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PROCEEDINGS
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MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Forty-Second Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
AL TOMARE, Nello	Transcona	NDP
ASAGWARA, Uzoma	Union Station	NDP
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<i>Vacant</i>	Thompson	

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Friday, May 13, 2022

*The House met at 10 a.m.***ORDERS OF THE DAY***(Continued)***GOVERNMENT BUSINESS***(Continued)***COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY****(Concurrent Sections)****ROOM 254****HEALTH**

Mr. Chairperson (Dennis Smook): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order.

Before we begin, I have a leave request for this section of the Committee of Supply. Our long-standing practice is for the opposition to sit at the committee table to the right hand side of the Chairperson. Because the minister is participating virtually this morning, I am asking if there is leave for the—leave of the committee to waive this practice. This would make it much easier for the members of the opposition to see the screens that are situated in the room.

Is—agreed? [*Agreed*]

The section of—this section of the Committee of Supply will now resume consideration of the Estimates for the Department of Health. Questioning for this department will proceed in a global manner.

The floor is now open for questions.

MLA Uzoma Asagwara (Union Station): I believe the—or, last time we were here in committee—I'm good? [*interjection*] Okay.

The minister was actually answering a question that I had asked regarding the renovations at St. Boniface emergency room. I'd asked specifically when that project will be complete and what is the budgeted cost.

So I'm going to hand it over to the minister, as she was in the middle of providing her response.

Hon. Audrey Gordon (Minister of Health): I thank the member for Union Station for bringing forward the question about the St. Boniface Hospital emergency department expansion.

And construction on the expansion and modernization of the St. Boniface Hospital emergency department has officially started, following strategic design, planning. Community and stakeholder consultations and preliminary demolition work did see changes at the new emergency department. State-of-the-art design will reduce wait times and the length of stay in the emergency department, improve patient and staff experiences and maximize functionality and flexibility. It will have expanded space for increased numbers of patients.

I am pleased to share that the project is very much on track to be completed by 2025.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that response.

Can she indicate when in 2025? What month? Is there a month and a date in 2025 that it's projected to be completed, and what is the budgeted cost? She didn't provide that response in her last answer.

Thank you.

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable Minister of Health.

Could the minister turn her mic on.

Ms. Gordon: My apologies for missing that very important information. The amount of—budgeted for that project is \$141 million.

And in terms of where it's at, I have a recent report from the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority. Decanting and renovations in phase 1—overall work progress is 91 per cent completed. So, that's the pharmacy moving from D block into new space has started. And abatement and demolition of D block—overall work progress is 50 per cent. So, abatement is complete in the crawl space and on the second floor; 95 per cent complete on the main floor. And demolition of D block, again, was scheduled to start in April and to be completed this month.

New construction under phase 2—so, their tendering package for site works, foundation and structure, the bid award is complete and sub-trade agreement has been finalized. Tender package on No. 3, which is mechanical and electrical—the bid award is complete and sub-trade agreements have been finalized.

And phase 3 is renovations. So construction work has not been initiated yet by PCL, but I'm soon to get a report.

So what I am seeing is a lot of green checkmarks that say everything is on track.

MLA Asagwara: Can the minister clarify: on track for what date of completion?

She provided the year; she did not provide a month and date, so if the minister can provide that clarity, that'd be great.

Thank you.

Ms. Gordon: So, renovation started June 10th of '21, so actually, work had already started last year.

And as I shared earlier, phase 1(b), which is decant work and relocations, is 91 per cent completed as of today's date. Phase 2(a), pre-construction, is 95 per cent completed as of today. Phase 1(c), demolition of D block, is 50 per cent completed and they estimate that by May 13th, again, D block should be—have substantial completion. And by April 21st of 2025, the new construction—the phase 2(b), new construction, should have substantial completion by April 21, 2025.

MLA Asagwara: Well, I appreciate that the minister has repeated some of the same information over and over. I did grasp it the first time she provided some of that information in regards to the phases and I can appreciate that she's provided a bit more clarity on phase 2.

*(10:10)

But what I'm looking for—for the third time—is when this project in its entirety will be completed and the projected date for that. She has provided 2025; now she's saying that phase 2 should be substantially completed by April 21st of 2025, but she has not provided when, in total, the project should be complete.

So can the minister just, you know, provide clarity on that one specific point? When will the project, in full, be completed? What is the projected date—month, day? When are they hoping to be there celebrating, you know, probably as, you know, members of the community coming and being there celebrating the expansion? I'm sure she plans, hopefully, to be down there in some capacity in 2025, if that's in fact the year that she's saying the total project will be done. But what month are they projecting in 2025 the entire project will be completed?

And if she can provide clarity as to whether or not the budgeted cost has increased from the original budgeted cost, that'd be great as well.

Thank you.

Ms. Gordon: Similar to the member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara), I'm not always well-versed on how construction works and when is something demolished and when is—when do we start to build.

So, substantial completion, as I mentioned before, is April 21st, 2025. We begin to start operational moves into the space in—after all the testing has been completed—around August of 2025, and we're aiming for a goal line date of September 18th, 2025.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that response. It's great to have clarity. I'm glad we finally got there on this question.

I would ask that the minister provide a response to the other question that I also asked in regards to the budgeted cost for the emergency room in St. Boniface. Has it increased, and if so, why?

Ms. Gordon: I'll reiterate the response I gave earlier. The budgeted cost for the St. Boniface Hospital emergency department expansion is \$141 million.

MLA Asagwara: Has that number—that budgeted number—increased from a previous amount, and if so, why?

Ms. Gordon: I thank the member for Union Station for the question.

When this project was first announced in the summer of 2019, the cost was—allocated was \$90 million, and there has been an increase, and our government was pleased to support the continuation of this expansion and renovation and work of one of Manitoba's key hospitals.

The increases are due to COVID cost increases. We're seeing that across many sectors, the supply chain as well. And so there were several challenges, supply chain challenges, that increased the cost of materials and that is—and supplies and equipment that will go into this new expanded space. That is the reason for the increase.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that response.

I'd like to ask some questions around patient transfers. We know that several hundred people across the province have been transferred away from their home region. We also know that at one point, very

recently—probably still ongoing, from what I'm hearing—that there were many folks who have been unable to return home.

In January, the minister announced hardship supports for people to be able to visit those—their friends, their loved ones who have been transferred.

Can the minister provide an update on the current situation with transfers? Are they paused or are they ongoing?

Ms. Gordon: Like myself, the member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara) also worked in the health system for quite some time, and so I know that they are familiar with transfers and that people in our province cross regional boundaries every single day for care, and that is due, primarily, to our geography and how people are distributed, where they live across the province.

People are coming from the North into Winnipeg through our northern patient transport program. They are being transferred for various therapies and various treatments every day. The decisions on those transfers are being made by leadership in the health system and by clinicians, certainly not being made here in the Legislative Building by political officials.

One of the reasons we decided to move forward with the clinical preventative services plan was for that very reason: to be able to provide services to Manitobans closer to home. And we are planning provincially but delivering locally.

I am advised by the health-care system that makes these interregional or within-region transfers that, to date, 340 patients have been moved as part of their protocol, as of—this is as of today; none were moved yesterday. They tell me that stable patients are being transferred to different sites for care following assessment by a clinical team.

* (10:20)

So, I want to emphasize, again, these decisions are being made in the health system.

So, that is the number that I'm aware of. And again, they continue to tell me that people are crossing regional boundaries every day for care and they are making those decisions, Mr. Chairperson.

Thank you.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that response.

You know, I would—I've had a lot of conversations with families who've had loved ones transferred abruptly, with no notice, to other health-care facilities, residences. I've had conversations with clinicians, with folks working on the front lines of the health-care system as part of multi-disciplinary teams. And I would just flag for the minister that this ongoing narrative that she is taking on—her and her colleagues—in regards to this being just clinical decisions and it's on them and has nothing to do with political decision making—is one that does not sit well with families and certainly does not sit well with health-care providers and clinicians.

They fully understand and are aware that it's the decisions made by this minister and her government that have resulted in people—hundreds of Manitobans—being transferred away from their home communities and care facilities. It's been incredibly disruptive and harmful for folks and their families. It's created a lot of distress and it's impacted the ability of folks to recover in places where they have the support of their loved ones right nearby or right beside them.

And so, this narrative that I understand is likely a talking point that they want to continue to push to shirk accountability for the conditions that she and her government have created that have resulted in 340 people being transferred away from their communities to date, I would encourage her to stop that because it is quite harmful, it's disingenuous and it's not the approach, in terms of being accountable, that I think a lot of Manitobans have made clear they want from her and her government.

So, I just wanted—I wanted to put those words on the record because it is important. This is significant. It is not for any of us to minimize just how tough this reality is for the families who are navigating their loved ones—some of which have dementia, some of which, when they're being transferred, are incredibly distressed because they don't know what's going on or why. They think somehow it's their fault. They're away from what they know and understand and it impacts their well-being overall.

And so, I just wanted to make sure that the minister was aware. Maybe she hasn't heard those things directly from clinicians or family members, so I'm sharing that on their behalf because I've heard that frequently. And her narrative around this is not conducive to folks at all—seeing what this government's decision making has done to our health-care system—feeling any more at ease with the ongoing—she's just indicated the transfers are not paused.

The minister has made clear that these transfers are still happening.

So I'm wondering if the minister can provide some clarity on the hardship supports that I mentioned earlier. She announced this again in January, for those visiting those who've been transferred.

How much of—how much was budgeted for those hardship supports, and can she provide an update on how much of those dollars has actually been spent?

Mr. Chairperson: I'd like to ask the minister if she could adjust her camera a little bit because about—or adjust it—yes, that would be perfect.

The honourable Minister of Health (Ms. Gordon), thank you.

Ms. Gordon: Again, the member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara) as well as myself, we both worked in the health system, and I know for the over 12 years that I worked in the health system, transfers were occurring—and that was before even our government formed office.

Mr. Chairperson, the patient transfer protocol within the province of Manitoba, if I could update the member for Union Station, has been in place for decades prior to COVID-19 and prior to our government taking office. And it's important to remember that, once again, transfers are clinical decisions made by physicians and they take many factors into account. And this allows clinicians to ensure patients who need a higher level of care have access to it.

We know how difficult this can be for families. That is why our government moved to develop the hardship supports for families. And I just want to put on the record that I'm told by our health system that, this month, five interregional transfers have occurred—only five this month. And, again, those are decisions that are being made in the health system level, not by our government.

And I want to also share that we have a Northern Patient—transfer—Transportation Program that was established in 1972. And in 2015, under the previous government, 19,985 trips were made by people from the North into Winnipeg and other areas being transferred for care. So nearly 20,000 patients a year rely on this program. They're being transferred. They're being moved, Mr. Chairperson, and that's why our government invested the largest amount in Manitoba's history of \$812 million this year to improve health care in rural and northern Manitoba, to allow for the creation of a northern intermediary

health-care hub to ensure patients and Manitobans can receive care close to home.

So this is not new. This is not related to a government. Patient transfers and interregional transfers have been done for decades.

Mr. Chairperson, to answer the member's question about hardship supports, the policy and forms went live February 22nd, 2022. The last I checked, Shared Health advised us that a small number of individuals had requested supports. We're asking for the updated numbers. The—I think in March there were only five requests for reimbursements.

We do not have a budget for this program because we implemented this program in the midst of a fiscal year, so regional health authorities were asked to cover the reimbursement of individuals that came forward. Again, the program will allow for up to eight visits per month by a designated support person.

* (10:30)

Meals were available. Meal vouchers are provided for designated support persons to allow them to dine with the client if meal service was not available on site. Assistance was provided to a maximum of \$8 for breakfast, \$10 for lunch, \$15 for dinner; transportation: return bus fare or gas expenses; and accommodation up to a maximum of \$70 per night plus taxes.

And I also wanted to add some factual information about transfers, and when patients and families are told. So all hospital and health centres provide a letter to patients and their families upon admission, Mr. Chairperson, to hospital, to detail the possibility they may be transferred to another site. So it's factually incorrect that patients and families are not being told.

A follow-up conversation is typically led by a care team member, which occurs between the patient and their family member or representative to identify suitable candidates for transfers and additional written communication is provided. That is the fact.

And I just want to ensure that we're not, for lack of a better term, throwing out—the health system and our leaders under the bus by saying that they're not providing notice of transfers, because that is not correct and, again, we appreciate all that they do—

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable minister's time has expired.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for providing that information.

I can certainly see why folks—some folks—maybe wouldn't be able to access this opportunity to access the hardship supports, given that the resources provided are actually just based on—you know, even that the \$70 that you're talking about to contribute to a hotel stay is markedly insufficient for many folks who wouldn't be able to maybe come up with the other half of that—what it may cost to rent a hotel for one day or one evening.

So, certainly, I can see the barriers that would still exist for many people to be able to visit their loved ones. Even the per diem amounts, I think, for many folks would be insufficient.

Can the minister provide clarity on—it's five folks? Only five people, up until March, have actually accessed the support?

What does that look like in real dollars? So how much money was actually spent, and what was the average amount of support provided?

Ms. Gordon: I thank the member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara) for the question.

Because this reimbursement program is being applied across the province in very—in various facilities, I will have to take it under advisement. We'll have to pull that information from each facility and provide a response at a later date.

I do want to speak to the member's point of the \$70. I do know that regions have some discretion to look at the cost and the claims that come forward on a case-by-case basis and to possibly go beyond the amount that is established, in extreme cases. So, they're certainly not bound by the parameters that have been set in the initial formation of this program.

And so, we will have to come back—I'll have to come back with an update on the hardship supports and financial assistance for patient transfers.

Thank you.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for taking that under advisement.

And I apologize, I don't think that I interpreted the information you provided, maybe, for what it actually was. So, I'm just going to ask for some clarity.

The minister stated that there had been five requests. Now, can she identify if that was for March of 2022, for that month, or were those five requests

since the announcement was made in January? Just so that I'm clear on that point.

Ms. Gordon: That report came to me back in March and they didn't specify whether it was for that specific month or since the program started. So again, I'll take it under advisement and I will come back with a report to the member.

I also want to add, in terms of my earlier comments about patient transfers, that we have a radiation oncology program. And when Manitoba was not achieving timely care for radiation therapy for cancer, patients were referred for out-of-province radiation therapy to cancer centres in Grand Forks and Thunder Bay. So, even outside of our province, under the previous government. In fact, over the period of 1999 to the time when we took office, 213 patients were referred to Grand Forks. And during the period of twenty—2001 to 2003, 13 patients were referred to Thunder Bay.

We have CAR T-cell therapy that's provided on a case-by-base—case basis by Mayo Clinic, and that's been happening for years. So, the member needs to be aware that care is provided not just interregionally, but even outside of the province. And that was happening even under the NDP administration.

So, this is not new, Mr. Chairperson, and our government took a very proactive step to support families and patients by establishing a hardship support and financial assistance program. That program continues to remain open to individuals who feel they would like to take advantage of that program. And we will provide a further update on its—on how much of that program has been used to date.

Thank you.

MLA Asagwara: I think the minister was sort of alluding to the challenges around the surgical and diagnostic backlog and the Manitobans who are unable to access what they would be able to typically access here in Manitoba, and therefore, being forced to access those services in other jurisdictions.

It's interesting. It reminds me of that period of time I think we all would rather forget, when the former premier, Brian Pallister, actually stated that he would happily send educators, burnt-out and tired educators who were going above and beyond for Manitobans to provide the best education and care they could to students, that they would have to go to America to get vaccines. It was such an interesting and challenging time.

But anyhow, I'd like to ask questions about the dashboard, actually. On the government's Info Manitoba website, the province has put up what it calls the Provincial Health System Performance Dashboard. I know the minister is well aware of what that is.

And over the last two years, financial targets in Health over the previous year's budget were 1.6 per cent and 1.4 per cent. That's about 4 per cent less than the current rate of inflation. It's a big gap. It also leaves very little available for any volume pressure or wage settlement. It also substantially—is substantially less, rather, than increases through the Canadian health transfer.

* (10:40)

With all of that in mind, I'm wondering if the minister can explain why she feels 1.4 per cent is an appropriate financial target for health spending during a pandemic.

Ms. Gordon: I thank the member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara) for the question. COVID-related costs are budgeted in a different budget called the internal service adjustments, and they're not in the percentages that the member is referencing because it's over and above our health-system budget. So, COVID payments to service delivery organizations and personal-care homes are, as I said, outside of the normal budget for health, and so for fiscal years 2021 and 2022, I will read into the record what has been paid out.

But I do want to say that the COVID-19 response has [*inaudible*] in new and additional costs to the service delivery organizations and personal-care homes so that they can continue to safely provide care to Manitobans. That is why we developed the internal service adjustment budget. Under this, the Province provides a quarterly reimbursement for expenditures related to COVID-19, and this includes staffing requirements, enhanced cleaning procedures and additional supplies and equipment in acute-care settings like hospitals and, again, as well as personal-care homes.

So for '20-21 and projected for '21-22, COVID payments to service delivery organizations in '20-21 is \$176,961,683. Broken down: for WRHA, \$50,341,379; Interlake-Eastern Regional Health Authority, \$7,767,194; northern regional health authority, \$10,522,964; Prairie Mountain Health, \$8,673,347; Southern Health, \$98,144,681; Southern Health-Santé Sud, \$1,512,118.

Actuals for 2021 for COVID payments to personal-care homes: \$37,110,266; broken down: for WRHA, \$34,855,113; Interlake-Eastern Regional Health Authority, \$456,763; Prairie Mountain Health, \$409,049; Southern Health-Santé Sud, \$1,389,341.

And, of course, projected for payments to service delivery organizations for '21-22: \$351,873,000; and projected COVID payments to personal-care homes for '21-22: \$25,785,365.

So, again, the member can see that that is certainly outside of the Ministry of Health budget and it's considered internal service adjustments, and we've gone further as a government. For Budget 2022, we're proud, to date, that we have invested over \$3.1 billion in pandemic supports to protect the lives and livelihoods of Manitobans: \$630 million to strengthen the fight against COVID-19 and prepare for other variants and pressures on our health-care system; and \$30 million to add 28 additional beds to our intensive care unit, which will bring our true ICU bed baseline up to 100 from the 72 we have pre-pandemic.

So our government in 2021 provided supports and in Budget 2022 we are continuing our supports of the health system: \$7.2 billion total from the health-care budget in the 2022 budget. This is the most significant health-care investment in the history of our province, and our government will continue to support our health system to ensure we recover and we advance—

Mr. Chairperson: The minister's time has expired.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that response and for breaking that down by region and, as well, for SDOs and projected for PCHs.

In the minister's annual report, on page 53, it says that the health transformation has achieved a net financial benefit of \$23.7 million across the health system and a \$60.5 million in net financial benefit since the start of the transformation.

Can the minister provide more details on what makes up these purported savings?

Ms. Gordon: I thank the member—the honourable member for Union Station for the question.

My staff are pulling that information, but while we wait for that information I do have an update on the patient transfer reimbursement dollars for the member: paid to date, \$35,486; pending review, \$5,465; a total of \$40,951. And the various health

authorities and health facilities have received 65 claims.

* (10:50)

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for providing that information when she received it during this committee. That—I really do appreciate that. That provides a lot of clarity.

I'm wondering if the minister would just be willing to take the question that I asked her, in regards to what makes up these purported savings—if she needs to take that as an undertaking, that's fine with me so that we can move forward, but I'll leave that to the minister.

Mr. James Teitsma, Acting Chairperson, in the Chair

Ms. Gordon: I do want to take this moment to put on the record some of the work that has been done in the health system by our leaders, clinicians and allied health. Everyone works together as a team. We're celebrating Nursing Week, as well as health-allied health professionals, and so I just want to thank them for the incredible work that they're doing.

But I also want to share some information on our surgeries and how they're progressing.

So, since January, in Winnipeg, 13,323 non-emergent surgeries have been completed, 3,604 emergent surgeries completed, for a total of 16,927 surgeries. This is in addition to the 11,000 surgeries procured by the task force through the request for supply arrangements. Just last week, I was informed that there were 1,088 non-emergent surgeries completed and 241 emergent were completed. This is over 100 per cent of pre-pandemic levels, and in recent weeks, this has increased as high as 122 per cent.

In terms of diagnostics, since December we have completed 2,947 CT scans, we've completed 3,538 ultrasounds, we've completed 1,240 MRIs, for a total of 7,725 scans and diagnostics.

All emergent and urgent surgeries, including cardiac and cancer procedures, continue to be prioritized. Elective and non-urgent surgeries are constantly being reviewed by physicians to prioritize patients who, medically, should not wait any longer for procedures to be performed.

And I'm pleased to also put on the record that all staff redeployed or reassigned due to COVID have now returned to their normal duties. They're back to their acute-care facilities, personal-care homes, health

facilities, and I hear that they are settling in very well back into their locations and we thank them, on behalf of all Manitobans, for the incredible work that they did over the past two years.

I also want to talk a little bit about the CIHI report because a lot has been said about that. And one of the important conclusions from the CIHI report for Manitobans to be reassured by is that more urgent procedures like hip fracture repair, radiation therapy and cancer surgery was prioritized in Manitoba during the pandemic as volumes remained stable.

And Manitoba compares favourably with other provinces in the areas of radiation therapy, hip fracture repair and coronary arterial bypass grafts. And in 2021, Manitoba's hip fracture repair wait time was shorter than the national wait time, and more patients had their hip fracture repair within benchmark compared with Canada. So that was 89 per cent versus 85 per cent. And between 2019 and 2021, Manitoba's and national hip fracture volumes remained stable.

At least 97 per cent of patients received radiation therapy within the benchmark in all provinces. Manitoba was the only province where 100 per cent of patients received their treatment within benchmark. So, some excellent news, as well, for our province between 2019 and 2021: Manitoba and national radiation therapy volumes remained stable, which is excellent news again for cancer treatment in our province.

In addition to that, in terms of cancer treatment, Manitoba's breast cancer surgery median wait decreased from 28 days to 21 days, and the lung cancer surgery median wait time decreased from 34 to 22 days. And as we all know, for an individual diagnosed with—hearing the horrible news of a cancer diagnosis, every day counts. So we are certainly pleased to see those decreases; while not as high as we'd like them to be, they are certainly progressing.

Mr. Chairperson, so much more good news for Manitobans. We will continue, as a government, to work on their behalf to ensure we improve health services.

MLA Asagwara: Does the minister now have available, since that was a whole—an entire five minutes that she used to provide that information while failing to answer my question, regarding providing more details on what makes up the purported savings?

Mr. Chairperson in the Chair

Does the minister now have that information available to her, and is she willing to provide it?

* (11:00)

Ms. Gordon: I'm pleased to respond to the honourable member for Union Station's (MLA Asagwara) question about how we arrived at the savings. Certainly, Shared Services, at a provincial level, was one of the mechanisms; through the Clinical and Preventative Services Plan, targeted practice improvements. So, for example, blood utilization and how we utilize the scarce resources of blood distribution; Digital Health; new province-wide better contracts, so now you're negotiating at the provincial level; supply chain improvements, so better contract management and category spending, again purchasing provincial—at a provincial scale.

And I do want to place on the record that all savings are reinvested back in the system and they are not extracted from the system.

Thank you.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that response.

I actually just need a little bit of clarity on the patient transfer claims. The minister had provided a bit of a breakdown there, which I do appreciate, but I'm wondering if she can advise as to—she said 65 claims were made in total.

How many of those claims were approved? Does the minister—did the minister mean that the 65 represents, you know, 65 folks who applied and all 65 were approved, or could she just provide clarity on, if 65 claims were made, how many of those claims were approved and resulted in the amount that she broke down.

And then after that I'll be asking a question about ER waits.

Ms. Gordon: I thank the honourable member for Union Station for seeking clarification.

I do not believe that any have been denied of the 65, but I'm seeking clarification of that. Again, the total is \$40,951 and it's 65 claims. I do not believe any have been denied.

So, there was, in my breakdown, \$5,465 in process, but that is in process of being paid. So the person had—the individuals haven't actually received their payments as of yet, but I will clarify all of that.

Thank you.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that clarification. I do appreciate it.

I'm wondering if the minister can provide some clarity now on the area of emergency room wait times. So, last month it was reported, so that's—well, I guess, almost last month or—May, so we're talking about March, so actually a couple months now—Winnipeg emergency rooms saw the highest wait times that they have on record. Waits were alarming, I think, to all of us, at Winnipeg's busiest hospitals, including 8.7 hours at St. Boniface and a very concerning 10.5 hours at HSC.

I've been able to speak with doctors and nurses and health-care aides at all of our emergency rooms. I've had conversations with folks at St. Boniface and HSC and the Grace over the past many weeks, and it's really challenging what folks are facing. Health-care workers are doing their absolute best and they're doing incredible work. Really, they're doing heroic work, given the circumstances that they're in. But this is a challenge that is really overwhelming folks not only providing care, but certainly incredibly difficult for folks accessing care. We do know that folks have even left emergency rooms without being seen as a result.

How does the minister account for this large spike in wait times for emergency care?

Ms. Gordon: I do want to say that our health-care workers are heroes, and that's why we celebrate our nurses this week. That's why we're selling—celebrating our allied health-care workers. And that's why, so many times, I have risen in the House to say thank you. And I want to put it on the record again that I thank everyone in the health system for the incredible work they've done over the past two years during a very, very difficult time—the pandemic.

And I recognize that there are still many challenges stemming from the pandemic and that patient flow issues continue to be a concern for the health system, and a number of initiatives have been implemented in the recent weeks. And those initiatives have come forward from the hospital floor. So, it's our health system leaders talking with staff in the emergency department, talking with leaders in those departments to generate ideas. And so, these ideas come from them.

The expansion of the physician-in-triage model of care at Health Sciences Centre: this pilot program places a physician in a triage area to manage and provide care for those waiting to be seen, with a particular focus on higher acuity patients. The levelling of

transport arrivals across all sites and then improving lab turnaround time for patients requiring admission—we expect these initiatives will have some success in reducing those wait times, and further initiatives are in development. And, again, system leaders from both Shared Health and the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority continue to meet with staff and physicians to discuss their concerns and share ideas on how to improve patient flow and reduce wait times.

We also continue to recruit and retain nursing staff at all sites.

Some of the early interventions, again, in terms of our ER wait times and program enhancements, we're making changes to ambulance transport protocols to redirect appropriate lower acuity patients to an urgent care instead of an emergency department. The pilot test for COVID-19 within the emergency department, again, for new patient arrivals—early evidence is that this is streamlining the process and allowing for quicker patient flow.

We are refining both the interregion transfer protocol and the virtual COVID outpatient program to better assist in maintaining medicine bed capacity in our biggest acute-care facilities, recruiting to fill nursing and other roles across the system.

Our Community and Long Term Care teams are improving flows for patients ready for discharge so that they can move to their personal-care home faster. With improved summer and spring weather, our interregional transfers of individuals who no longer require acute care—clinicians continue to look at that. I've already talked about the physician-in-triage program. I also want to share that \$1.2 million has been committed to the Health Sciences Centre for the implementation of that physician-in-triage program.

And just to be very clear on the record, that new investment will place a senior attending emergency department physician in triage on a daily basis at Health Sciences Centre Winnipeg, alongside a triage nurse and a nursing assistant. And this model of care ensures all higher acuity patients are triaged by a physician while waiting to be seen and reduces the rate of patients who leave without being seen by a physician.

* (11:10)

So I know that the member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara) raised that as a—today, and we are waiting for early results on a reduction in the individuals that are leaving without being seen, and we expect this program to also begin very shortly with

the—with an expansion to St. Boniface and Grace hospitals, and that will certainly help all Manitobans who are accessing care. It's the first point of access to our health system. We want to ensure those wait times are reduced and that Manitobans receive care in a timely and efficient manner, and again, I thank all our health-care workers for the phenomenal job that they have been doing.

MLA Asagwara: Thank the minister for her response, and I appreciate that she provided some clarity just now on initiatives around folks leaving emergency rooms without being seen.

Can the minister provide the most current information she has in terms of how many people are leaving emergency rooms without being seen? What is the current number that they have for that?

Ms. Gordon: I thank the honourable member for Union Station for the question.

This information was accurate as of—for last month. So, patients who left without being seen by a physician comprised 13.6 per cent of all emergency and urgent-care visitors last month. So, this would have been for April. In—so in other words, one in seven people going to urgent care or emergency were leaving without being seen.

But those numbers, I want to add, was before we initiated the programs that I mentioned earlier. The expansion of the physician-in-triage program, the levelling of transport arrivals across all sites and improving lab turnaround time for patients requiring admission.

I do not have that updated information since these programs were implemented at Health Sciences Centre emergency department, St. Boniface Hospital emergency department and Grace emergency department. I would have to take that under advisement and bring that information back.

MLA Asagwara: I'm good with that being taken under advisement. I appreciate the minister's willingness to do so, and I thank the minister for her providing clarity around the current number of folks leaving. I'm—I know the minister, like I am and many others, are concerned about that number of folks leaving emergency rooms or urgent care and what that means for their well-being.

But certainly, I know that, as the minister has indicated, that, you know, physicians, health-care aides, nurses, allied health professionals are doing their best to address these concerns and come up with

unique strategies. Certainly, the government has a significant role to play, in terms of providing adequate resources to achieve more positive outcomes, in terms of repairing relationships with health-care workers; you know, satisfying things like agreements that health-care workers, some of which still don't have in place; recruitment and retention, retention being a really big component here.

So, you know, recognizing that there's a lot of work that needs to be done, certainly on behalf of the government, to help support the efforts that are being made on the front lines by these health folks and leaders.

Wondering if the minister can provide some clarity around acute-care budgeting. So, the funding by this government for acute care, I'm just going to outline what that's looked like recently. In 2017-2018, budgeted funding for acute care was \$2.458 billion. In this year's budget '22-23, it's just—sorry, it is \$2.525 billion. Now, over the seven-year span—sorry, six-fiscal-year span, that's an increase of just 2.7 per cent.

Given the acute-care crisis that we're seeing right now, given all of the challenges that are glaringly obvious in acute care, why is the minister providing—why is the minister and the government providing such limited funding to acute care?

* (11:20)

Ms. Gordon: I thank the honourable member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara) for the question.

Similar to what I indicated previously, COVID payments for service delivery organizations and personal-care homes are outside of our Health budget in internal service arrangements and paid out there. So if it's related to mental health as well, acute-care funding for mental health, it's now under the Ministry of Mental Health and Community Wellness. If it's COVID, it's in the ISA budget, and if it's related to collective agreements that fall under acute care, then it's, again, in ISA. So just wanted to provide some clarification there so that the member is aware of how the funding is divided up and is being allocated to different areas.

Thank you.

MLA Asagwara: Does—I do—I thank the minister for that, providing that clarification.

I do understand how those resources are distributed. And I guess my question really would be, then,

does the minister think that this amount of funding for acute care is adequate?

You know, also looking at the funding that's provided for the regional health authorities, SDOs, you know, when we look at what that—what those numbers by percentage actually look like year over year, and certainly where things are at now, we are still looking at percentages that are well below the rate of inflation. And so when I look, at over six fiscal years, an increase of just 2.7 per cent, even looking at the ways in which these other resources are allocated, you know, and given the crisis in acute care, I'm wondering if the minister thinks that the amount that's being provided here is really adequate.

Percentages, even when we look at the way that these resources are being distributed, again, and we look at these funds regionally, to me, you know, looking at the math here, it is clearly insufficient, and there's a crisis in acute care. There are challenges that we're going to see as we move forward, given the crisis in health-care staffing. There's a staffing shortage crisis, not just nursing, but we're also looking at allied health-care professionals as well.

So with all of that in mind, is the minister saying that the percentage that we've seen over the last six years and where things are at for acute-care funding is adequate?

Ms. Gordon: I thank the honourable member for Union Station for giving me the opportunity to read into the record our government's investment in the health system: \$7.2 billion, total, for health care in Budget 2022—that is the most significant health-care investment in the history of our province, \$1 billion more than the previous government ever invested in health care; \$3.1 billion, pandemic supports to protect the lives and livelihoods of Manitobans; \$630 million to strengthen the fight against COVID-19 and prepare for other variants and pressures on our health-care system; \$30 million to add 28 additional beds to our intensive-care units, increasing our bed baseline up to 100 from 72.

With regard to the Diagnostic and Surgical Recovery Task Force, a very significant investment, Mr. Chairperson: \$110 million to address the surgical and diagnostic backlog, for a total of \$160 million; \$10 million to improve priority procedures and wait times; \$4.9 million to expand the Concordia Hospital's orthopedic surgery program with a fifth operating room that will add 1,000 surgeries annually; \$400,000 in the spine assessment clinic to increase the number of assessments for Manitobans, ensuring

900 patients receive their treatment or care plans sooner; a new mobile CT unit and two new mobile MRI units, which will soon deliver nearly 12,000 CT scans and over 7,000 MRIs annually.

We've also invested \$90.5 million to add 259 additional nurse training seats this year as part of our plan to increase seats by 400; \$11.6 million to add the next phase, permanently expanding our nursing seats in Manitoba; \$4.3 million was also announced for 37 additional nurse training seats at the University College of the North; \$23,000 of financial aid for each internationally educated nurse applicant. Each individual will get help with fees to obtain their licensure. But in addition to these investments, we're hiring 35 more paramedics across our province.

* (11:30)

And for the member's information, in terms of capital investments, twenty-three—\$2.3 billion in our targeted health-care capital plan for projects; \$141 million for the St. Boniface Hospital emergency department redeveloping that will triple the size of this emergency department; \$8 million for the new acute stroke unit at Health Sciences Centre; \$812 million to build, expand and fix our health-care facilities in all regions of our province in support of Manitoba's Clinical and Preventative Services Plan; \$283 million for a 90-bed new hospital in Portage la Prairie; \$127 million for a 60-bed new hospital in Neepawa; \$70 million to enhance and add 30 additional beds at the Brandon Regional Health Centre; \$32 million to enhance and add 23 additional beds at saint-Steinbach's Bethesda hospital; \$64.4 million to enhance and add 24 beds at Boundary Trails; \$31.6 million to enhance and add 30 additional beds at the Selkirk Regional Health Centre; \$5 million for a new emergency department in Dauphin; \$10.8 million to enhance and add 12 additional beds at the Lakeshore General Hospital in Ashern.

And, Mr. Chairperson, for the record, our government will be making more investments, more announcements, to improve health-care services for Manitobans. Our government was elected to fix our services, including our health services, and that is what we're going to do with our record 7.2—

Mr. Chairperson: The minister's time has expired.

MLA Asagwara: Mr. Chair, I can't, in good conscience, thank the minister for that response. That was—I'm not—I think that was just an exercise in wasting time, and I'm sure that there's some element

of strategy on the part of the minister to avoid answering questions.

My question was very clear; a simple question as to whether or not the minister thinks that the funding she is providing for acute care—and has been providing over the past six years—is adequate. For the minister to go on and list line-by-line funding announcements to me is—it's irresponsible, quite frankly. It's a poor use of the very limited amount of time we have in Estimates, and the minister should have been able to, with confidence, state whether or not she believes the funding they're providing for acute care is adequate.

I don't understand where the minister thinks it's reasonable or appropriate to spend five minutes to go over funding announcements instead of just providing a clear response to a very straightforward question. I would ask that the minister, you know, refrain from doing so. We have a very limited amount of time in Estimates in this committee to get some questions answered on behalf of Manitobans, and this information's really important.

So I'm going to move on to family medicine, and I'm going to take the minister's previous response to indicate that she probably doesn't think the funding that she and her government are providing for acute care is adequate. Otherwise, I think the minister would have clearly responded that she does, and she didn't. She did something else totally unreasonable instead of just providing a response, so I'm going to take that as the minister indicating that she probably recognizes that the funding to acute care is insufficient.

In regards to family doctors, we know that primary care is so important. We know that people being able to access primary care by way of a physician or nurse practitioner is very important in terms of having good health-care outcomes in Manitoba.

We also know it's gotten harder to get timely access to a family doctor in our province. Manitoba's Family Doctor Finder actually shows a deterioration in that. Things were quite bad in this regard before the pandemic, as clinics were closed—clinics like on Corydon and St. B. Timely matching to a primary-care provider, to a physician, fell to less than 16 per cent. It's still taking too long at this point. Last year, nearly half of those folks seeking a family doctor waited for more than half of the target time to be matched, that target time being 30 days.

What is the minister doing, actively doing? What steps is she taking to ensure timely access to primary-care physicians?

Ms. Gordon: I want to start by saying I am very disappointed to hear the information the member for Union Station's (MLA Asagwara) placed on the record about acute care and my listing of the significant investments our government has made in acute care.

The last time I checked, intensive-care-unit beds were in acute-care facilities, and the \$30 million I mentioned to add 28 additional beds to intensive care is an investment in acute care. The last time I checked, Concordia Hospital was an acute-care facility, and orthopedic surgeries—adding another operating room is acute-care funding.

So, I'm very disappointed to hear the member try to dismiss that information as not being funding of acute care. And I know they—it hasn't been that long since the member left the health system to join politics, but perhaps they have forgotten what encompasses acute care.

* (11:40)

So, to the member's question about timely access to primary care, I'm pleased to see from the College of Physicians and Surgeons a steady increase in the number of physicians entering our province, in Manitoba, going from 39 in 2012 up to 89 in 2022.

And all the other investments that our government has made in terms of allowing for virtual tariffs during the pandemic. So there were individuals who expressed concerns with having to go in person to see their physician during the peak of the pandemic, and our government and health system allowed for virtual tariffs to be billed for virtual appointments to occur.

Under our Clinical and Preventative Services Plan we have a primary-care provincial clinical team that is looking at certainly ensuring that we are a welcoming health system for new primary-care providers. I know that myself, I do a lot of mentoring of young people from the Black community and have had an opportunity to work with what I understand is now a group of physicians that have formed this—a formal group of Black physicians that are helping other young people from the Black community to access our health system as physicians. And I was really pleased to hear about their program and how they're helping with those efforts.

And then our distributed medical education program through the Rady faculty at the University of Manitoba, how we're supporting our U of M medical school in terms of ensuring that when practitioners and physicians come to the system, they are being

recruited and trained to work across the province and not just in Winnipeg.

And I was pleased to join my colleague in Beausejour, where we welcomed nine family physicians who started to practise in communities across the Interlake-Eastern Regional Health Authority. So, four of the new physicians were graduates of the one-year medical licensure program for international medical graduates offered through the U of M, which is designed to integrate physicians who have practised internationally into the Canadian medical system. And the program allowed physicians who have practised internationally to better understand the needs of rural patients. And then the four graduates would be working in rural and underserved areas of the province and have made a four-year commitment to the region, and that was just last summer. So they're just completing their first year.

So we have many efforts under way. We will see more come to fruition through our clinical preventative services plan. We are committed to all our health-care providers at various levels of our organization not just in Winnipeg, but in rural Manitoba, in northern Manitoba, to ensure that care is provided closer to home. And, again, we will continue to make our acute-care investments that I listed earlier and in support of the work that our clinicians—

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable minister's time has expired.

MLA Asagwara: I'd like to ask some questions around the surgical backlog. This is an area that I—you know, every person in Manitoba is in some way, shape or form impacted by, whether you yourself are waiting for a test or procedure of some kind, or you have a friend or loved one who is. A significant portion—about 10 per cent—of our population is either waiting for a surgical procedure or diagnostic test.

I'd like to point the minister to page 54 of her last annual report, so that's the report for 2020-2021. This shows that spending on what's called priority procedures wait times reduction. So, under that category, the minister would know that, with a growing and aging population, enhancements need to be made at regular intervals just to keep wait times in check. That's just the reality of the ever-increasing aging population. And it's not just happening in Manitoba, we know it's happening, you know, elsewhere, everywhere, across jurisdictions.

Unfortunately, after the PCs—after this minister and her government were elected, for several years the

government did not make any enhancements in this area. As the minister would imagine, that means that there's going to be potentially poorer outcomes, challenging outcomes, but certainly wait times got worse for priority procedures. This was actually reflected in CIHI reporting.

And so, belatedly, we saw in the 2020-2021 budget the PCs did announce \$10 million for priority procedures. Unfortunately, quite surprisingly, shockingly, given the state of things and how we know things are progressing, that line—that budget line was underspent by 26 per cent.

So, you know, of course we know that Manitoba's wait times for priority procedures as a direct result of that have continued to get worse. They've been deteriorating as a direct result.

Can the minister explain, provide clarity around why this funding, \$10 million that was budgeted for 2020-2021 for priority procedures, why it wasn't fully spent?

Mr. Shannon Martin, Acting Chairperson, in the Chair

Ms. Gordon: I thank the honourable member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara) for the question. Before I answer that particular question, I do have an update on the patient flow reimbursement. I would like to complete that, if I may.

So, the \$40,951 that I mentioned—so, all 65 claims have been approved, and that total number is—the \$35,486 is already paid out, and the \$5,465 is approved, and payment is in process. So I can state that the 65 claims is now completed.

* (11:50)

I also want to respond to the member's question about the \$10 million for priority procedures. That funding was provided in April of 2020. And as the member is aware, the pandemic was officially announced the month prior to that, in March of 2020, which led to a slowdown in procedures.

So to ensure that we continue to provide Manitobans with care—and that slowdown, just let me clarify, the slowdown in procedures was within our health system—we launched what we now refer to as our request for supply arrangements, or RFSAs, so that we could increase the number of procedures that were being done outside of the health system that was very—under an immense amount of pressure and was quite taxed.

To date, we have completed five request for supply arrangements for surgical services to address the backlog; 11,000 procedures have been contracted; \$13.7 million has been spent and allocated to date: \$8.1 million for the first four RFSAs, \$5.6 million in service delivery organizations on priority procedures, including hips, knees and cataracts. We are now working on our sixth RFSA, which includes endoscopy; cataracts; pediatric general surgery, dental and ear, nose and throat; outpatient spine procedures; adult ear, nose and throat and general surgery.

So in terms of the dollars that the member mentions that was underspent, we have—we were in the midst of a pandemic, and the system was undergoing an unprecedented change, in terms of redeployment of staff, in terms of a decrease in surgeries.

And we moved to an RFSA process, have been able to use the RFSA process to sign agreements such as the one we're working on now with Maples Surgical Centre, which will provide women with hundreds of gynecological surgeries. The Sanford Health in North Dakota has helped to provide spine surgeries. We're doubling the number of anesthesia clinical assistants in the province, working with our colleges for nursing and regulatory colleges to look at staffing models.

And so we have certainly been asked to pivot and be innovative and creative, in terms of being able to provide surgeries and services to Manitobans. We have that money in our budget and, you know, the Diagnostic and Surgical Recovery Task Force is working to ensure we continue to provide surgeries for those priority procedures. An update will be coming from the task force very, very soon and more good news for Manitobans who are receiving their surgeries and their diagnostic tests.

And, again, I thank all the health-care professionals that are—have returned to their programs, their acute-care facilities, their personal-care homes, all across this province, for the incredible work that they did to make these RFSAs and the procedures that have been done a success, and we will continue to work closely with them as we move forward—

The Acting Chairperson (Shannon Martin): The honourable member's time has expired.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that response.

I would like some clarification, because that \$10 million for priority procedures was actually seen again. So, it appears again in the budget for 2021-2022, so last year's budget.

Can the minister indicate how much of that funding is the department projecting has been spent?

Mr. Chairperson in the Chair

And, interestingly enough, that same budgetary amount, \$10 million, appears in the budget for this year; for 2022 and '23. Does the minister believe that that funding will actually be spent in its entirety for this year?

So, can the minister provide clarity around whether or not the \$10 million, which appears again for last year's budget, how much of that is the department projecting will be spent, and how much of the \$10 million that's in this year's budget—or does the minister think, rather, the \$10 million in this year's budget will be spent in full?

Ms. Gordon: My apologies—I'm not sure why my screen blanked out.

I thank the member—honourable member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara) for the question.

In terms of the question about why it's appearing year after year, this is an ongoing commitment that came from the wait times report in 2017, and that request—that recommendation was part of that report that came forward from front-line physicians, that our government would continue to invest \$10 million on an annual basis, specifically for priority procedures.

For—the numbers are still being finalized for 2021-2022, but what we're seeing right now is that we will be surpassing the amount of the \$10 million. So the \$10 million will be fully spent and more.

And for this year, again, it's a commitment of \$10 million for priority procedures, and I anticipate that the \$10 million will be fully utilized. We have many Manitobans that require care and many of those are priority procedures, and we want to ensure that all of those funds—so to the member's question, '21-22, we're on track to fully utilizing all of those funds, and again for '22-23.

Thank you so much.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for those responses.

I know that she said that they would fully—they would go over and above the \$10 million allocated in last year's budget.

If the minister could provide clarity around how much has been—what they do have, in terms of what

has been spent, so the most recent calculation that they have would be great, in regards to 2021 and 2022.

* (12:00)

I'd also like to ask the minister about funding priority procedures—sorry, I apologize. Last year's fiscal year, the government—this minister and her government announced a general annual contribution for all procedures of \$50 million specific to the surgical and diagnostic backlog.

This year's budget presentations—so, 2022-2023—shows the last—the line, sorry—the line for last year as \$40 million and not \$50 million. So a discrepancy there. In addition, in March, at the very end of fiscal year 2021-2022, the minister reported that \$13.7 million of the \$50 million had been spent or allocated to date. That's what the minister reported.

So can the minister explain why the Estimates of expenditure for this year show that last year's commitment to the surgical and diagnostic backlog was \$40 million and not 50, and that's on page 156 of the budget Estimates of expenditure. So I just was seeking clarification, if the minister could I—could clarify for us—if the minister could clarify for us—and I've now lost my train of thought on that—yes, sorry—for last year, if the \$10 million for priority procedures, where things are at in terms of that spending, that would be great, just whatever calculation they have to date for that. And then just clarify why in—on page 156 of the budget Estimates for expenditure, why it says \$40 million for the backlog and not 50 as indicated.

Ms. Gordon: I thank the honourable member for Union Station for the question.

I do want to answer the previous question that they asked, and that was about the 2021 priority procedures and how much we are estimating to spend against the \$10 million budgeted. Preliminary estimate for 2021-22 is \$10.9 million. Again, that number has not been finalized so I emphasize the word estimate.

I also want to answer the subsequent question about the \$50 million, and so on an annual basis our government is supporting the recommendation of the wait time report with a \$10-million investment. So in 2021, there's \$10 million for priority procedures, and then health system capacity enablement was \$40 million and that totaled \$50 million.

So the \$50 million referred to in 2021 was a combination of two things: the \$10 million for priority

procedures and the \$40 million for the COVID backlog.

Thank you.

MLA Asagwara: Thank you, Minister, for that question.

Can the minister update us on how much of that funding was actually spent and not just allocated? And I'm speaking specifically—just so that I'm clear—I'm speaking specifically to the diagnostic and surgical backlog funds that the minister had announced—the \$50 million that were announced by the minister, rather.

So, I'd like the minister to be clear on how much was spent directly on surgeries and procedures. So, an update on how much of that funding was actually spent, not just allocated, and clarity around what was spent directly on surgeries and procedures.

Previously—and I'll give this as an example. We've raised this recently that, previously, the government has suggested things like doctors' billings for meetings were being counted as part of that \$50 million. So I really am just looking for clarity around how much was directly spent on surgeries and procedures.

Thank you.

Ms. Gordon: I'm going to have to spend a bit of time explaining how medical remuneration works for our diagnostic and surgical recovery backlog. So, of the \$50 million, \$13.1 million was for the first four request-for-supply arrangements that led to 11,000 procedures which came from this, which include cataracts—endoscopy; cataracts; pediatric general surgery, dental and ear, nose and throat; outpatient spine procedures; adult ear, nose and throat and general surgery; \$2.1 million for initiatives through the Diagnostic and Surgical Recovery Task Force have totalled, for the initial activity like FIT testing and spine surgery, \$34.8 million for medical remuneration for physicians.

And so, you know, let's—I'll give you an example. So, someone has a cataract done at western surgical centre. We bill—western surgical centre bills us for the surgery time, for the space—oh, I'm gone now. Okay. We've got to sort this out, guys. There's got to be L-D-I-S power—

Mr. Chairperson: We can hear you, minister.

Ms. Gordon: Thank you, Mr. Chairperson. Can I continue without video?

Mr. Chairperson: We have video.

Ms. Gordon: Oh. We—I can't see you. So I'll just continue.

So, if western surgical centre, for example, does a cataract surgery, they will bill us for the surgery time, for the surgery room and equipment, and then the doctor that performed the cataract will bill us under medical remuneration. So the \$34.8 million can include anything from the person seeing their physician to begin the process leading up to their surgery.

So I just want to clarify that, because there seems to be some misinformation in the public sphere about the monies that are being paid out under medical remuneration, but it is for individuals who might even be starting their journey towards their surgery, have completed a test, where we are billed under medical remuneration.

Thank you.

*(12:10)

MLA Malaya Marcelino (Notre Dame): Advocates, IENs and even the former fairness commissioner have identified specific requirements and processes that have been mandated by CRNM, or the College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba, that have acted as unfair barriers to IEN accreditation.

Last spring, your government made some amendments—passed some amendments to The Fair Registration Practices in Regulated Professions Act, and that legally allowed for more government discretion in determining these outcomes for accreditation for these regulated professions like nursing.

Has the minister availed of these new powers to carefully present compliance orders to CRNM to compel them to remove certain unfair barriers that advocates, the former fairness commission and IENs themselves, have raised to you? And if so, could you please describe the nature of those compliance orders?

Thank you.

Ms. Gordon: I thank the honourable member for—from Notre Dame for the question and welcome her to the committee table.

Internationally educated nurses and supporting those nurses is certainly a priority for our government. That is why we have made available \$23,000 for each internationally educated nurse to gain licensure and to practise at their full scope here in this province. And we continue discussions. I was pleased to meet yesterday with the Association of Regulated Nurses of

Manitoba, talking about how we can better support our internationally educated nurses and it was in the first half of 2021 that the first compliance letter was issued to the College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba.

Since being appointed Health Minister in August of 2021, I've had several meetings with the college, and my latest meeting was May 11th, just a couple of days ago, where we both spoke about the need to streamline the process, to work with our colleges and our Red River College and our advanced education institutions to streamline the process to licensure for our internationally educated nurses.

So, conversations continue to be held. We also have a tripartite assistant deputy minister working group that has been formed between the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Advanced Education, the ministry of economic development and trade. So everyone is coming to the table because it is going to require that whole-of-government approach to addressing the needs of internationally educated nurses, as well as working with the colleges and the Manitoba Nurses Union, I've had many discussions with them, as well.

So, we continue to work through the challenges that we have seen, and I stand committed to ensuring that we streamline the process to licensure for our internationally educated nurses.

Thank you.

MLA Marcelino: Thank you for that response, Minister.

And speaking of the IENs in Manitoba Project portal that was rolled out last summer, this is a project that would purportedly provide funding to Manitoba IENs for the various steps and requirements involved in the recognition and 'regitation' process.

I'd like to know how many folks have been successful applicants to this project and how much funds, in terms of the grants, have been disbursed to this date?

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable Minister of Health (Ms. Gordon), we have no video or audio of you. *[interjection]* We've got video but no audio.

The honourable Minister of Health. Could the minister unmute?

Ms. Gordon: I'm pleased to answer the honourable member for Notre Dame's (MLA Marcelino) question.

This program, which is one of the reasons we have this tripartite working group, is managed—the funds and the number of individuals that are moving through their portal is handled under the Department of Economic Development, Investment and Trade. So that information would need to be taken under advisement or asked during their Committee of Supply.

Ms. Amanda Lathlin (The Pas-Kameesak): I just want to clarify—

An Honourable Member: Amanda, can you just say that we'd like to take it under advisement?

Ms. Lathlin: Oh, okay. We'd like to take this under advisement—

An Honourable Member: The previous question under advisement.

Ms. Lathlin: With the previous question, minister.

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable Minister of Health—we cannot hear the minister. Could you be unmuted?

* (12:20)

We are working to get your audio restored.

Could the minister check if they're muted because we cannot—

Ms. Gordon: Can you hear me now?

Mr. Chairperson: We can hear you now.

Ms. Gordon: We can take this—these questions under advisement and seek that information from another department, which is where the information is held. Yes, we can do that.

Ms. Lathlin: I had walked in in the middle of numbers when you were talking about transportation. I'm from—I would say everyone knows here I'm from northern Manitoba.

Is there a difference between that NP, Northern Patient Transportation Program versus what—the conversation I had just walked in when we were quoting \$70 per night allotted for patients from northern Manitoba? So can you clarify that? Is that two different fundings or is that the same?

Ms. Gordon: Can you hear me now? Okay, and I thank the member for The Pas-Kameesak for the question.

So, you may have entered the room when we were talking about the financial hardship supports for individuals that are—experience patient transfers,

interregional patient transfers. The Northern Patient Transportation Program is different. So that was established in 1972 as a reorganization of the former patient air transportation program, and it covers individuals who are residents of Manitoba located in one of the applicable RHAs and are registered with Manitoba Health.

And individuals can receive a travel subsidy for certain travel expenses incurred while travelling to access an insured benefit, being referred by a physician for a medically necessary intervention not available at the individual's community, subject to the northern patient transport policy, travelling to the closest appropriate location and travelling by the lowest cost travel option that is medically appropriate. So that—they're two—it's a different program.

Ms. Lathlin: Since it's a different program, can you name—are the rates still the same, as in hotel and meals per diem, because I can tell you for a fact, when one cannot cover the other half—usually hotels go for \$130 a night; depends where you are. Most of our people where I come from can't afford to come down, pay for the hotel. And meals is like \$8. You know, it just forces people to go eat at fast food restaurants at that rate, with our diabetics.

Is there going to be a time where these rates can go up so our patients from northern Manitoba will feel more comfortable and safe and more ensured that they can receive their medical needs instead of having to have money in their pocket or money in their bank accounts?

Ekosi.

Ms. Gordon: I thank the honourable member for The Pas-Kameesak for the supplementary question.

So the—this is a travel subsidy; it's a transportation subsidy to residents who have to travel long distances to obtain medical care in the province. First Nation Inuit health covers transportation for on-reserve status clients through the Non-Insured Health Benefit Program. So this program is unique in Canada. Manitoba is the only province that provides a transportation subsidy. Again, it's to residents who have to travel long distances to obtain medical care.

Ms. Lathlin: I'm very aware what the—this program is all about. But, again, to—in order to prevent people from neglecting their health by not having money in their pocket to attend these long-awaited appointments for our people, not just for Indigenous people, but all of our northern Manitoba—I don't live on reserve; I live across the river, and I'm—I would have

to go under NPTP, not on reserve, which is just across the river. It's ridiculous.

Anyway, will these rates be increased so we can feel safe and comfortable to travel to Winnipeg, access health, instead of having to worry about money, cancel appointments and hope you have money in your pocket next time? Because this really is detrimental to our health—money.

Ms. Gordon: I thank the honourable member for The Pas-Kameesak for the question.

And in my time in the health system, I travelled quite extensively in the North and in rural Manitoba, as well, and I'm very familiar with the patient transportation program and that it is a transportation subsidy; it does not, for the member's information, does not include meals and ensuring a person has cash on hand to—for out-of-pocket expenses. It's specifically a travel subsidy.

And just want for the record to state that our government has doubled the NDP's funding of the program from \$7.9 million to \$18.1 million. So we are investing in the program. We recognize that individuals need to be able to travel from their remote communities into Winnipeg and other locations for care. Again, it's a transportation subsidy; it's unique in Canada. See, we're the only province that provides a subsidy, and again, it's to residents who have to travel long distances to obtain medical care in the province.

Mr. Chairperson: The hour being 12:30, committee rise.

ROOM 255

EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING

Mr. Chairperson (Brad Michaleski): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This section of the Committee of Supply will now resume consideration of the Estimates for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning. Questioning for this department will proceed in a global manner.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Nello Altomare (Transcona): It's good to be back this Friday morning looking and getting into the Estimates for Education and, you know, just determining the direction that the department is going in and what we can expect moving forward for '22-23.

I do want to acknowledge, Mr. Chair, we do have people in the gallery today, and I just want to welcome

them to the committee room because this is an important part of democracy, one that not a lot of people get to see and witness. And today it's, like I said earlier, it's great to have people in the gallery. So, welcome.

We'll just get right into this, Mr. Chair, and we'll also continue with questions that are global in nature. I will say, I'm finding it somewhat interesting because I know this government does talk about transparency, need for the public to know how departments are working and the pieces included in that.

So, when I'm talking about that, I'm thinking and reflecting back on the Estimates book, Mr. Chair, back in 2019-2020, the Estimates book for the Department of Education was actually quite extensive and granular, found it quite informative and did give a real clear direction as to where the government was going with the Department of Education.

Now, two short years later, we have an Estimates book that is somewhat less concise, and really difficult to discern exactly what direction the department is going in.

So, I would like to ask the minister, my first question is, how is this Estimates book able to provide the necessary detail to determine what direction the department is going in?

Hon. Wayne Ewasko (Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning): Good morning, everyone, and happy Friday. And again, yes, absolutely, Manitoba is a great place to live, work and play and raise a family, Mr. Chair.

And so, just to concur with the member from Transcona, that's the beauty of being here in Manitoba and being able to have people in the gallery and witness the democratic process, here. And I think, more and more, we need to do—I know—I can't really speak to some of the policies and ways of doing various different things and how we educate the public on the processes and the various steps of government here, Mr. Chair, but I know we, in the education system, are working on various different things to get information out to the public so that they're more than aware of the different steps and how government works. And that goes with committee rooms and absolutely everything. And especially, you know, during the Estimates process.

So, to answer the member's question, so, the format for Estimates and for the Estimates booklets, the budgetary supplemental expenditure documents, the government changed the format in '21-22, so that's

what the document is in front of you, my friend from Transcona.

But, in addition to that, what we have is the balance scorecards, which basically is totally transparent; it's available to the public. And those balance scorecards also have targets attached to them so that everybody can see exactly what are the steps, the goals, the missions and the progression as far as what the department is doing.

And as, you know, the member knows, in January, my department, Education and Early Childhood Learning, was created. We brought in Early Childhood Learning because it is just a great synergy, it totally makes sense, and absolutely have to applaud Premier Stefanson for that move.

* (10:10)

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: I just, like, want to remind the Minister of Education that we can't use proper names, so for Premier Stefanson, please just use Premier. Thank you. *[interjection]*

Mr. Altomare: I'm glad that we're working out all of the machinations and how to, you know, conduct business this morning. It's always a lesson, because, you know, we don't nearly have enough time in Estimates and to get down to the nitty-gritty here.

I will talk a little bit more and ask the minister a little bit more about assessment. We do know that during the past 26 months it's been a challenge in schools for assessment, and I would assume for the department as well, Mr. Chair, because a number of assessment tools have had to have been suspended, not undertaken. And this, of course, gets back to the department because the department, then, doesn't know how students are progressing, what stage they're at, et cetera.

And so, with the challenge of the past 26 months, what type of assessment data—other than report card data, which I do know that the department collects—what other pieces of assessment data has the department been collecting so that they can get an idea of how students are progressing in Manitoba?

I'm thinking specifically of the grade 3 assessment that would go on, I'm thinking of the middle years assessment and I'm also thinking of the assessments that were used in high school.

Mr. Ewasko: You know, the member knows—I mean, he was an early years teacher and an administrator for

his 30-plus years in the education system. I mean, this year would have been my 28th year as a teacher and guidance counsellor and working with students at all different levels, Mr. Chair, you know, with student services, a little bit in the early years for myself, but mostly middle years and senior years.

But I'm not quite sure—the member might need to put a little bit more on the record in regards to what he was referencing. So I'm going to just basically go with that he was talking on the positive side of half—how all this works.

But he knows that our teachers, educators, staff, they assess and reassess on a daily basis. They work with their students. You know, as far as the pandemic goes, even before the pandemic, teachers were finding new and innovative ways to make sure that that learning had continued before the pandemic, during the pandemic and post-pandemic. I mean, we're having those conversations with school boards, school divisions, educators.

The department has met with all 37 school divisions to make sure that our framework for learning—which, again, you know, the member from Transcona doesn't reference all the good things that are going on, unfortunately, but that's okay. The day after, when we launched the action plan on April 20th, we actually also launched the framework for learning, which all school divisions, school boards and senior admin had absolutely applauded.

So with that, you know, I know he mentioned also the assessments at the early years level and the middle years and also the senior years. So the grade 3 and 4 assessments have started again, and keep in mind, this is on top of the day-to-day assessments that teachers and staff are doing, and the 7 and 8 assessments have started again. We have suspended the grade 12 assessments right now, but then again, that's—that doesn't exclude any of the day-to-day assessments that are going on from our hard-working teachers and staff at the various different levels within our K-to-12 system.

And we just continued to have that dialogue, open dialogue with our education partners at various different levels, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Altomare: What I was asking for specifically, Mr. Chair, is, has the department collected any assessment data from school divisions, and—in the sense, during the pandemic? And, you know, if not, you know, not to provide a reason but to—at first, I kind of want to know if data has been collected. And then, if

it hasn't been collected, what's the plan moving forward for the department to know what level students are at?

* (10:20)

Mr. Ewasko: I mean, the member knows how challenging it has been over the last couple years and especially—you know, and for all Manitobans and Canadians and people all across this—the world, basically. You know, to specifically talk about assessments as he asked for a specific answer. So, here we go.

The 3-4 assessments had started again as far as the provincial assessments; that was getting collected in the fall. The 7-8 assessments had started getting collected in the winter and we're getting that information. Again, teachers are assessing and reassessing on a day-to-day basis.

We're also taking a look at, of course, the K to 12—the commission basically asked for the provincial enhanced programming, basically a system-level check. And, again, with the framework for learning, it definitely highlights the fact that we want to support teachers in their classrooms as well, anything that they need to build upon what they already know in regards to assessing and all of that type of stuff. We are still tracking credit attainment at the grade 9 level. We're still checking and collecting data on the graduation rates.

You know, we are looking on—again, the framework, and I'm hoping, you know, again, it's been a few days since we've been in Estimates and I'm hoping the member took it upon himself to take a look at the framework for learning and maybe read the action plan, and then also our Indigenous inclusion framework for learning called Mamāhtawisiwin. So, hopefully he is—if he hasn't, hopefully, he's asked his staff to give him a bit of a summary on that.

And again, I'm more than willing to have a briefing with the member. I know that we've had—shared many great conversations in regards to education in the past, and definitely open to any type of briefing that the member would like to have on any of the topics or all the topics that I've spoken about.

Mr. Altomare: I do know that there was an announcement earlier in the year regarding moving assessments at the high school, or at the senior years, from grade 12 to grade 10, and that was interesting.

I would like to ask the minister, what was the assessment department thinking about in the

Department of Education in moving that from grade 12 to grade 10? What is the thinking behind that, and what do they wish to accomplish with that?

Mr. Ewasko: So, I'm hoping that the member from Transcona—my—you know, my colleague in the education world, I'm hoping he's not going down the path of trying to say that teachers aren't assessing. So I'm going to answer his question and then get into an additional teachable moment, as we say at times.

So, basically, what had happened is, you know, unlike many, many, many years ago, we have—in our government, we have had the opportunity to bring people in and to collaboratively have conversations about education.

So, there was a summit—there was a literacy and numeracy summit in 2018—maybe the member's aware of that, maybe he's not, but that's okay. There was a numeracy-literacy summit in 2018, January of 2018, and there was well over 800, I believe, participants that was engaged. And they overwhelmingly suggested that the grade 12 provincial assessment be moved to the grade 10 assessment.

And for many years, I mean I—I taught precalculus at the high school level myself, and even when I was teaching precal back in the mid 2000s, 2005-ish, somewhere in there, to 2008, maybe even a bit earlier, I was always wondering, like, so we're doing this provincial assessment, and I know it's a snapshot, but we're doing assessments on a day-to-day basis—why were we doing a provincial assessment snapshot at the end of their K to 12?

Now, part of that rationale makes sense to me, I guess, right—they want to see, you know, how the students are doing at grade 3, 4, how they're doing at 7 and 8, and how they're doing at grade 12. So the overwhelmingly—advice from the summit, also from the K-to-12 commission plus—and, again, I—I'm referencing that action plan, because it's a great K-to-12 action plan, which is a road map to student success—it's mentioned in there as well, to move that grade 12 snapshot assessment to grade 10.

And I'd like to actually quiz the member, but I know this is—that's a little bit different, but in his professional opinion, why does that make sense? It makes sense to me, because again, it's a snapshot. All these teachers are doing assessments at every grade level, on a day-to-day basis. And why are they doing that? So they can assess where their students are at, be flexible and nimble within the curriculum, to be able to

change and adapt what they're teaching to each individual student's needs.

So, the recommendation to move it to grade 10 is so that, okay, we're taking a snapshot here at grade 10, they've got another two years of secondary school, is there any gaps, is there any other learning needs that these students need, any other supports that this—that the teachers need?

That's pretty much it. Totally makes sense. I know that the member from Transcona would more than agree with me.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Altomare: I'd just like to reiterate that I was genuinely curious as to some of the rationale behind that. Certainly, we all know that teachers assess continually and they have a variety of tools. But this is, more specifically, I was trying to get to the thinking that the Department of Education has, because I do know that the department wants to collect the data so that they can make informed decisions based on the data that's collected.

And because we've been in this—past 26 months, have been in this up—I know, kind of an upside-down way of learning that I was genuinely curious as to the thinking behind that. And I was—I'm happy to hear what the minister said in his response, and I'm also willing to take up the minister on his offer to have another briefing and talk about assessment. I would certainly look forward to that, Mr. Chair, because this is an important piece, especially moving forward, right?

Because all of this, Mr. Chair, impacts, eventually, the supports that we're providing kids in schools. And, of course, the best of support for kids in schools is that classroom teacher, that teacher in front of them.

* (10:30)

And we do know that that's certainly been challenged lately, especially since 2016. We've been seeing some real cuts and constraints to the public school system. And I know assessment data is critical in ensuring that we plan not only for success, but also have a plan in place that is proactive in nature, that is based on assessments that have been collected for a number of years so that we can make informed decisions, so that we can provide the services that kids require in their classroom experience.

So I look forward to an invitation from the minister regarding that briefing. He knows how to get ahold

of me and, like I said, Mr. Chair, I'm looking forward to that.

I do want to stay on this sort of pandemic-theme piece and how it's impacted kids in school and kids out of school. We do know that the pandemic had a significant impact, Mr. Chair, on attendance and enrolment. A number of parents, at the height of pandemic, decided to home-school their children.

And, in this vein, I'd like to ask the minister: Can his department provide a pre-pandemic number of home-schooled kids, and how does that compare to the current number of kids that are being home-schooled?

Mr. Ewasko: With the five minutes of questions and answers—so I've got a couple little notes and tidbits that I wanted to mention and just to show that, my friend from Transcona, that I am listening to him. So I'll start, I guess, up at the top.

First of all, I totally know that the questions that he was asking in regards to assessment and, you know, as I mentioned to him earlier—and I think he knows that I'm also being sincere—as he is on his questioning, I'm being sincere about the briefing. So we'll definitely, you know, get him that briefing on that framework for learning document and additional things, for sure.

You know, I do have to say, in regards to the member continuing to put misinformation on the record—and as he continues to do it, I'm hoping I don't have to slide that word to disinformation, that he's doing it on purpose. But in the last two years, we have funded education to the tune of about \$327 million of more funding over the last two years—that's over a 17.2 per cent increase.

You know, when he's asking the question specifically—so, I'm sort of going in chronological order to how he was asking the questions. So in regards to enrolment, in 2019-20, there was home-schooling—there was just about, well, 3,689 students; in 2020-21, there was 8,027 students; in '21-22, we had already seen the majority of these students start to make their way back, so that's 6,149.

And, you know, of course—the member from Transcona being a former administrator, he knows that at the end of September of each year he has to try working with the school division to get the numbers into the department as far as the enrolment within the schools and all of that type of stuff, and we know that those numbers sort of trickle in, I guess, throughout October of each school year, and so that 6,149, that is

the number that we have reported and trickled in from this past October.

But we also know that school divisions and school boards and school leaders, including us in the department of working—have been working very diligently and closely with communities to make sure that they're very much aware that—and that we're strongly encouraging students to get back into the public school system. And so we anticipate that those numbers are quite a bit less today. We'll know more come this fall, of course.

But also, just to assure—or to anticipate a potential future question that the member is going to ask, we also, within that \$327 million of funding—the 17.2 per cent increase to Education—we also were making sure that we were funding school divisions to basically balance off that reduction in enrolment due to the pandemic pressures. So, schools and school divisions had not seen—you know, they—we worked quite closely with the school divisions to make sure that—because, of course, funding, as the member knows, generally, under the present model, which we're doing a funding review, is based on enrolment, and we just made sure that no divisions were penalized for a reduction in enrolment due to the pandemic.

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Altomare: Those numbers are quite interesting. I want to thank the member for providing those numbers; I didn't realize that it was that high in 2021.

And I do know that the department said that they were using the numbers from before the pandemic to determine base school funding. That's a very important number that every school here looks forward to seeing later in October based on a number on September 30.

I would like to ask the minister, then, for September of 2022, are we going to go back to that September 30 number, or will we continue using an average of the previous years?

* (10:40)

Mr. Ewasko: In regards to funding—and I believe I understood the member's question correctly—is that—and just to clarify to him, and again, he knows this because he's an administrator—was an administrator.

So, the funding for school divisions was announced in February to all school divisions, and as we've been doing over the past two years since the pandemic had started, we are taking a look at

numbers. We are watching those numbers. We are in constant communication with school boards and school divisions and senior leadership.

The department and I are—and as we moved forward we're going to continue to see what impacts the pandemic continues to have on our enrolment within schools. And so those numbers are adjusted as more information comes in, and how the pandemic has actually impacted—or as the students come back to public school system.

Mr. Altomare: What the FRAME documents outline, Mr. Chair, is a steady decline in the provincial contribution of public education. In 2015-16, the provincial contribution to public education was 62.4 per cent, or \$1.404 billion. In 2017-18, it went down to 60.3 per cent, and the actual dollars that the provincial government contributing to public education remained flat at about \$1.4 billion.

Mr. Chair, in the latest FRAME, the provincial contribution is 58.2 per cent or \$1.45 billion, which means since 2015-16, the actual provincial contribution to public education has only gone up roughly \$50 million. That's in the FRAME.

In February of 2022, the government did announce a 1.34 per cent increase to base funding to public education in a high interest environment, in an environment, now, since 2015-16, where inflation is reaching close to 22 per cent. An extra \$50 million over the six years doesn't cut it to meet the needs of students. It's outlined in the FRAME as to those numbers, Mr. Chair. It's quite clear.

Right now, this core service of government is being starved—starved—of the human resources that it needs, Mr. Chair. We're seeing it tangibly evidenced by teacher layoffs. We've outlined those in question period. They're well known in Seven Oaks, Brandon School Division, a number of smaller rural school divisions.

The minister likes to talk about a 300-and-something-million-dollar increase to a budget. That's factually untrue, Mr. Chair. If that were the case, teachers would not be being laid off. EAs would not be losing their jobs.

We still have a very difficult time understanding how, as we emerge from the pandemic, a 1.34 per cent increase in base funding is going to meet the needs of students, Mr. Chair. And this is a real concern. When a—when this government took office in 2016, they began a systematic reduction in support for schools, fiscal support for schools, shifting the burden onto

school boards—school boards then having to raise property taxes—but then tying the hands of school boards because they couldn't raise them enough to make up even just to maintain their base level of what they had the year before in human resource complement.

So my question for the minister, Mr. Chair, is how is a 1.34 per cent increase in base funding going to meet the needs of our students coming out of this pandemic?

*(10:50)

Mr. Ewasko: You know what, I more than appreciate, actually, this question coming from my friend from Transcona, because, you know—so when I was elected in 2011, many of the funding models—I mean, I was actually in that chair that he's sitting in back quite a few years ago, Mr. Chair, as Education advocate, and some of the cases—I mean, I was still relatively early on in my political journey, and he knows as well as I know, it's amazing on how many things that you end up learning and, you know, nobody's got any textbooks on this stuff where you can actually go and read up on a lot of this stuff, but there is information out there.

And so when the member puts on the record various different numbers and things, and, I mean, he talks about the FRAME report which is—which, you know, when you talk about the FRAME report, and the one that he—the member is referencing, this is from 2020-2021, and that is a budgeted FRAME report.

What is not included in the FRAME report—and you know what, I'm going to give the member a bit of a pass on this, because I didn't know necessarily all of the inner workings and the additional fundings that went from the provincial government to school divisions and school boards so that they could then make the decisions that they make.

And the member references teachers and EAs and all these support staff within school divisions, and he knows that it's—because I know that he doesn't want me interfering with school boards and, you know, trustees' decisions on what they do with the money that they're given.

And so the FRAME is a budgeted amount, and this is sort of operational dollars, but in addition to that—in addition to that, there is a—various amounts of money that is allocated and given towards school divisions, so I'll just list off a couple.

We know that—and he knows—that the funding model is old and antiquated, and we're under—in process to start to redevelop, speaking with our education partners all across the province of ours to come up with a better funding model. And what that means is taking that chunk of money and being able to send it out to school divisions and school boards more fairly and equitable. It is unfortunate that the previous government didn't feel that they ever needed to actually embark on this, but we're doing it.

So what the member is almost deliberately not putting on the record, but I'm going to give him a pass on that, is that we have also, in addition to the budgeted amount of monies, we have given \$80 million in January and an additional \$77 million to school divisions outside of the base funding through that formula.

Why did we do that, you may ask. Well, we did that because the funding model. If you just threw that money into the funding model, it would go back into that funding model and then not be dispersed fairly and equitably where that money is needed. So, that's why we did that. Those types of dollars do not show up in the 2020-2021 budgeted FRAME documents.

We also, throughout the pandemic, we had allocated over \$250 million to support our school divisions, schools and school boards.

Also—what is also not included in the FRAME report is capital expenditure, all the monies that is spent on schools in regards to capital. So, in the last two years, our capital allotment was \$160 million, and we've added \$100 million on top of that each year. So we've been—we've upped the capital by \$260 million for the past two years.

We also, Mr. Chair—I'm going to run out of time—we also increased our additional funding by \$1.6 billion over four years. I'll explain more in the next answer.

Mr. Altomare: I think what I'd like the minister to understand is the real-life consequences. What happens at a school level when a provincial government isn't a willing partner in ensuring that students get the support they need?

A 1.34 per cent increase in base funding has direct impact on the classroom, Mr. Chair. I outlined some of them. I can go into a more granular level, at the school level. I can say in some middle schools that are about four to five hundred that are in my 'constit,' we're seeing a reduction in student support teachers, middle schools going from two resource teachers

down to one and a half, losing block funding in order to support kids with additional needs, and then, of course, that having an impact on a number of EAs that can be in a school. These are the real-world impacts of that.

Capital funding is one thing, but that doesn't keep the lights on in schools that are currently functioning. And what we're seeing, as clearly outlined by the FRAME documents that the minister referred to, is a systematic decline in provincial funding, base funding, for schools. And that has impacts on the classroom, has impacts on kids and families.

* (11:00)

This question was not about the department interfering what school boards are doing, this question was about having a real partner in the provincial government to ensure that kids get the services that they need, Mr. Chair. With this level of funding, it's becoming more and more of a challenge after five to six years of this. We are at this point now where, not only is the system tired because of the pandemic, but the system feels like it just can't provide the support necessary.

Here's another tangible example, is that we're starting to see school boards having to make really, really, difficult decisions now, because of the increasing fuel costs. And that is a direct result of forces that are out of the control of that school board, so we're talking about places like Evergreen, Lakeshore, where transportation—where their transportation—transporting a majority of their kids, having to make some really difficult decisions.

And so I'll ask the minister again: How does a 1.34 per cent increase in base funding respond to the needs of kids coming out of this pandemic? *[interjection]*

Mr. Chairperson: Order. Order.

Mr. Ewasko: So, it's evident to me that my colleague, my friend from Transcona, the MLA for Transcona, is doing a little bit of cherry-picking.

And so what I mean by that is that, on one hand, he's talking about the FRAME report from 2020-2021, which is based on the budgeted amounts, not the additional funds that have come into play; now, on the other hand, he's talking about fuel prices.

So, can he please focus? I—it—like, it's unfortunate that the member continues to put misinformation on—and I'm telling the member, I am close for calling him out on disinformation, because he's refusing to listen.

I'm listening to him, and I'm answering his questions. I am explaining the additional monies that are—been allocated and given directly to school divisions to help keep the lights on.

I'm not sure if he doesn't understand the operational dollars versus the capital costs. I added the capital costs in there—well, what do you think keeps the lights on? Capital costs. The maintenance costs, that's the additional \$260 million we have provided to school divisions over the last two years. And that's each year, so that's \$520 million, Mr. Chair.

Holy smokes, we're going to go for a little bit on this because there's—again, the member is totally working on a two years ago and—but what I want to applaud the member is the fact that he did say that funding to schools had gone up. He did say that. Funding to schools had gone up. He said it.

Now, we have also, in addition to that, due to various wage pressures, cost pressures, just like he mentioned, fuel bills are up, right—not only in Manitoba, across Canada—continue to go up. Rate of inflation, it's a tough go for everybody. So I don't want him thinking that this is only affecting him. This is affecting our students. It's affecting our families. COVID affected our families, our students, absolutely everybody involved, not only in Manitoba, though, not only in Canada, but across this whole great country of ours, Mr. Chair.

We have given, again, \$80 million in additional funding this past January for the 2020-21—no, '21-22 school year. We've at—then given an additional \$77 million—that's additional money—in the '22-23 year, which is coming up. All that funding was given, announced the end of February.

And he knows that we are working—and this is probably what's bugging him—is that we're actually working with school boards and trustees and school leadership to have these conversations about the different challenges. The only one that is not accepting the fact—ones, I'll say, the ones, plural—that is not accepting the fact that we've gone through a pandemic is the member opposite and his NDP team. I'm asking the member to stop being so political and actually see what's in front of him. He's looking at the FRAME report from two years ago, which he admitted, funding went up.

Take some time; google, over the weekend, the news releases that we have done in regards to additional funding to school divisions for education to

help us through the pandemic—over 250 million additional dollars allocated to help with that, Mr. Chair.

I look forward to his next question.

Mr. Altomare: There are a number—and I've said this to the minister. The very fact that base funding is only increasing 1.34 per cent has real-world consequences at the school level.

The minister needs to understand that the provincial contribution, as clearly indicated by the FRAME report, has been 'din' decline since 2015-16. He cannot dispute that, Mr. Chair. And it has, as I mentioned earlier, real-world consequences at the school level and to kids in the system.

* (11:10)

One of the largest pieces, here, is we needed to see a plan, post-pandemic, that addresses clinical support in schools. The member also knows—or, sorry, the minister would know that clinical services have been greatly disrupted these past 26 months, and now there's an opportunity to ensure that clinical services get delivered to the kids that need the levels of supports.

In 2018, some of the wait times for psych assessments were at six to eight months; those wait times now have increased to close to 20 months. Speech-language supports, as the minister knows, have also been in higher demand; reading recovery, higher demand; reading tutor programs, higher demand. These are the challenges that are facing Manitoba students coming out of the pandemic. And what they need is a provincial government that's a willing partner to address these needs, Mr. Chair.

So, I would like to ask the minister, what are the plans to ensure that clinical supports are being supported by the Department of Education to ensure that they get to the kids that need them?

Mr. Ewasko: Again, I appreciate the member's question.

And basically, again, much like other things that are going on lately, it just shows that we need to—in addition to how much collaboration and work we're doing within the sector and our education partners, it also just shows that we need to do a better job of highlighting the information out there, because the member, even in his role as Education—I'm going to say critic, because I'm sensing the tone that he really doesn't like my old tag line of Education advocate, because he refuses to put some of the facts on the record, but that's okay.

I sort of know where he's coming from. He's following, you know, some of his leader's self-supportive talking points. I was hoping to have a little bit more of a collaborative question and answers, and I'm going to continue to go down that path of just keeping it high level and, you know, making sure that we're talking about the facts and what is happening within our school system.

So, when we—and again, I appreciate him putting on the record that funding has gone up in Education, and he hasn't quite given the full accolades of the total amount that it's gone up, but that's okay; he'll get there once he gets himself some of the factual information or gets his staff to pull up some factual information for him.

So, a lot of this money that is given, is given—sometimes it's outside that funding model, and the reason for that is because of the collaborative approach not only our government but the department and I have embarked on, actually having conversations with the front lines, with our school boards, with our trustees, with our superintendents, with teachers, educational assistants. He fails to remember that we have multiple connections all across this great province of ours that know both of us.

Worked in the—I worked in the student services realm for quite some time. I worked in it from the early years to the high school. I appreciate he's coming to us from the early years standpoint and the administrative standpoint, and that's why I really feel that the—from him coming from the administration side, he should know some of this.

So, in regards to student supports and special needs funding, we have actually given an additional \$5 million last year, an additional \$7 million this coming year, which—I'm just going to give him the percentage, because I know he likes percentages—is an increase of 8.2 per cent over the last two years, in addition to \$80 million and \$77 million.

So, \$80 million for this current year that's coming soon to completion at the end of June; \$77 million, which is going to start in September, which has already been allocated—been given outside of the funding model.

* (11:20)

Why is that? Because the former government didn't do anything with the funding model, even though administrators like himself stood up and said, we have to do something with this funding model,

why is the government not listening? That's what they said to the NDP.

Well, sir, we're stepping up. We're doing it. We're taking a look at it. We're changing it. And the reason why we're giving all those dollars outside that funding model is, why? It's so that those funding dollars—millions and millions and millions—can go to specifically where it's needed.

How do we know where it's specifically needed? Communication with the sectors and consultations with the sectors—that is with all of our education partners. That's how we know where those dollars and cents are going and have to go, and that's why we're committed to over \$327 million—17.2 per cent increase—over the last two years.

Mr. Altomare: We do know that—and this has been established—that the FRAME documents are really important. We do know that the latest FRAME document that I was referring was released in May of 2021.

I would like to ask the minister, can we expect the newest FRAME to be released shortly, since it is May of 2022?

Mr. Ewasko: Yes, but in addition to that, Mr. Chair—because I ran out of time on my previous answer—so, yes, the member asked an answered question. Yes, yes, yes, the next FRAME report is due out shortly.

The member asks questions about the fact on, you know, enhancing supports, working with our school clinicians. I know he has first-hand knowledge working with our school supports and clinicians throughout his school and school division, as did I—as do I—still talk to many of them. I don't think he's giving quite the credit where credit is due as well.

So, in addition to our educators, our school staff, our administrators, our senior admin, our trustees, our school boards—they've had to be really flexible and nimble over the last couple years, and I think that they've all done that.

And I would not exclude our school clinicians on that as well, whether it's social workers, speech and language pathologists, psychologists, school division psychologists—I mean, they've had to be nimble as well.

They've had to adapt to this hybrid way of doing things, as far as assessments and working with students and because they all—like, I mentioned the other day in one of the speeches, we talked about a calling. Because they've had a calling to this great profession, working with students, and so they're going to do

everything within their power to be able to make some of these changes and adapt to various things.

You know, we've launched also a mental health and well-being strategy with targeting—targeted funding to make sure that we're enhancing the resources, tools and supports that are required, but not only by staff, but for students. The strategy's going to continue next year; that's an additional \$5 million.

And, again, just to put an exclamation mark on this, that's over and above that funding model that the member continues to go to and continues to ignore the fact of all the additional dollars and cents that go out there, Mr. Chair.

Also, within that—he might have heard this, you know, in the last year or so—but the Teachers' Idea Fund, we're specifically asking teachers—and I ask him to maybe, you know, put the partisan stuff aside and reach out to some of his former colleagues—I know he talks to them, I know I talk to mine. Put the ideas in. What—because there's no monopoly of great ideas. I know that the NDP think that they have the monopoly on good ideas, and if that's the case we wouldn't have to fix all those messes that we inherited in 2016, Mr. Chair.

But with that, I want him to encourage teachers and people within the sector, with our partners within education to put in their ideas in regards to the dedication to mental health and wellness, because we have embraced that—of the collaborative approach, the listening approach, the doors-are-always-open approach, to coming in and have those conversations.

I do know—I did want to put for my last few seconds here before the next question, Mr. Speaker—or, Mr. Chair, is that the River East Transcona—because that's where he used to teach—over the last two years, the River East Transcona School Division has received a 12.2 per cent—that's a \$12.3-million increase in funding. This figure does not include additional support for COVID-19 costs.

And, as the member knows, school divisions, school boards take these dollars. They've got priorities and they put those dollars where they feel the priorities are within their school divisions.

Mr. Altomare: I do know that the minister has referred to the—there's a new education funding model that's coming downstream. I do know that late last year the government did announce it was creating a consultation team to work on this education funding model, and this is something that came out of the commission for K-to-12 education.

Can the minister provide the names of the people on this team and the experience that they bring to this consultation group? *[interjection]*

Mr. Chairperson: Order.

* (11:30)

Mr. Ewasko: I notice that the member went on the funding model review, which is great, and I'm going to provide him some names of the review team members. And I know that he really didn't want to carry on with the whole River East Transcona School Division money that we've given to them, because it's a good news story.

It is a good news story. And we're working hard with our education partners all across this province of ours, and he doesn't like that. Many of the NDP supporters don't like that. You know why they don't like that? Because myself, the department and our government are being collaborative, working with—and we're being transparent on how to improve education for our students and build on existing excellence within our school system, as opposed to what had happened in the—under the previous administration.

And yes, I'm going to call it out: 17 years of NDP mismanagement, absolutely, where there was many discussions on their side that had happened behind closed doors. We've got plans, even though the member refuses to read them. We are making changes for the good of our students and our staff within the education world, Mr. Chair.

So, the funding model review is one of those changes that we're doing. Why? Because for many, many, many years, many of our stakeholders, our education partners, have said, hey, we need to take a look at this because the funding is going in and it's being sent out unfairly and inequitably. And it's not going to the places that absolutely need it the most. So, that's why we're working with everybody. Doors are open, arms are wide open, working with people.

So, the review team: the review team meets couple times a month.

We've got, from DSFM—and for the sake of time, and I might need some more time, so I will have to ask for leave—Division scolaire franco-manitobaine, so I'm not going to work on acronyms, I'm going to just read it out—we've got Rob Dupré-Ollinik, who's secretary-treasurer.

We have the Family Advocacy Network of Manitoba, Theresa Cronin *[phonetic]*.

We have the Indigenous Services Canada, Derek Bradley. He's the regional program manager.

We have the Manitoba Association of Parent Councils, they're known as MAPC, Brenda Brazeau, who's the executive director.

Manitoba Association of School Business Officials, MASBO, Amanda Senkowski, who's the secretary-treasurer. We have Manitoba Association of School Business Officials, MASBO, Wayne Shimizu, secretary-treasurer. Manitoba association of school boards—of—sorry, of school business officials, Brian Spurill, secretary-treasurer.

We have the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents, MASS, Pauline Clark, she's the president and, yes, she's from Winnipeg School Division. Manitoba Association of School Superintendents, MASS, representative Stephen Ross, he's a superintendent in the rural.

We've got Manitoba Federation of Independent Schools, Robert Praznik, he's the superintendent at the archdiocese.

Manitoba First Nations School System—Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre, George Merasty, he's the executive director.

We've got the Manitoba School Boards Association, Alan Campbell, he's the president of MSBA. We also have Floyd Martens—many familiar name—Manitoba School Boards Association, Floyd Martens, trustee, rural. We have the Manitoba School Boards Association, Sandy Nemeth, trustee—familiar name, worked with Sandy for many years.

Manitoba Teachers' Society, Joseph Warbanski, policy analyst.

Post-Secondary Presidents' Council, associate dean of the faculty of education, Dr. Lesley Eblie Trudel, formerly assistant superintendent of Sunrise School Division.

Mr. Adrien Sala (St. James): I'm grateful to be here to have an opportunity to ask some questions about early childhood education, and I'm grateful to my colleague, Nello, for inviting me to be part of this.

Before I start, I also just want to say that I am also grateful to be part of our child-care caucus in the NDP, to work with my colleague Nello, our colleague Malaya Marcelino and previously with our colleague Danielle Adams, who, unfortunately is no longer with us.

Mr. Chairperson: Order. Just want to remind the members that, please, if you can refer to the colleagues from their constituency or their ministry. Thank you.

Mr. Sala: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

So, I'd like to start, Minister, by asking a bit about something that I think is a real concern for our child-care sector here in Manitoba and for the health of it on an ongoing basis.

You know, we've had six years of operating grant freezes to our child-care centres. They've undergone two years of incredible challenges throughout the pandemic. And if you speak with child-care centres and you speak with directors, as I hope you have, you hear from them a pretty clear message, and that is: our child-care sector is currently in crisis. Our child-care sector is in crisis right now. And that's a message that, you know, I hear over and over; I know my colleagues hear over and over.

And that ties to, of course, the funding freeze, but it also relates to the impacts of that funding freeze in terms of the ability of centres to retain and hire staff. And that's because the wage levels that they're able to pay are poverty-level wages. They're incredibly low wages.

And so, of course, all Manitobans were very excited to know and to learn about the significant investments that the federal government has committed to making here in Manitoba into child care. They're bringing in hundreds of millions of dollars, which is welcomed, of course, and is good news for this province.

But the concern for many is that we still haven't seen any commitment from this government as to how they're going to be using those dollars to improve wages for child-care workers in this province.

So, I'd like to just give the minister an opportunity to help us understand what the status of those—of their plans are to improve wages for child-care workers in Manitoba.

One thing I do want to flag that is of concern is that the Canada-Manitoba child-care agreement contains a wage grid, and I think there's something of real concern in there to child-care workers in Manitoba. That issue of concern is that the wage grid outlines target wages for CCAs and ECE IIs that are below the current average wages for workers in those same roles, and I'm using the numbers that are all from that same agreement.

So, that's got a lot of people concerned that, ultimately, these dollars that are coming our way won't be used to do what's needed to bring wages up to a level that are fair and that will allow centres to do what's needed to hire staff and retain staff.

So, hoping the minister can speak to their intentions to raise wages, whether not they have developed a wage grid and, hopefully, some clarity around why the average target wages in that agreement are below the average wages that are in place right now—and again, I'm just using numbers that are from their agreement that they signed with the feds.

* (11:40)

Mr. Ewasko: I guess I'd like to start by absolutely—you know, we've said it multiple times, but I don't think it can be stressed enough that whenever a family member passes is absolutely tragic and it's absolutely brutal—it's absolutely brutal.

I'm thinking I shared this earlier, but I—it might have just been in the condolence booklet to Danielle's family, but I definitely want to say, again, from the bottom of my heart, it—I couldn't imagine having to go through what Bill, Nic and Jack [*phonetic*] are going through with the loss of their partner and their mom. It's absolutely horrendous.

Now, moving forward—and I appreciate the member for St. James' (Mr. Sala) question on early childhood learning and daycares and wages and all that type of stuff, and I'm hoping that with him being the new—I don't know if it's fully being announced, but I'm assuming he's going to be the new advocate—I'll say advocate, until I hear otherwise—advocate for Early Childhood Learning.

I know that we'll be able to work closely together as time moves on, in a collaborative approach. I want him to know that these are opportunities. And these are great opportunities, especially now that Early Childhood Learning has been brought into the Department of Education, which I think is absolutely long, long, long overdue.

I'd like to thank the Premier (Mrs. Stefanson). I learned from previous things, Mr. Chair, your tutelage on making sure that we're not using direct names, so I'd like thank the Premier for making that happen, because we have an incredible team in Education and Early Childhood Learning.

We have so much good news that has already been announced, with the federal government and

Minister Gould, I know, has congratulated our government, and me personally as well, and our department for being leaders across this great country of ours.

Manitoba is a leader in Canada. Minister Gould has said it. So what is great is that we have committed to make sure that we strengthen the sector. We've got a great working relationship with Jodie Kehl and Caryn LaFleche, who is with the sector right now.

We have multiple conversations with front-line services there as well. We're making sure that we're taking a lot of that, you know, Canada-Manitoba, pan-Canadian agreements, and working towards making sure that we strengthen the sector.

And it's not only creating new child-care spaces, which the former government should have, you know, started doing, or started planting those seeds on how we were going to staff the sector, but we're doing it. We're doing it. We're getting 'er done, lot more work yet to do.

We right now are—have been working on that wage bridge, and what that means is we're taking people within the sector who are making certain wages and bumping their wages up. And soon there's going to be a really good news announcement on what that wage grid is going to be—is going to be looking like.

Before we go on to the member's next question, or if I can continue, I did want to say that the organizations that I provided the list for the funding model review team, those organizations have actually provided the reps for our team on that funding review, so I just wanted to make sure that there was no misinformation out there.

Mr. Sala: The number that child-care workers have been hearing for, well, since government announced that they were—they'd signed the deal with the Government of Canada is \$25 an hour.

I think that's what we've heard in the Chamber; we've heard the government repeatedly announce that your predecessor also used that number, and, you know, in my conversations with child-care workers, there is an expectation, because of what this government said about wages, that they would be raised to an average of \$25 an hour, that workers can expect that, that that's coming.

Can the minister confirm that workers will see, overall, wage increases that will approach what they've suggested here, at \$25 an hour?

* (11:50)

Mr. Ewasko: The member brings forward a really good point, which I failed to say in my previous answer.

And the good point that I want to bring up is the hard work of my predecessor. So, the Minister of Families (Ms. Squires) worked very hard with her department and the federal government building those relationships, and I like to think that, with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning, we're continuing that good relationship with not only our sector, the staff, the boards. And much like the work that we've done with my Education critic, I'm going to do with the early childhood advocate, and it's, you know, being open and transparent.

And so the numbers—I know that the member wants numbers—and so he knows, or I think he knows, and if he doesn't know, here comes another teachable moment: we're lifelong learners. It's always good to learn new things, or maybe not new things, because I think the member from St. James does a lot of his homework and reading, I believe, so he knows that a lot of our daycares within Manitoba are run by boards, and they make many of the decisions and, again, prioritize.

But in 2021—because I know the member from Transcona likes to go on the 2021, so I'll help out the member from St. James—that the average for all ECEs was \$17.66, and our target is \$24.92, and our average, which includes all directors, everybody involved, the average in 2020-2021 was \$22.94, and the target for all staff is \$25.89.

You know, when we—again, we're working with our federal partners making sure that we're increasing seats, so we made a promise of 23,000 new seats. And I know—I was sort of hoping that the member might start off in good faith and congratulate us on—not only that, but also increase in the various wage grids or income grids for subsidies—we announced that as well. So I encourage the member for St. James (Mr. Sala) to get his staff to pull out all those great news releases for him.

And there's more good news to come. So, we've actually provided subsidies to another 12,000 individual spaces. That brings us to 18,000 subsidized spaces. And again, that's three times, or a 300 per cent increase. That's about 50 per cent of the child-care spaces in the province of ours. So we've got a lot of—we've had a lot of great news.

We need to make sure—unlike the previous government, we're making sure that we're creating strategies, working with the sectors to recruit, train and retain people within the industry, within the sector, with our partnerships, to make sure that we've got a sustainable child-care program here in Manitoba moving forward for many, many years to come.

And with that, Mr. Chair, I'll turn it over to the next question.

Thank you.

Mr. Sala: I would suggest that with the minister's last comments, it's not clear to me that he's been speaking with people in the sector and having conversations with directors and with people working in the sector, because I don't think that they would agree that this government is helping them to build a workforce for the—our child-care needs of tomorrow.

In relation to what he said about target numbers, I just want to get clarity, because it's a little confusing, because the agreement that his government signed with the feds—and I'm just—again, I'm just reading right out of the agreement itself. So this isn't—these aren't my numbers; these are your numbers.

It states that, right now, the average wage for a CCA is \$13.59 an hour. That's the current wage for a CCA right now, according to—on page 36 of the Canada-Manitoba child-care agreement. CCAs make up about 65 to 70 per cent of our child-care workforce right now, so this is a big deal. This is the—this is—most of our child-care workers fall into this bucket.

The target wage in the same plan, on page 49 and 50, the average target wage for a CCA is \$13.11 an hour. So, the average wage in the same document, \$13.59 an hour, and then the target wage in the same document is \$13.11 an hour, a 50-cent reduction or 50 cents less. This is the vast majority of our child-care workforce.

So I guess I'd like the minister to kind of square the circle and help us understand. He's using numbers. He said \$25.89 as a target for all staff. That's a big number, and I think we'd all love to see our child-care workers start to be paid wages that reflect the importance of the work that they do. But there's a big gap between that and what we see in the plan.

Can the minister help us understand the gap there? Why does their plan commit to a \$13.11 target wage for CCAs, which is below the current average wage, when he's just shared that they're seeking a \$25.89 wage target for all staff?

Mr. Ewasko: I appreciate—I do appreciate the question coming from the member opposite. I know that the member has some numbers, so I'm going to give him some factual numbers.

He knows I know that CCAs are very important within this sector—absolutely, absolutely important.

February of 2021, when I was the Advanced Education, Skills and Immigration minister, we launched—our government launched a Skills, Talent and Knowledge Strategy, which then works with the education sector—and that's now the Education and Early Childhood Learning sector—as well as our post-secondary sector, and all our education partners and business and looking at labour market needs. And we created this strategy so that we could start being a little more nimble and flexible in regards to what do we need out there as far as labour and workers.

And I think it's a great document, and I think, you know, it's not only housed in Advanced Education, Skills and Immigration, it's a whole-of-Manitoba approach making sure that we've got people with the right skills, talent and, of course, knowledge, to fill those gaps that we have within the systems.

Another—I think, coming from the education world—you know, and I know the member doesn't, but he, of course, went to high school and then post-secondary after the fact. But I think what was a great initiative done up by our government was to provide a high school course, which has always been in play—families 40S—with a component in there of the 40-hour course required to become a CCA at the grade 12 level. I think that's a great initiative, and I applaud all the students and all our CCAs for taking that 40-hour course.

And taking a look at, you know, as we continue to move forward—and I did want to just, you know, correct the record. I know the member is putting numbers out there. But this is coming from the department, so I'm going to put some correct numbers on here.

So, within the agreement, it is strongly encouraged to have CCAs—and this is advice to the boards of the child-care centres. Now, I'm not sure, you know, and the member can correct the record if he'd like or put whatever he needs to put on the record. I'm not sure if he's really strongly encouraging me to interfere with boards, because it almost sounds like that.

But within the agreement and the actual numbers that are happening in the province of Manitoba right now, the target is to have two thirds of the workers on

the floor working with kids and youth and students; two thirds of them must be ECEs—75 per cent of facilities in Manitoba have met or exceeded this trained requirement.

And so what our government is doing is giving opportunities for post-secondary training, and we're working with our post-secondary partners to make sure that we're being a little more nimble and flexible so that those CCAs, who are absolutely needed necessary, important cogs in the wheel, to get trained up if they'd like to. And so that's why we've also—we're also offering a grant to upskill as well if they so would like to be.

So with that, Mr. Chair, I look forward to the member's next question.

Mr. Sala: There are a number of child-care workers watching the proceedings today, and I know I can share—I'm sure that they're feeling the same disappointment that I'm feeling right now having heard what the minister just shared and his failure to answer the question.

Of course, it's good to help CCAs get the training they need to move ahead; no one would dispute that. But what we've just heard the minister seemingly double down on is that there is no intention to raise wages for CCAs. And he didn't dispute the numbers that were provided—which, again, aren't my numbers.

He said he was going to put numbers on the record that were correct and seemed to suggest that mine were false. To be clear, I'm using his numbers, not using my numbers. The lower average target wage for CCAs that I offered was his government's numbers. So, strange that he would suggest that I would put false information on the record when it's coming from him.

In terms of this question of interference, his suggestion of interference or that I'm suggesting that he should direct child-care centres to pay certain wages, that's not what's being recommended. What's being recommended is that the government identify target wages that are fair. Ideally, they look to the wage study that's been done by the Manitoba Child Care Association for those targets, and then they fund child-care centres appropriately through increases to their operating agreements.

So, it is really disappointing here to hear that we're not going to hear clarity over when child-care workers can expect their wages to increase. And I want the minister to know—and I just kind of put politics aside, and I think is a really important

message that needs to be conveyed today. There are a lot of child-care workers that are just hanging on by a thread right now in our system, that are waiting for this government to clarify how they're going to increase their wages with those federal dollars. They're waiting for that. And when they find that out, if those numbers don't approach what we need to see in terms of fair wages, we're going to see a mass exodus of workers from our system.

And those aren't—not my thoughts—or, this isn't my—just coming from me, this is what we hear from child-care workers and executive directors all the time, and that's going to come back to Manitoban families; it's going to really hurt families.

* (12:10)

This is critical; this is about the future of our system, the future of child care in this province, the ability of families to access good quality child care. This is key, so we need to see this government make a clear statement soon about what they're going to be doing to raise wages for workers. And if they are planning on lowering wages as they were—or at least not moving them up as is outlined in the agreement with the federal government—that will be a disaster for our system.

I'd like to move on to ask the minister a bit about the subsidy rollout. Again, we know the federal government is generously bringing hundreds of millions of dollars into Manitoba to help increase affordability of child care in this province. We've heard the government—our provincial government here—talk about their desire to see us move to \$10 a day with those funds. This is a positive. We're glad to hear that they're going to use those federal dollars to benefit Manitobans. But there's some huge concerns that we're hearing about right now in terms of the subsidy rollout, and I'm sure the minister is hearing this as well, and I'm hoping he can help us to understand what's going on.

The subsidy went live in early February, and the change of the subsidy, it modified it so it increased the subsidy level to include families up to a net income of \$83,000. Child-care centres were asked to administer this new subsidy without clarity or information on how that was supposed to be managed, and, as a result, we've seen, in every different child-care centre, different experiences for families.

And what we're hearing is that certain families, if they applied for the subsidy in early February, just by chance of applying for it, even if they didn't fall under the \$83,000 income threshold, have been getting full

subsidy and free child care. Other parents who didn't hear about this, because the government didn't announce it, haven't received anything.

So, if you are in a child-care centre where you heard about this and you applied, you may have saved thousands of dollars and gotten free child care even though you don't qualify for the subsidy, and another child-care centre, you've received nothing.

Mr. Ewasko: Mr. Chair—so, the member from St. James, even though he's relatively new to the Chamber, I can already tell that he's sort of a master at putting certain things on the record, because later on today what he'll do is he'll go and clip his little section, and then he'll go and take a small snippet of how I've answered, and he'll put it on social media and that, instead of sending the link to the whole story. So, before I answer his final part of his question, I have to go back and correct the record on some of the misinformation that he's put on the record.

The numbers I was correcting of his was the amount and the percentage of various different roles and responsibilities and education levels of different people working within the sector. And again, hopefully he clips this part, but he probably won't, but we will direct people to the whole story, is how important CCAs are to our industry.

But then, in addition to that, much like he would be doing with his kids, children moving up in through the K-to-12 system, we always encourage people for post-secondary education, whether that's a certificate, whether that's a diploma, a degree, a master's degree, a doctorate—whatever—we encourage people to get as much post-secondary education as possible.

* (12:20)

So I want to put it on the record, Mr. Chair, and it worries me that this member—the member from St. James—is putting false information on the record. We are acting—so, he talks about CCA wages—that's why we're acting on this. That's why we are working with our sector, listening to the people who are working front lines, as opposed to just going into the media and just repeating something that he has potentially read there or staff has picked out maybe a slip, a small little bullet. That's why we're acting. That's why we're working.

We know that this sector needs to have recruitment, training and retaining. That—we know that, and that's why we're working with the federal government; that's why we're working with the child-care sector; that's why we're working with the school boards—or

the daycare boards, and also school boards, making sure that we have a strong workforce in place.

The announcement happened February 3rd. An additional announcement happened February 22nd of the subsidies. A webinar was done in March. Circulars were put in—put out around the same time for more information. We did some prepayments of funds to those child-care facilities because they can then make those decisions within their facilities; those boards can make those decisions within their facilities to either waive parent fees as we continue to move forward, because, keep in mind, this is new. It's not something the NDP ever thought of doing—nada, zilch, zero did these ideas come from the NDP, I'm telling you that.

And I know for a fact the working relationship between our government, myself, our Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning is far better with the federal government now than any relationship that the NDP had with the federal government. So we're working with them to strengthen the sector. Do we have more work to do? Absolutely. But how does that happen? By listening and working with, as opposed to putting misinformation and fear mongering out to the sector.

So I'm hoping the member clips the whole story as opposed to tweeting out the little tidbits that he's so famously known for. I'm looking forward to expanding and ensuring that this sector is supported, and in addition to that, making sure that those child-care spaces, the subsidized ones and the non-subsidized ones, are stronger than ever in this great province of ours, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Sala: The federal dollars that are coming forward that are supposed to make child care more affordable should be especially focused on helping lower income families in Manitoba.

And, you know, I just had asked the question about the subsidy rollout in the hopes that the minister could help us all understand about what his government intended or what they were hoping to achieve with their rollout, but I'm going to help him understand what's happening on the ground.

In February, when it was rolled out, families—any families who learned about it, if they happened to apply, regardless of whether or not they fell underneath the \$83,000-net-income cap, were all given free child care. Those families—again, I'm going to repeat: any family—\$200,000 a year, \$500,000 a year—were given free child care if they happened to apply, even

though, according to the government subsidy estimator, they shouldn't have qualified for it.

At the same time, we have a huge number of low-income families and middle-income families who could really use the help who never heard about this subsidy who've lost out on all of this—these—this income benefits, these child-care cost reductions because they didn't apply.

So again, I'll repeat: if you happen to have been lucky enough to have applied in the early February, even if you were way over the subsidy level, you were given three months of free child care. So, we're giving out free child care to everyone in this province using those federal dollars and giving them to everyone, and I understand that the subsidy has just been extended for another three months. So if you happen to be a low-income family or a middle-income family that wasn't lucky enough to happen to apply or have heard about this, you just missed out on thousands of dollars, potentially, of cost savings for your family. So, there's something absolutely wrong with what's going on here. I can tell you that centres are confused.

I want to ask the minister right now, is the plan of their subsidy rollout to give free child care to everyone in this province regardless of their income level? Is that the plan for this subsidy? Is that the intention here, because that's what's happening on the ground. Is that the plan for the government?

Mr. Ewasko: No, and I am appalled by the line of questioning by this member and the false charges and allegations he's putting on the record.

If the member, the new child-care critic—so, you've lost the advocacy tag line that I'm giving—critic—if he needs a briefing on how this works, again, my door is open. Since he's become the child-care critic, I have not received one piece of correspondence from him alerting me that he is the critic, or from his party.

As the member from Transcona knows, my door is open. I am open to having conversations. I am open to having briefings. So, if the member from St. James does not understand or is confused, or if he's getting verbiage that seems to lead him down the path of being confused, absolutely, I am more than collaborative and transparent with giving him a briefing on how this is working.

The department has provided \$75 million to improve the affordability of child care through advance subsidy payments to facilities.

The member for Lac du Bonnet—who is myself, because I can't reference my name—nor the department makes those decisions on where those subsidies go. The facilities makes those decisions, and then families apply through the Child Care Subsidy Program in—which I shared with the member, and pull out the news releases. Do some reading, do some homework. Don't just punch the clock at 5 o'clock and go home. Do some homework.

The Province have provided an advanced subsidy payment to child-care facilities across the province to prepay all subsidy payments for a period of six months: February 6th to July 23rd, 2022, covering three consecutive months for families waiting their approval. This will allow families to apply and not pay any parent fees during the application period.

The prepayment given to child-care facilities: (1) helps facilities to immediately enrol children; (2) prevents interruptions to child-care services for families now applying for a child-care subsidy that already have a child enrolled in child care while subsidy applications are processed; (3) it waives parent fees for families that have applied for subsidies and are waiting for their application to be processed for up to three months.

We are moving from 6,000 subsidized daycare spaces in Manitoba to 18,000. I know the member was not in government in the 17 years of mismanaged NDP rule, but I am appalled that the member, as opposition critic for child care, for early child care, comes in and starts spouting off things that are inaccurate, that will then fear monger.

Because I've got every bit of faith in those child-care centres, in those child-care co-ordinators who are working—

Mr. Chairperson: Order. The hour being 12:30 p.m., committee rise.

CHAMBER

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INVESTMENT AND TRADE

Mr. Chairperson (Andrew Micklefield): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order.

This section of the Committee of Supply will now consider the Estimates of the Department of Economic Development, Investment and Trade.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Economic Development, Investment and Trade): Good morning. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Pleasure to be in the Chamber this morning, talk about the new and revised Department of Economic Development, Investment and Trade.

I will say, from our government's perspective, that economic development is very important for our government, and we're taking steps to improve the economic conditions in Manitoba, and to get Manitobans back to work.

Recovery and growth is our top priority as we work our way through the pandemic in what we all hope is a post-recovery stage. Think we all recognize that when we have Manitobans working and that generates the income that we need to support our social services such as our record investments in health care, \$7.2 billion; record investments in K-to-12 and post-secondary education, and also the social services that Manitobans come to expect. That's why economic development is so critical for Manitoba and, in fact, for Manitobans.

So a new department, a revised department, as I said, clearly, economic development and how we improve that climate. We added the word investment and we want to make sure that we have private sector investment coming to Manitoba. And trade—clearly, Manitoba is a trading province and we want to make sure that we're doing everything we can to make sure that we seize every opportunity when it comes to trade.

So realignment, reassessment, reinvestment in trade within the department. Obviously, we'll be working closely with our other partners in this front. And, clearly, I think a discussion piece this morning will be about our potential and existing labour shortages we have across the province.

To assist in this endeavour, we have created a new economic development committee of Cabinet we—chaired by the Premier (Mrs. Stefanson). The concept here is we will expand the capital availability, modernize the department—hopefully, some regulations and programs and services along the way. We will expand markets through these trade initiatives and increase the speed at which government responds to issues. We will also support the Cabinet committee with a secretariat, and we have brought Michael Swistun in as the secretary to the Cabinet. Tracey Maconachie has moved over to the associate secretary role.

We do want to make Manitoba as competitive as possible to attract and retain capital. We just recently announced \$50 million initial seed money for a venture capital fund. We think that will attract additional investments in Manitoba companies. We believe this initial \$50-million investment will serve as a catalyst for development. So these funds will be managed by third parties and we think this is a great catalyst to leverage additional funding for Manitoba companies.

Tax 'competitiveness' is certainly an important aspect. We have made cuts in this budget to the payroll tax, taking 200 businesses off the payroll tax, reducing the payroll tax for another 800 businesses. Another important move is the Small Business Venture Capital Tax Credit. We have made that permanent and we've also expanded it to be applicable to the venture capital funds. We also have a suite of other equity and industry tax credits available to Manitobans to spur on investment here.

We are committed to reducing red tape as it relates to Manitobans and Manitoba businesses. CFIB has recognized Manitoba as the top province in red tape reduction in 2021, but more work needs to be done on that front. And we are committed to working with Manitobans and, in fact, the business community to continue to reduce red tape.

We will be supporting innovation and digital adaptation. We have a number of programs available for that. We have a Innovation Growth Program; we have 32 projects supported under that program since 2019. We have the Digital Manitoba Initiative; we have over 1,000 applications to that particular initiative.

Workforce and skills development is a priority for our department and our government. I think this is key in terms of tackling our labour shortage issues that we're facing. Just this past week, we introduced \$1 million to support some of the hardest hit industries, as a result of the pandemic. This would be the restaurants, hospitality sector, supply chain, and food and beverage industry. These programs and projects are designed to facilitate recruitment and retention of skilled workforces within those respective areas.

I would also say that within our budget, we've set aside employment and training financial assistance of \$76 million. We have another \$30 million set aside for workforce development funding, including the recently announced Canada-Manitoba Job Grant, which is a \$10 million fund. That's two more—\$2 million more than last year. We do support a

number of sector councils through their sector council program, and that's certainly working closely with industry to make sure we understand the issues that they are facing.

Just a little bit of—more trade. Obviously, Manitoba is a training province and we're doing everything we can to make sure we capitalize on those opportunities, so we have earmarked additional money in our budget for that to support trade.

I also did want to just briefly touch on Indigenous reconciliation. Obviously, collaboration with Indigenous people is important as we try to advance our shared goals. We have set aside money for that to assist in that, and we'd be working with our sector councils to deliver skilled trades training initiative for Indigenous people, including Indigenous women as well. So we're continued to work with Indigenous communities and partnerships, and we think there's tremendous opportunity in the workforce for Indigenous people here in Manitoba.

Certainly, Manitoba remains open for business. We are committed to working and listening to business, industry and to all Manitobans. We're focused on opportunities for development and economic growth. This is so very important for us.

And just before I close, I do want to make a comment on—in terms of our government's work in preparing for the arrival of Ukrainians here to Manitoba. Our deputy minister's committee, I think, has addressed so many issues that have to be addressed for the arrival of these people from the Ukraine. Our welcoming centre is up and running, and we're certainly—arms are open to welcome those people, I believe, coming soon, in May, just in a week or two, so we look forward to their arrival. And I know from the business community, too, they are certainly looking forward to the potential of additional workforce here in Manitoba.

Obviously, we will have to determine who is coming and their ability to enter into the workforce. Clearly, there will be educational and skill opportunities for us here to upskill. I think the English as an additional language will probably be very important; that training will be very important. And if these folks arriving from the Ukraine want to enter in the workforce, we will certainly do whatever we can to help facilitate that as well. And I know the business community is welcoming that in the very near future as well.

So with that, Mr. Chair, that's my opening remarks.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the minister for those comments.

Does the official opposition critic have any opening comments?

* (10:10)

Mr. Jamie Moses (St. Vital): Thank you very much, Minister, for your opening statement and your comments and highlights that you've brought forward with regard to economic development in the province of Manitoba. I'm looking forward to having a chance to chat with you today and question you as to the details of the budget and the Estimates process.

I'd like to thank the department staff for the work that they do each and every day to keep the department running and keep our economy flowing.

I also think it's important that we acknowledge that there's important work that's done by the department. Economic Development, Investment and Trade has an important job to ensure that we have the supports for businesses, supports for the workers in those businesses, 'intracting' investment and ability to trade in our province, and while we support those efforts, we also want to make sure that we take a lens appropriate to the time that we're in.

We're coming off a pandemic that affected Manitobans in very serious ways economically. Many people lost their jobs. Many people had to reduce hours and take wage cuts. Many people had to shift to more flexible hours because of child-care concerns, many people decided to leave the workforce to go back to re-educate themselves or some other people chose to look for other opportunities outside of Manitoba.

And while many Manitobans face these issues, I think it's clear that some of the people who have faced the most issues during the pandemic, during the last two years, have been women, have been people in the BIPOC community.

Women have often faced the challenge of leaving their jobs for child care, more so than men, and they faced a harder economic time. People in the BIPOC community also worked jobs that are far more precarious and more prone to shutdown during the various phases and lockdowns of the pandemic.

And as we're sitting here in the spring of 2022, and we're looking at our economic development

policies and finances in the budget, it's on us, in this place, to put forward policies and economic plans that will not only boost all Manitobans, but, in particular, those who are the most hit and most affected by the pandemic.

And so I hope to hear from the minister today throughout our discussions that he has put a great deal of thought into how he's going to work in our—work to improve our economy for those who are the most affected by the downturn, are the people who have suffered the most.

Not just any and every business was hit in the equal way. Many businesses did just fine. Many businesses, in fact, thrived throughout the pandemic. But it's the ones that, you know, the people who are the most affected, the businesses that are the most affected and the people, the workers who were the most affected during the pandemic, which I think the minister should find ways throughout his programming, in all areas of his programming, to improve their condition and their situation.

So I hope to hear that in 'discussions' as we go through our questions and our time during the Estimates process.

We know that there's a track record of this government having not maybe considered those folks and those businesses, and there was, I think, certainly, areas over the course of the pandemic where, you know, businesses were calling for more supports or more clear supports or more effective supports from this government.

And I just want to—I think we'll take some time to highlight some of those issues and discuss and see if there's ways that, you know, our government can learn from those, moving forward in a more effective way.

And I just want to say that, in the closing of my opening remarks, that I look forward to the discussion, I look forward to some good, open and honest dialogue with the minister, and I hope that, you know, through this dialogue we can bring about a stronger, more equitable economy in Manitoba.

Thanks.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the critic from the official opposition for those remarks.

Under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last item considered for a department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we will now defer consideration of line item 10.1(a) contained in resolution 10.1.

So, at this time, we invite ministerial and opposition staff to enter the Chamber and I would ask the minister and the critic to please introduce their staff in attendance.

Would the honourable minister like to introduce his staff.

Mr. Cullen: First of all, Kathryn Gerrard, deputy minister. I have Michelle Wallace, who is the assistant deputy minister of the industry programs and partnerships branch; and Melissa Ballantyne, assistant deputy minister, finance and corporate services.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the honourable minister for that brief introduction.

Would the official opposition critic like to briefly introduce their staff.

Mr. Moses: Yes, our staff here: Mark Rosner, chief of staff.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the critic for that introduction.

In accordance with subrule 77(16), during the consideration of departmental Estimates, questioning for each department shall proceed in a global manner with questions put on the resolutions once the official opposition critic indicates that questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Moses: I just want to begin by welcoming the staff to the Chamber. It's a pleasure to have you here and I thank you for the work that you do each and every day to help run the department and our economy in Manitoba; appreciate that.

I want to just begin by just asking some—it's a basic factual question, which the minister can endeavour to deliver to us if he likes.

Can the minister provide a list of all technical appointments in his department, including the names and titles?

Mr. Cullen: I, too, while I have them in front of me, thank my senior staff as well for the work they do in the department, and I certainly appreciate all they've done over—a couple of them for many years. They were here back when—six years ago when I was in the Economic Development portfolio, so they've stayed with the department, so they have a wealth of knowledge over those last few years. And, of course, Deputy Minister Gerrard just started here in March, so, relatively new to this portfolio, but not necessarily

new to government and certainly has an appreciation for the private sector.

* (10:20)

And, at this time, I do want to thank all of the staff within the department, too, that do the day-to-day legwork. And it is very valuable work, as my critic will understand. This is about ensuring that Manitobans have every opportunity to get back to work, and we do have a lot of staff dedicated to make sure that people have those opportunities.

So, in terms of the technical officers in my department, or in my office, I have Tyler Slobogian who is special assistant; Taylor Shule, who is the executive assistant; and Michael Swistun, as I mentioned earlier, is the secretary to the Economic Development Board of Cabinet.

Mr. Moses: I began my last question with a thanks to the department staff. I also wanted to take a minute to thank staff on our side: Mark, who's with me today; all the staff behind the scenes who prepare our team to do the job that we do. So, just thank you, shout-out to all the staff who work for us as well.

Can the minister provide with—me with a current vacancy number—the current vacancy numbers and the percentages for each division of his department?

Mr. Cullen: Sorry for our delay. We were doing some math over here to give you the breakdowns.

So, overall—and this is reflective of the end of February, so there's been some adjustments since then. We could probably follow up on some numbers after that, but as of the end of February, across the department we had a 23 per cent vacancy. We combined Finance and Corporate Services and Economic & Labour Market Policy together. They have at that time a 23 per cent vacancy.

The Workforce Training & Employment branch had a 25 per cent vacancy at that point in time. And then if we combine the Industry Programs & Partnerships with the Economic Opportunities Navigation Unit, combined a 13 per cent vacancy there.

So that's of—as of the end of February. Since that time, we've hired 20 additional staff and we have 16 more positions that are—we're actively seeking employment for. So that's in the works. [*inaudible*] you're—what you're looking for.

Mr. Moses: So, in previous Estimates book, it used to provide a lot of information. Minister—would the

minister undertake to provide me with a five-year comparison of department appropriations? And I'm looking for five-year comparison of each appropriation funding as well as the FTE.

* (10:30)

Mr. Cullen: I appreciate the member's line of questioning here. So, I think, back to the vacancy numbers—totals, we have 80—we had 80—that was at the end of February—we had 80 vacancies out of 369 positions across the board. Since then, out of that 80, we—as I mentioned, we'd hired 20 and in the process of employing another 16, which will hopefully happen fairly quickly.

To the member's specific question, that would be quite an undertaking. I can tell you since—when I was here six years ago, five years ago, in this department, it was a substantially different department then. *Vis-à-vis*, we had a smaller government; we had 12 ministers at the time and now we have, I believe, 18 ministers, so there's been a fundamental restructuring of departments over the course of those six years. And, in fact, there was pretty regular changes in the structure of government over that particular time. And I would say, in particular, the—I will use the term Economic Development department in general terms, because there's been different components involved in that.

And, you know, for the member's benefit, when I was here initially when we came to government, we had a number of sectors included in there, including labour, mining sector, and we had the trades sector involved; we had the tourism sector as well. So it was certainly a completely different-looking department than it is today.

Today's department has a focus on the economic development pieces of the puzzle, including the investment and trade, so a lot different department than we had six years ago, and certainly even a different department than we had, you know, prior to January. So to undertake that over the course of a number of years would be a challenge. We could certainly give global numbers; I think that's relatively easy to provide global numbers, and then what areas were associated with those respective departments, because there's been different training functions attached to the Economic Development portfolio, and there's been some other areas that have moved around within government.

I think what we could do for the member is, in global terms, go back and look at the changes over the years, and if we could just provide him a global

number in terms of staffing, and we could provide a description in terms of what was included in that respective department. To get into the specific breakdown by branch would be an overwhelming task, and quite frankly, I'm more interested in getting Manitobans to work in the opportunities they have, so that's been our focus.

So hopefully, the member would be satisfied. We'll get the broad numbers, and then if we want to have a further discussion about that, I'd be more than happy to have that with you.

Mr. Moses: Thank you for the response. I, you know—I'd gladly accept your undertaking to provide those figures in a global assessment as you suggested. I mean, I do, though, think that, you know, in some ways, as you mentioned, you're focused on moving the economy forward. In order to move it forward appropriately, sometimes we have to look at the successes and failures of the past, so that's why a past-five-year analysis might be appropriate in terms of your future decision making, and making sure that they're correct and in the best interest of Manitoba. So even though it might be quite an undertaking for your department, it might also be useful for ensuring that we're staying on the right course in Manitoba.

In terms of your first point, with respect to vacancies, I just want to ask—follow up on that and ask the minister, that's fairly significant vacancy rate, you know, end of February being near that 23, 25—it's almost one in four positions specifically are gone. You know, you look at the workforce training and employment FTEs there, it's a pretty significant vacancy rate.

And I'm wondering specifically if this vacancy rate is hampering the work that the department is trying to accomplish and if the minister—and what concrete steps is the minister doing to fill this vacancy rate.

Mr. Cullen: Thanks for that line of questioning.

And I get the member's point about structure when it comes to government and how economic development is carried out. And there can be changes in philosophy in terms of what economic development looks like and the structure of delivering economic development. And I will say, even within government—our government—that's changed from time to time.

So I think what we've done this time is real—a real focus on the economic development component of it. Clearly, over the last couple of years, we've gone

through the whole COVID challenge, and government is not immune to changes during that time.

You know, you mentioned the same thing where we had in the workforce people changing jobs and careers and going back for education. And what we're finding is Manitobans in the workforce are more mobile than ever before. And I would suggest the government is very similar. There's always opportunities for either moving from department to department or up in a department or going back to school and getting into the private sector. So those opportunities do exist and we certainly have seen that over the last few years.

I will say once we get—probably over the next month or month and a half—once we get these additional 36 positions in place, 20 of which are in place now, our vacancy rate will be down to 12 per cent. So I would say under the new department effective in January, we've made tremendous strides in making sure that these positions are full. Obviously, there was some realignment in January in terms of what positions would be where and, you know, creating new positions and so forth. So I think we're well on our way to getting back closer to the—you know, the regular vacancy rate, as somewhere—8 per cent, in that range. So we're—in the next month or two, we'll be very close to that range.

We certainly want to make sure that we are providing services to Manitobans. We want to make sure that we are getting money to support Manitobans and Manitoba businesses so that they can hire in a timely manner. That's our goal, and we certainly made improvements here in the last couple of months to that end.

* (10:40)

Mr. Moses: Yes, I thank the minister for the response.

In terms of vacancies, it's important to address that issue, not just from the government perspective but from end-users' perspective, the businesses in Manitoba—like, I've heard from businesses who've said that, you know, that they're looking for additional services. And, you know, when I see vacancy rates as high as one in four some areas, it makes me wonder about whether that staffing shortage in the department would—if filled, would allow to—for better service to some of the businesses who are relying on hearing from government. So, I think there's a correlation there, and I want to make sure the minister is aware of that and is able to address that.

I want to spend some time today to look at the shop-local campaign a bit, and talk about the government programming during that pandemic. The minister—you know, I can provide you actually with a—the minister with a copy of the contribution agreement between the economic development and training and the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce. The agreement assigns \$500,000 to GoodLocal, and that's one third of the total funding for the shop-local campaign.

So, I'd like to ask the minister what kind of analysis he's done and—you know, when I mean—when I say analysis, I mean, you know, return on investment, interjurisdictional analysis and, you know—are examples of what I mean. What sort of analysis was done in advance of this agreement in preparation to create this agreement between Economic Development and the Manitoba Chamber?

I'd like to just table the document now.

Mr. Cullen: You know, we were happy to support Manitoba businesses over two years during the pandemic. In fact, we're still supporting Manitoba businesses with programming. We've provided Manitoba businesses over \$650 million in funding, 38,000 businesses and organizations being represented in that \$650 million. So a lot of different programs were put in place.

And I will say—we put these programs in place because we had regular conversations with stakeholders across the province. We invited the business community in on a regular basis. I think the ministers at the time were having at least weekly calls with the sectors.

So there would be 30, 40 sectors represented on these calls. And we were dealing with Business Council, chambers—Manitoba chambers, the Winnipeg chamber; all the sectors were represented on those calls as we worked through the pandemic.

And there was regular dialogue about what kind of supports would be needed, especially as the regulations around shutdowns were evolving. So it was completely an evolving process as health situations changed. So that's really precipitated the ongoing discussions.

So a number of programs came out of those discussions, and the GoodLocal that the member refers to was part of a \$1.5-million retail shop-local program. The program overall supported 388 vendors. At that time it was, like, a pivot to an e-commerce platform and 1,700 businesses received re-opening

support. So, certainly, a lot of vendors were supported by that particular retail shop program.

Now, we—because there was a number of programs going on over the course of the last two years—and there still is programs going on, quite frankly. We as government didn't think we were—had the ability to manage all of those programs. That's why we would sign an agreement with, in this case, the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce to manage those particular funds. So we as government supplied the funds, in this case to the chamber. The chamber made the decisions in respect of where they felt best value for that money, for those programs, and that's particularly what happened in this case.

So the shop local—specifically, that campaign—was to support the development of a one-stop shop for Manitobans to safely purchase goods from local businesses. We as a government are—and certainly the chamber are supportive of supporting local business, and that was really the impetus behind the shop-local campaign—the retail shop local. It's about Manitobans supporting Manitoba businesses, and in this case decisions on the funding was done by the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce.

Mr. Moses: I thank the minister for his response.

* (10:50)

I think it's—I just want to get back to the part of the question that I asked. It was specific to the analysis done before the agreement was signed. And I say that because this is, you know, a large amount of money, as the minister said, a program that affects a lot of businesses, a lot of small businesses, and we acknowledge the challenges that small businesses face during the pandemic. We do think it's important to support them at that time. We just want to make sure the government is doing their due diligence, that they're making the right and proper decisions, help as many businesses as possible in the most cost-effective way.

And so, that's what comes back to my question around analysis. What kind of analysis did the—was done in advance of this agreement?

Mr. Cullen: Well, you know, as I indicated before, there was ongoing discussions with the business community and Manitobans on a regular basis.

Clearly, from our perspective as government, engaging in this particular case with the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce, they are reflective of all the chambers across Manitoba, and they had very good insight in terms of what the requirements and needs

would be of the business community, including a lot of small businesses.

So they certainly bring a unique perspective to the table, I think a good perspective, because it does engage every corner of the province in that discussion. Clearly, there was discussions with Manitoba Chambers of Commerce, with government before signing the agreement. You don't have discussions without formulating a 19-page contract. So, obviously, there was lots of back and forth in terms of putting this particular contract together.

At the end of the day, the government had faith that the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce would administer this course—this fund. I will say we have provided the chamber additional funding. We're still—have some money outstanding that hasn't been allocated yet. Again, we're working very closely on that front with some of the money that hasn't been allocated, again, but that was a different agreement than this particular agreement. So, a lot of discussion beforehand, a lot of discussion during formulating this particular agreement and then, obviously, lots of discussions subsequent to this about additional assistance to the business community.

Mr. Moses: Thanks, Minister, for the response.

So, when I asked about what kind of analysis was done in advance of the agreement, the minister suggested that there were discussions that happened, and then he relied on the insight from the Chambers of Commerce. While I think those things are important, they're clearly not analysis.

So is that the type of analysis work that the department does before it makes a \$1.5 injection into our economy? They just have discussions with no concrete analysis on what's the return going to be, what impact it'll have on overall economy?

And I say this also just from the frame of—we look at even just the start of the pandemic, throughout the pandemic, and the government's history with providing some of these programs. There were many support programs that, quite frankly, failed. They were well underspent and they reached far less businesses than they were intended to and they, quite frankly, didn't work. And so having had that track record early in the pandemic, it now is—proposes the shop-local campaign, and I think it would be, you know, wise—would've been wise of the government to actually do some due diligence and proper analysis on this project before signing an agreement.

But instead of actual analysis, I hear the minister say that there were just discussions. And so I wanted to clarify if that's really what the minister is saying, especially in light of their past failed economic projects during the pandemic. Is he saying that they just did—had discussions, and that was the basis for making a multi-million-dollar agreement?

Mr. Cullen: Well, in respect of the member's line of questioning here, I mean, I guess we could have spent \$500,000 to do an in-depth analysis on that \$1.5-million program, but I would sooner put the money in the hands of the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce, who represents the business community across Manitoba, to make those assessments in terms of the best allocation of that money.

I would say they've done a pretty good job: 388 vendors pivoted to an e-commerce platform; 1,700 businesses received re-opening support. I mean, that 1.5 is one component of \$50 million that we provided to the chambers for long-term recovery through various programs. We had the dine-in restaurants program; we had the shop-local campaign, as mentioned; Digital Manitoba Initiative; we had the retrain program. And we tried to keep these programs as simple as possible so we didn't burden Manitoba businesses with extra red tape, and I think that's pretty critical here.

The retrain program in particular, I mean, we had great reviews from a few fronts. We had from the Economic Development Winnipeg, saying that business leaders say this funding was giving them the flexibility to not only pursue training and upskilling for employees, but recruit and train new employees. I'm confident this program has put businesses in a strong position for growth as we move past the pandemic. And you go back to, in fact, Chuck Davidson of the Manitoba chamber; he—his feedback: We're thrilled with the program's success, especially SMEs as a valuable long-term investment in agile, highly skilled workforce.

So, I mean, there's all kinds of positive comments coming out of some of the funding that we've provided to businesses through the course of the pandemic.

And as I say, these programs aren't all over, but we are continuing and actually bringing new programs to the front to try to make sure that we get Manitoba businesses continuing to run—up and running, and get Manitobans back to work. And, quite frankly, Manitobans are back to work. We're in the second lowest unemployment rate in the country, and the

challenge now is finding additional labour to support business activity.

So, if anybody wants to work, Manitoba's the place to be.

Mr. Moses: I thank the minister for the response.

Just wondering out loud, you know, wonder if the vacancy rate wasn't as high, there would've been larger capacity for the department to do some of this analysis work.

But I just want to move on to ask: Did the government play any role in GoodLocal receiving the \$500,000 at any point along the way? I just want to know if there was any role in the government—I know you said the chamber was—you know, chose GoodLocal. I want to know if the government played in any—a role in any aspect of the process in order for GoodLocal to receive that \$500,000.

* (11:00)

Mr. Cullen: So I'll just add some clarification from staff here. So I'm understanding there was two separate contracts. There was one contract with the chamber for the \$1.5-million contract, and then there was a separate contract to make up the \$50 million, as well; so two separate contracts, from my understanding.

From my knowledge, there was no government direction in terms of how that funding would roll out. So I have no reason to believe that government would be directing that \$1.5 million. I mean, 19-page contract here that says to the chamber, you know, you go ahead and roll this program out and use your discretion. That's the way I see it.

Mr. Moses: Okay, so thanks for the—minister for stating that and clarifying that. I also want to just clarify, were there any conditions set on the—this amount that went to the chamber for this—the money that ended up—the \$500,000 ended up for GoodLocal: any conditions or criteria that the government might have set out that might have, you know, indicated that it'd gone to good—the money would have gone to GoodLocal or perhaps even a review that was taken place before the contract was signed with GoodLocal; the government might have been in between there reviewing the possible candidates for the money before it was actually given out.

Was there any—along any way was the government reviewing or aware of these different processes before the money was chosen and chosen to give—provided to GoodLocal?

Mr. Cullen: Yes, I think we'd better be, maybe, clear from the outset how this all transpired, the whole retail shop local. It was actually the chambers of commerce came to government with an idea that we should invest \$1.5 million in a retail shop local program.

As a result of the—you know, those discussions, a 19-page contract was put together outlining the stipulations around the \$1.5 million and how it would be administered. And, clearly, there is a reporting mechanism back to government. The onus was on the chamber to report back to government. That's why we had, out of the \$1.5 million, 388 vendors pivot to an e-commerce platform and 1,700 businesses received reopening support.

So that's the mechanism and that's the process that happened. So this was not necessarily initiated by government, but it—as, again, I went back to the stakeholder discussions we had through the process. That's where the chamber—Manitoba Chambers came to government and said we have an idea for a program that we think will assist local vendors. So as a result of that initiation by the chambers, the document was put together to frame how the money could be spent and then the reporting mechanism back to government.

Mr. Moses: So, I mean, as far as I understand, the department, on an annual basis, providing \$86 million—services out to businesses in Manitoba. And it seems like this one's \$1.5 million—it seemed like they were, you know, allowed the—gave the money to the chambers with almost no oversight or no criteria or no return on investment.

So it just seems a little bit, you know, like, unusual that this would happen and that a lot of this—given the context of the work the department does that they would give almost free rein for the chambers to use this money and that so much of it, one third of it, ended up with one business. And so I—it strikes me as rather odd, and I just wanted to ask the minister how that came to be and why is that the case.

Mr. Cullen: Well, to the contrary, I think it's rather odd that we have a 19-page document signed between the government and the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce for \$1.5 million. I mean, if that is an oversight, to me that's almost overkill on oversight. Clearly, it's laid out here, the rules around how this money would be spent, the reporting mechanism back to government. That's why we have these numbers.

The \$1.5 million had a positive impact to 388 vendors plus 1,700 other businesses. So I would suggest \$1.5 million was a pretty wise investment

when you get those kinds of results. Very rarely do you see a 19-page document for \$1.5-million investment going back to local small businesses.

Mr. Moses: So, I'd like to just at this point just table the—GoodLocal's final report. I have it here. This is the final report for the \$500,000. So this was 100 per cent provincial funding. The financial report was to the chambers of commerce.

And I just wanted to ask some questions around this, and the minister walked through this a little bit. Maybe he can explain it in more detail, because I believe the member for Fort Whyte (Mr. Khan) had previously said that he brought a proposal to the chamber of commerce about this idea, and I think the minister just said that the chamber came to government with this idea about the contribution agreement.

And so, maybe you can just put a little bit more context about the sequence of events, there, and how it came to be that GoodLocal was chosen for this unique arrangement.

* (11:10)

Mr. Cullen: I think members opposite are chasing a dog that doesn't hunt here. So, I don't know the chain of events. Apparently the member thinks that GoodLocal came to the chamber with an idea; appears to be a good idea. That could well have been the order of how this happened.

In turn, appears that the chamber of commerce thought this was a good idea, as well, so then the chamber of commerce comes to the government and says, we've got an idea here to support Manitoba businesses and looks like it's only going to cost \$1.5 million. Why don't we get into a contract and make this happen? So, government said, well, you guys are close to the action, let's put the parameters in a 19-page contract so that you're covered off, we're covered off, and there's a reporting mechanism back.

So, from there, it appears to me, that the chamber of commerce said, okay, let's get GoodLocal to develop a platform that will support Manitoba businesses. And the Manitoba businesses, in the middle of a pandemic, prior to Christmas season.

So, getting this platform operational at a timely fashion, at a timely time as well, supported 388 vendors and 1,700 businesses. I mean, we have the list here of all the businesses that were supported through the GoodLocal platform. So, clearly, the chamber thought it was a good deal. I would suggest

the 388 vendors and 1,700 businesses that were supported by this program; I would say they probably view it as a good deal too.

Mr. Moses: So I know that in the community there are other businesses that do similar, not almost the same type of work as GoodLocal. Were those businesses or were any others in the community given the opportunity to bring forward a proposal like this to the chamber?

Mr. Cullen: Well, you'd have to ask the chamber about that process.

Mr. Moses: So, in March of this year, the chamber of commerce reported that GoodLocal had generated \$850,000 in sales. This is as a result of this arrangement. So what analysis was done or is being done on the result of this deal?

Mr. Cullen: So we have a report here from the president and CEO of the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce, and I don't know how many pages it is; it's a—its substantial report about the success, quite frankly, of the GoodLocal project. And, again, 388 vendors, 1,700 businesses seemed happy with the program, seemed to be successful supporting Manitoba business prior to the Christmas season.

It appears to me that the Manitoba chamber have fulfilled their obligations under the 19-page contract that was signed with the Manitoba chambers. I don't know what else the member would like us to do.

Mr. Moses: The government and the minister stated, you know, his priority for having a value-for-money approach. So does the minister believe spending \$500,000 on this project to generate \$850,000 in sales as good value for money?

Mrs. Cathy Cox, Acting Chairperson, in the Chair

And further to that, the minister just referenced emails. I wonder if he could be able to table that. The last part was about being able to table that letter—the email that you just referenced.

* (11:20)

Mr. Cullen: Yes, so, I think we have to put this in perspective for members opposite. So, the number he reported, the 877 or 850 in sales, that was a reporting period of only November 20th—sorry, November of 2020 to March of 2021, so very limited period of time.

So, there was 388 vendors at \$850,000 in sales, additional \$147,000 in gift card sales. That created 27 new jobs, of which nine became full-time.

And I think the member should recognize that this platform still exists. So, that generated that much activity in a matter of five months at the most, but that platform still exists today. That is still creating economic activity for those business communities. It's creating—probably creating more jobs, including full-time jobs. So, if you want to talk value for money, it sounds like we're doing pretty well.

And I understand, you know, this was some initiative that was brought forward to the chambers, and the chamber clearly decided that it was positive. In fact, I had a quote from Mr. Davidson looking back at the results in terms of what we were able to achieve with that: I would do it again in a heartbeat because I think it did exactly what it needed to do.

Mr. Moses: So, there is a local business owner, Tara Davis. She was obviously—I'm sure the minister is aware—quite upset about the arrangement with GoodLocal, as they—and her business had already been supporting local business for years.

Many of these products have e-commerce and, you know, she says that the infrastructure was already there; had that money been distributed more fairly that a lot of more businesses and all these businesses would be thriving.

So, how did GoodLocal get chosen over the alternatives that were already existing in Manitoba, and what does the minister say to Tara Davis?

Mr. Cullen: Well, to be clear, government did not make the choice here. The Manitoba Chambers of Commerce made the choice on reviewing this initiative.

And, clearly, the chambers of commerce were quite satisfied with this initiative. We just talked about some of the economic activity that generated, even within a five-month period, of \$850,000 in sales, 147 in gift-card sales, 27 new jobs, nine of which became full-time.

And, again, this particular platform continues to provide services to Manitobans and create economic activity for Manitoba businesses, and the chambers of commerce said they would do this program again in a heartbeat.

You know, we also supplied Manitoba businesses \$650 million in support over the course of two years. I'm sure that not every business in Manitoba is going to be happy with the supports that we've provided, the mechanisms that we provided. And, you know, I feel for the member that—or the person that the member

referenced. We were trying to support the business community. We were trying to support Manitobans. We were trying to support, in particular, the concept of buy local. Clearly, 388 vendors, 1,700 other business bought into this program.

Mr. Chairperson in the Chair

There's going to be people that maybe feel there was other options. You know, I can't speak to that, but from all reports, this program looked to be very successful and, I would say, continues to be very successful.

Mr. Moses: The member—the minister said that the total of five—sorry, 850 or 877 was just for about five months.

Can the minister provide what that total amount is now? And what sort of analysis, if any, is the government looking at of the GoodLocal project by the minister's department or Treasury Board? Did it really live up to expectations? Not just from, you know, the five-month time frame, but to even how it is now?

Mr. Cullen: Well, I mean, we don't go back and evaluate all \$650 million in terms of our supports to communities. We did have a 19-page contract with the chambers of commerce to provide a report back to us on the investment over a period of time, and clearly, the \$1.5-million investment—sorry, in this case, \$500,000 investment—has created an ongoing platform for Manitoba businesses, even just in a five-month period benefitted 388 vendors; 1,700 other business received reopening support, gift-card sales over and above that, creation of new jobs in that five-month period.

You know, we could go back and spend several million dollars on that \$500,000 investment, if you'd like us to do that, but I would sooner invest that \$1 million or \$2 million in making sure Manitobans get back to work and have the opportunities in front of them.

So, the reports here are saying that this is a successful program, even during that five-month period, and it appears to be operational to today, so I'm sure it's providing economic opportunity for Manitobans. So I don't know why we would start chasing—throwing more money after a project that appears to be working quite effectively.

Mr. Moses: I just heard something that kind of seemed very concerning, that the minister mentioned that they don't go back and evaluate up to

\$650 million of investment that they're making in the economy.

* (11:30)

How do you not evaluate whether this type of money being spent by the government is being spent wisely, is being spent effectively? This is to grow our small business through a very challenging time, and if we don't have—if we're not spending the effort to evaluate whether this is being spent wisely, then how do we know what we're doing is actually working, and how do we know that the next project we're going to put forward will be effective or whether it'll fail?

It's very concerning if the minister's not going back to evaluate \$650 million being spent. So I wanted to clarify and ask the minister if that's the case.

Mr. Cullen: Yes, and I'll be very clear—and I don't think the member wants to be putting words in my mouth here—that I said we don't evaluate every one of the \$650 million.

Now, clearly, in this particular case, there was a 19-page contract with clear stipulations, reporting mechanisms back on this that Manitoba Chambers have provide that—provided the terms and the conditions within that reporting period. This particular platform continues to operate, from what I understand, operating quite effectively.

In terms of the other \$650 million, you know, we do have discussions with our stakeholders. We continue to have discussions with stakeholders in terms of seeing how effective they were. Now, I could go through the list of positive feedback we're getting from some of those investments that we made for Manitobans, but I don't know if the member wants to sit through all that.

The reality is, I think we've made some positive investments. We do have a look at those to make sure we're getting as much value for money. And I go back to our latest investment of \$1 million to provide some support for—you know, for the sectors that were hit the hardest. And they speak very highly of those investments that we're making in conjunction with them. I mean, this is all about having discussions as we work through the pandemic about how we could support business and how we can support Manitobans.

Obviously, a very challenging time for everybody, but we thought it was, you know, critical to get many out the door. And in a lot of cases, you know, for instance, another contract with the Manitoba Chamber of Commerce, the \$50 million on a number

of those programs. And again, a challenging time for everybody, but we thought it was worthwhile to get those investments back into the community.

Mr. Moses: So the minister doesn't evaluate every one of the programs. Can he elaborate about which ones he does evaluate and which ones he doesn't, and how does he make that determination?

Mr. Cullen: Yes, I just wanted to go through some of the programs for the member. So, our Bridge Grant program provided almost \$300 million to close to 16,000 small- and medium-sized business, non-profits and charities. Clearly, there were some gaps there in some of the federal programs that we invested money in there. Obviously, very positive response from those 16,000 businesses that were impacted and non-profits. Again, the \$50 million for long-term recovery supported 4,300 businesses. That goes into the Dine-in Restaurant Relief, the shop local program, Digital Manitoba Initiative and Retrain Manitoba program.

In fact, we've had over 1,000 applications for the Digital Manitoba Initiative. Clearly, that points to a very successful program. Lots of positive comments about the Retrain Manitoba program. And, again, these programs are all over and above what we have for existing programming to support business and to support labour development here in Manitoba.

The hospitality relief sector, \$8 million to 340 businesses. In the accommodation and tourism sector, again, very well received Sector Support Program: \$22 million. And, again, an additional \$1 million announced just last week for four other—four sectors that have been impacted substantially by that. The charter transport program, almost \$2 million there to support them. And then the—probably the bigger one was the pandemic wage support programs; that's \$88 million to help close to 7,800 employees—employers hire over 30,000 employees.

So at the end of the day, with all these investments that we've provided through the pandemic, the economy is up and running. We have more people working than we had prior to the pandemic. We have the second lowest unemployment rate in the country. So I would say these programs have been quite successful in getting businesses and, quite frankly, Manitobans through the pandemic.

Conversely, we're looking for more people in Manitoba to go to work. That is the No. 1 issue we're hearing from the business community is a shortage of labour. So I think we have, through these investments, weathered the storm pretty successfully, and we're

looking for other opportunities to upscale Manitobans, bring Manitobans into Manitoba to work because there's tremendous opportunity for work here in Manitoba.

Mr. Moses: And so, I want to just frame this issue. We've been speaking about this for roughly the last hour or so. And this goes back to what I mentioned in my opening comments about the type of recovery we want to have, particularly one that's focused on the people who need the support the most.

And so we have a situation here, right: money that went from the government to the chambers of commerce to GoodLocal in a process, by the minister's own admission today, wasn't analyzed before it was developed, right? A process that was controlled by the chambers of Commerce by, frankly, who the people in the chambers of commerce knew—by their friends who were closely connected, who approached them without the knowledge of the minister; whether there were other people given the opportunity, an equal opportunity, to have the same program awarded to them.

And we know a business owner who did a similar line of work wasn't afforded this opportunity, a woman, Tara Davis.

* (11:40)

We know that the money was invested into GoodLocal that went to support small businesses to generate sales that the government, by its own admission, you know, hasn't fully analyzed the success or failure of that program. And when we're worried about our economic recovery and, you know, even, you know, the minister highlighted some where we're at with our current economic condition. We also suffer from an affordability challenge right now. We're also suffering from growing income inequality.

And so our concern with the pandemic recovery is that we don't just help the businesses that can—that are already doing well, but we're helping the businesses that really, really need the help. And by—in order to do that we need to make sure that we're giving equitable opportunities when it comes to government resources spent on those businesses that need it the most.

And this case, I think, is a prime example of a failure to do that. What it appears—that someone, a business that was close to the chamber, had that access. You know, they knew the right person to talk to who, again, could approach the government through their conversations about a project. They

ended up awarding them \$500,000 when other businesses in Manitoba were left on the wayside—maybe ones that had suffered with the pandemic even greater. And as I highlighted in my opening comments, many of those people were women or members of the Black community and people of colour and Indigenous people, business owners in our community.

And so I want to know from the minister, does this sit well with him? Does this sit right with him? Is this the process that the government's taking with the economic recovery—and not just with the recovery, but also with the operation of the government for economic development, or the government in general? Is it about who you know? Is it about what connections you have? Or will there actually be an equitable access to government resources as we, together, get ourselves out of a pandemic? I'd like to know the minister's response to that.

Mr. Cullen: Well, I guess that's where this line of question is going. I mean, clearly, the opposition members want to play politics with the pandemic. That's certainly never been our intent. Our intent has always been to support Manitoba businesses, and by supporting Manitoba businesses, we're supporting Manitobans. That's why we've committed on the business side, \$650 million. That's only part of our \$3.1 billion in support to Manitobans during the COVID time. And, clearly, we still have—we're still dealing with COVID, and that's why we're going to continue to support Manitobans.

Now, I—respectful of the opinion put forward by the member opposite, but I don't necessarily agree with his opinion. He's clearly trying to connect some dots here that aren't connectible. We've been consulting with Manitobans since the start of this pandemic. We've put money out there. We rely on the business community to make decisions about, in some cases, where this money is best spent. We've been taking their advice through the course of the pandemic. We will continue to take advice of Manitobans and the business community as we work our way through this pandemic.

We've set aside in our budget, in our department, over \$100 million to make sure that Manitobans have every opportunity—doesn't matter which Manitoban it is—they have the opportunity to use our services and funding, whether it be upskilling or any other services that we have in terms of market access. We are there to support every Manitoba from every part of the province wherever we can. There is tremendous opportunities here in Manitoba, again, with the second

lowest unemployment rate in the country. Manitoba business is crying for people in the workplace. We recognize that it's not just education and training, but it's other social supports that are required.

That's why we're working closely with the federal government to supply very affordable daycare as part of that discussion, so that there's a lot of other things that we are doing as a government to make sure that Manitobans have the opportunity, if they choose to work, they have every opportunity to work here in Manitoba.

And in addition to that, we know people from all across the world want to come to Manitoba for the opportunities that we have. We have had a very successful immigration program, Provincial Nominee Program. We think that can be enhanced to make sure we have more opportunities for people seeking opportunity in Manitoba to come and work, live and raise a family here. So, we're doing everything we can on that front as well.

Mr. Moses: So, I think the minister is familiar with that term, you know, the K-shaped recovery, where we all kind of go down, economics suffer during, of course, the pandemic, but then it kind of splits off and there's some people who—recovery takes a lot longer and slides along at the bottom, and then some who tend to speak—peak up more quickly.

And this is what I'm asking the minister, is—are the programs that he's putting forward just perpetuating that type of split recovery? Are there—is the minister taking proactive approaches in his recovery to address that split in the recovery, to address the businesses and the individuals who suffer economically?

Because as the process of we've just been speaking about for over the past hour, it certainly seems like there are some people who have more access, and the minister just said in his last comment that he wants to ensure that this process—that everyone has an opportunity in Manitoba. But, you know, Tara Davis, as she said, she didn't get that opportunity, by her own words she didn't get that opportunity.

The minister office could have had—could have asked the chamber of commerce, did you do a scan for like businesses in Manitoba, and we can, maybe, award them all some money. Did the minister take it upon his own self and ask his department, hey, chamber has brought this idea from us, are there any other businesses that do this work where we can evaluate them—each one of them and see which one

can best fit the needs of Manitobans—or maybe award it to two or three of them that do this same, similar work. That would be a way that we don't have this K-shaped recovery, this split recovery where some businesses who face barriers continue to sink as we try to recover and other barriers continue to exceed to greater levels.

And so, I want to just put that to the minister again: Are the programs that he's put forward help us recover just exacerbating this K-shaped recovery that we're going through—and that we're experiencing right now and perpetuating that income inequality we see in Manitoba?

* (11:50)

Mr. Cullen: Certainly, you know, the COVID support programs were, we think, pretty accessible to most people. It was our intent to keep those support programs as general as possible so that as many Manitobans could use those support programs as possible, and obviously, you want to support small business in that endeavour.

The member is correct, though. Through the pandemic, a number of companies weren't impacted as much. Some, quite frankly, were quite successful through the pandemic; others, greater implications through that pandemic.

I would say we're doing everything we can to make sure that our programs are accessible to as many Manitobans as possible. I would say what we've seen here in the last few years is the workforce becoming more mobile and wanting to change occupations, change careers, go back to school, different levels of schooling. We want to support that and that's why we've set aside \$100 million in our budget to support that.

And in terms of employment supports as well, like, over the last year, we have delivered employment and training services to close to 28,000 Manitoba job seekers, including a wide range of target and universal services to support unemployment and under-employed individuals, existing workers, people with disability, newcomers and youth.

We've supported six—over 15,000 Manitobans with employment and training services through 13 of our Jobs and Skills Development centres all across the province. Overall, more than 7,500 Indigenous job seekers have been supported and we've had more than 7,800 newcomer job seekers supported, as well.

So, clearly, when it comes to employment supports, I think we are seeing a broad range of Manitobans seeking those types of supports. We want to make sure that every Manitoban, it doesn't matter where they are in this province, has accessibility to these support programs. And really, these programs are about a way up, how do we help people move up in their career path. So that's really what we're here to do and we're here to assist wherever we can.

Mr. Moses: I thank the minister for the response, but I just, you know, I think it was a bit underwhelming, especially for those people who, you know, see some failures by the government during the course of the pandemic recovery, to specifically target and help support women-led businesses, Indigenous-led businesses, Black-owned businesses and, I think, businesses led by people of colour.

And I think that—and I would actually just put to the minister a challenge to do more, an honest effort to do more, to look more concretely at steps to ensure that those people in business, those workers, have even greater opportunity to be successful in Manitoba.

I want to move on to Budget 2021, an announcement in there that created a new private-sector-led economic development agency called Invest Manitoba. The legislation establishing Invest Manitoba was passed as part of BITSA. But, however, since then we've learned it's been abandoned and won't come into force.

Can the minister provide some insights into why the government was pursuing this agency, Invest Manitoba, in the first place and why it was abandoned?

Mr. Cullen: Appreciate the line of questioning from the member opposite.

As I alluded to earlier on, there is so many different approaches to economic development, and there's a lot of approaches in terms of what that framework looks like in terms of how you move forward from a governance perspective on economic development. We can argue and debate governance models when it comes to economic development all day, and some forms work for some governments, some work better for other governments, and people have different philosophies in terms of what framework works best.

I think the member knows quite well that we had a change in leadership here just recently, and under her leadership, she's created a different governance model when it comes to economic development. So

we've gone away from the Invest Manitoba model to a slightly different model. The new model involves the Economic Development Board of Cabinet, which will be chaired by the Premier (Mrs. Stefanson), and we will have another—a number of ministers on that particular board as well.

So it's more of a—call it a whole-of-government approach to economic development. Say, the concept gets decision makers at the board level to make decisions quicker, and making sure we don't lose any opportunities when it comes to economic development here in Manitoba. And I think it allows us an opportunity to modernize how we do economic development within government by providing a co-ordinated approach to economic development across government departments. It allows us to provide a back-and-forth and communication with the business community as well, so that we fully appreciate the opportunities that they may see, and that we can respond quickly to that.

* (12:00)

And I think we all recognize that we have to make sure we are attracting investment here in Manitoba, and I believe that board can act as a catalyst to do that. And that board can also act as a catalyst for doing analysis, market intelligence, work with our other partners in economic development to make sure that we are seizing those opportunities, and quite frankly, I would say providing direction for government and our other external partners on economic development.

So, that's the concept. The board will be supported by a secretariat. We have brought Michael Swistun in as the secretary to support the board. And we're in the process of establishing a secretariat to support the board. And that secretariat will be existing government staff. We also have the opportunity to bring in private-sector individuals on a contract basis to provide advice for short-term programming.

But in essence, that secretariat will be supportive of economic opportunities or projects that either come to Manitoba or exist in Manitoba and they want to set up shop here, or they want to expand here in Manitoba, and how do we help them navigate through the government bureaucracy to obtain what they want to obtain?

So, in essence, a new approach, a different—I'd say a different approach to economic development from a governance perspective.

Mr. Moses: So is the minister saying that, essentially, the Premier's (Mrs. Stefanson) Economic Development Board is replacing Invest Manitoba? It was created to replace what would have been Invest Manitoba? And it will have a similar goal to bring in investment, that would be the goal of the Economic Development Board—the Premier's Economic Development Board will be to bring investment—I just wanted to—they're almost—different models, but like-for-like objectives?

Mr. Cullen: Yes, I would say exactly right. I mean, we talk globally about economic development and there's a lot of pieces to the economic development puzzle. But at the end of the day, I think we, for the most part, measure outcomes in terms of economic development similar. And that's about creating opportunities for Manitobans, creating wealth for Manitobans and allowing Manitobans to live, work and play here in Manitoba.

And it's really—economic development, in my mind, is about the future. It's about the future of Manitoba. And if we can provide opportunities for not just us, but for our children and our grandchildren, that is what's going to grow our economy.

And at the end of the day, and I'll go back to my opening comments, by growing our economy, creating wealth within Manitoba, that's how we support the social programming vis-à-vis health, education, social services that Manitobans have come to expect. So, that's why it's so important for us as a government to grow our economy and have a real focus on economic development.

And there's different approaches to carrying out economic development when it comes to governance. The—under the Premier's direction, we've seen this approach work in the past and this is the approach that we've taken. But again, it's about creating economic development opportunities and, as the member referenced, the investment component is one piece of that.

I think anything we can do to attract investment is positive. Anything we can do to enhance trade, because we are a trading jurisdiction, is helpful. Anything that we can do to improve entrepreneurship, innovation, commercialization is positive. How we work with our local markets and our global markets is important. And then also the whole idea of having a modern system, a modern government, to respond quickly to economic development opportunities is really important as well.

And government certainly has to provide direction on that front, and we do have a lot of really good agencies external to government that are working on the economic development file, but I think it's critical that government give direction to those agencies to make sure that they are supporting and working collaboratively to provide those outcomes that we need.

So we think this is a positive mechanism to make this happen. Obviously, it's new, so there is some growing at this point in time. But we're excited about the concept and this approach to economic development.

Mr. Moses: So, since the minister's not planning on moving forward with Invest Manitoba will they be repealing the legislation that passed to create it?

Mr. Cullen: That'll be a broader government discussion.

Mr. Moses: Okay. So, not confirming whether it's going to be repealed or not, all right.

All right. So I wanted to move forward to asking a little bit about Research Manitoba. We've seen in Research Manitoba funding get reduced year after year. Used to receive about \$17 million per year. That was cut to \$15 million in 2017-18, then cut again to \$12 million in '18-19.

Can the minister confirm how much this year's budget will have allotted for Research Manitoba?

Mr. Cullen: In terms of Research Manitoba, I do want to thank the folks over at Research Manitoba for the good work they do, a very strong board in place over there with a broad range of expertise.

We supply Research Manitoba just over \$12 million in this year's budget. That is the same as last year, very similar to the preceding three years.

And just a note on the pandemic. I know there is—they've allocated some money to deal with the pandemic response, as well, and research on the pandemic, very critical as we work through the pandemic.

And I will also say Research Manitoba use our investment to leverage additional funds, whether it be the federal government or other private-sector resources as well. So we appreciate the work they do on that front in terms of leveraging the provincial investment of over \$12 million.

* (12:10)

Mr. Moses: Thank the minister for the response.

It's important to—I'm glad the minister would thank the work that Research Manitoba does. They do very important work and they're critical to a lot of the businesses in our province. They help to develop them in terms of the research that they put forward frames some of the projects that become very important and impactful in our economy.

So I'm curious why the budget line for Research Manitoba would remain flat this year after seeing several years—consecutive years of decreases, when the minister even says himself today that it's very important. They do very important work, especially coming out of the pandemic and pandemic work-related work. It's really important.

Businesses rely on this type of research, and the businesses I've spoken with have said that we need to have more research and development in our province. So why is the minister just keeping the budget flat for Research Manitoba after years of consecutive cuts to it? Why not restore some of that funding?

Mr. Cullen: I just caution the members opposite to continue to use the word cuts. I recognize it's been flat in terms of the last five years of funding to Research Manitoba, but I would certainly guard against—caution against some of the vocabulary that we hear coming from across the aisle.

I will say Research Manitoba does a great job of leveraging additional money from federal government and private sector as well.

When it comes to formulating a budget, it's always a balancing act for government to determine where to put resources and, clearly, Manitobans have asked us to deal directly with health care. That's why we've made a record investment of \$7.2 billion into health-care funding. That's \$1 billion more than when we came into office.

They've also asked us to deal with the surgical and diagnostic backlog that has been created by the pandemic. That's why we've committed to \$110 million to address those backlogs. We want to make sure that money is being invested as quickly as possible so that we can reduce the backlog that Manitobans are facing. And we know this impacts Manitoba families and that's why it is so important that we respond to the needs of Manitobans and Manitoba families.

On the topic of research and health care, Manitoba does have, acquired over time, some very valuable health-care information. And I think it's incumbent upon us as a government to unlock the potential that exists in some of that information that

we have acquired over the years. I think there is real value in finding out what that potential is, and that's why we're working closely with Research Manitoba and others in unlocking that potential that exists for some of that information that we have here in Manitoba. And if we can unlock that, I think it will go a long way in terms of improving health for not just those in Manitoba, but in the reality, those across Canada and potentially North America.

So, Research Manitoba will play an important role on that, and I think other areas of government have an interest in this, in moving it forward. So again, I think there's real opportunity when it comes to health information and research.

Mr. Moses: So, yes, I mean, Invest Manitoba uses the funds it has to leverage further investment, and I think that's part of its job to do that.

Obviously, it provides huge benefits to health research and pushing that along. I'm still confused as to why the government sees fit to keep it—the funding at such a reduced level compared to what it used to get.

And I say this because health care has been such an issue over the last few years, with the pandemic. And what better place to put our research in, is to solve some of those health-care issues, not only because of the pandemic, but because we have an aging population and health-care needs continue to grow.

As well, economically, just talk to the people at BAM, Bioscience Association Manitoba, and they'll tell you the economic potential of health-care research.

So again, can the minister—I'll put to him again and see if he can clearly answer why wasn't more funding allocated or restored to the previous level for Research Manitoba after several years of cuts?

Mr. Cullen: Again, I challenge the member opposite on the term cuts. I mean, the level of funding to Research Manitoba has been consistent for five years in a row, and again, they've been able to leverage last year, close to \$20 million on our investment.

I think the member has lost sight of the fact that we are investing a record \$7.2 billion this year alone directly into health care. Manitobans have asked us to respond and strengthen our health-care system. We're investing an extra \$1 billion more than when we came into office in health care, and it really is about supporting front-line services for health care.

We're investing in capital on the health-care front as well. We recognize there's challenges in educating, recruiting, retaining a lot of different staff within the health-care system, whether it be doctors, nurses, EMS, paramedics, nursing assistants. We—we're facing those challenges, just as every other jurisdiction is; the country is facing those challenges.

To try to address that, we are investing record amounts in health care. Certainly, our department is supportive of investing in training for those health-care professionals as well. So it's a whole-of-government approach to try to deal with health care, and the challenges that we have within health care.

So, it can't be lost on the members opposite that we are making record investments in health care, and at the same time, being supportive of the work that's being done at Research Manitoba.

Mr. Moses: Thank the minister for the answer, although I think that, you know, compared to the previous years, in the past years, where there was higher levels of funding for research in Manitoba, obviously, if that was provided this year, they would be able to use that additional funding to leverage even more dollars.

And they do a great job of that, and this would be an even greater boon—boom to our economy, and potential economic driver. So I'm disappointed to see the cut in this area. I know the minister attended the chamber event yesterday and heard the brief presentation by BAM as to the economic impact that health sciences, biosciences, pharmaceuticals play in Manitoba.

* (12:20)

One of the large facilities they have is in the riding of my colleague, the member for Transcona (Mr. Altomare). It creates a lot of jobs, and it's confusing that, in a time when—and I'm—will add that these are good quality, high-paying jobs, well above the minimum wage, which hasn't increased very much under this government.

And so I want to just ask the minister again, is he considering making these types of investments into our economy in areas which would provide research and dollars to spur economic growth, in fields which we need, like health sciences, and create good quality, high-paying jobs? These are opportunities to have win-win-wins in our economy and it seems like the government hasn't spent as much dollars this year as it has spent—as was spent in years past.

So again, my question is, why aren't we spending as much as we've had previous years when this is a perfect opportunity to invest in our economy and get many different wins at the same time?

Mr. Cullen: I will agree with the member, then, in the 'wholm' of-bioscience sector of our economy is very important and I don't think people realize the significance and the size of the Bioscience Association here in Manitoba. And we also support sectors directly and we support the bioscience sector directly. We have an annual allocation of \$360,000 to support the Bioscience Association directly.

And we support a lot of other sectors in this area as well. I mean, you talk about aerospace, agriculture. All of those things certainly are related to the health care bioscience sectors, so we do support those sectors on an individual basis.

Again, the funding level for Research Manitoba has been consistent for five years now, but we have chosen in this budget as well to increase health-care support directly to the tune of \$7.2 billion with a \$110-million allocation to the surgical and diagnostic backlog. That has been top of mind for Manitobans for some time as we work our way through the pandemic.

The other issue that's become top of mind for Manitobans is affordability, and that's why, in this budget, and we, as a government, have been committed to allowing Manitobans to keep as much money in their pockets as possible. That's why we've reduced taxes to Manitobans and in support of them. In fact, we'd like to get more money back to Manitobans through the education property tax relief program and the legislation before the House to the tune of probably \$350 million that we'd like to get back in Manitobans' hands, but apparently the opposition don't see it that way.

We, as a government in this year's budget, we have committed over \$100 million in our department alone to support Manitobans, in educating Manitobans, in training Manitobans and in getting Manitobans back to work, and I'm happy at the place we're at in terms of getting more people back to work post-pandemic than we had going into the pandemic.

I think that's been a very positive sign for us. We've made significant investments to the tune of \$650 million to support Manitobans on the business side, that part of \$3.1 billion total that's gone into

fighting COVID, and we know there's more investments that will have to be made in our battle against COVID, but we're certainly prepared to do that.

So record investments in health care, record investments in education, record investments in social services. I would say, potentially, record investments in supporting Manitobans' training, upskilling and getting them ready for the workforce as well.

Mr. Moses: I hope to get a couple more questions in with the minister—two to three more questions in with the minister within the time remaining. I wanted to ask the minister this; I know it's not his department directly, but it will obviously have an impact on our economy in Manitoba.

We're set to have the lowest minimum wage in the country in October, come October. So will the minister elaborate on how this will affect our economic development in Manitoba?

Mr. Cullen: I think, as the member knows, we have legislation in place to provide the mechanism for increases in the minimum wage here in Manitoba. And we've had that in place for a number of years.

It's my understanding that we have approximately 6 per cent of the workforce currently at minimum wage level. I've asked my department to do an evaluation in terms of where those 6 per cent are employed. Are they employed in the hospitality sector where they also have the advantage of service tips, or are these other people being employed elsewhere?

So I'm looking forward to digging down a little bit on terms of who is actually making minimum wage. Obviously, we'll have a look at other jurisdictions and what they're doing.

And it's an interesting dynamic when this question comes up in this era that we're in. The reality is—and this is what I'm hearing from businesses across the province—we actually have a shortage of employees, and we have a shortage in our workforce. So we—the business community recognizes that they're having to pay staff more money to recruit and retain them. And that's really the reality that we're in.

Talked with a number of members of the Business Council last night, and that's the situation they find themselves in. And as the member would know, Manitoba workforce is more mobile than ever before. It used to be, not too long ago, once a person had a job, they would stay with that job and stay with that

company. That's not the case anymore. Manitobans are looking for opportunities and they're looking for opportunities to increase their skill level, their education level, and we're providing that for them. So there is certainly tremendous opportunities for them here in Manitoba.

So I'm curious about, you know, the number of people who is at minimum wage, how they're being impacted by minimum wage.

I certainly look forward to those results and have—obviously looking forward to what is occurring in other jurisdictions as well, and the implications those policy decisions are having for those people as well.

So it's certainly something that we as a government are cognizant of. That's why we're doing the work to fully understand the implications of where we're at and any implications of where we may go into the future.

Mr. Chairperson: The hour being 12:30 p.m., committee rise.

Call in the Speaker.

IN SESSION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Andrew Micklefield): The hour being 12:30 p.m., this House is adjourned and stands adjourned until 1:30 p.m. on Monday.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Friday, May 13, 2022

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