

Third Session – Forty-Second Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
DEBATES
and
PROCEEDINGS
Official Report
(Hansard)

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Speaker*

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MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Forty-Second Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
ADAMS, Danielle	Thompson	NDP
ALTOMARE, Nello	Transcona	NDP
ASAGWARA, Uzoma	Union Station	NDP
BRAR, Diljeet	Burrows	NDP
BUSHIE, Ian	Keewatinook	NDP
CLARKE, Eileen, Hon.	Agassiz	PC
COX, Cathy, Hon.	Kildonan-River East	PC
CULLEN, Cliff, Hon.	Spruce Woods	PC
DRIEDGER, Myrna, Hon.	Roblin	PC
EICHLER, Ralph, Hon.	Lakeside	PC
EWASKO, Wayne	Lac du Bonnet	PC
FIELDING, Scott, Hon.	Kirkfield Park	PC
FONTAINE, Nahanni	St. Johns	NDP
FRIESEN, Cameron, Hon.	Morden-Winkler	PC
GERRARD, Jon, Hon.	River Heights	Lib.
GOERTZEN, Kelvin, Hon.	Steinbach	PC
GORDON, Audrey	Southdale	PC
GUENTER, Josh	Borderland	PC
GUILLEMARD, Sarah, Hon.	Fort Richmond	PC
HELWER, Reg, Hon.	Brandon West	PC
ISLEIFSON, Len	Brandon East	PC
JOHNSON, Derek	Interlake-Gimli	PC
JOHNSTON, Scott	Assiniboia	PC
KINEW, Wab	Fort Rouge	NDP
LAGASSÉ, Bob	Dawson Trail	PC
LAGIMODIERE, Alan	Selkirk	PC
LAMONT, Dougald	St. Boniface	Lib.
LAMOUREUX, Cindy	Tyndall Park	Lib.
LATHLIN, Amanda	The Pas-Kameesak	NDP
LINDSEY, Tom	Flin Flon	NDP
MALOWAY, Jim	Elmwood	NDP
MARCELINO, Malaya	Notre Dame	NDP
MARTIN, Shannon	McPhillips	PC
MOSES, Jamie	St. Vital	NDP
MICHALESKI, Brad	Dauphin	PC
MICKLEFIELD, Andrew	Rossmere	PC
MORLEY-LECOMTE, Janice	Seine River	PC
NAYLOR, Lisa	Woleseley	NDP
NESBITT, Greg	Riding Mountain	PC
PALLISTER, Brian, Hon.	Fort Whyte	PC
PEDERSEN, Blaine, Hon.	Midland	PC
PIWNIUK, Doyle	Turtle Mountain	PC
REYES, Jon	Waverley	PC
SALA, Adrien	St. James	NDP
SANDHU, Mintu	The Maples	NDP
SCHULER, Ron, Hon.	Springfield-Ritchot	PC
SMITH, Andrew	Lagimodière	PC
SMITH, Bernadette	Point Douglas	NDP
SMOOK, Dennis	La Vérendrye	PC
SQUIRES, Rochelle, Hon.	Riel	PC
STEFANSON, Heather, Hon.	Tuxedo	PC
TEITSMA, James	Radisson	PC
WASYLIW, Mark	Fort Garry	NDP
WHARTON, Jeff, Hon.	Red River North	PC
WIEBE, Matt	Concordia	NDP
WISHART, Ian	Portage la Prairie	PC
WOWCHUK, Rick	Swan River	PC

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Tuesday, November 3, 2020

The House met at 1:30 p.m.

Madam Speaker: Good afternoon, everybody. Please be seated.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

Madam Speaker: Introduction of bills? Committee reports? Tabling of reports?

The honourable Minister of Economic Development and Training (Mr. Eichler)? Is there a report to be tabled from the honourable Minister of Economic Development and Training? If not, I'll move on.

Ministerial statements?

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Assiniboia, on a members' statement. The member needs to turn his mic on. Unmute.

Acknowledging Assiniboia Constituency

Mr. Scott Johnston (Assiniboia): I look forward to indicating to the House and the constituents of Assiniboia of how proud I am of the efforts that they have put forward in regarding—to continue to address the COVID situation that we all find very challenging for everyone within the province of Manitoba, as well as the country of Canada and the world.

I'm so proud of the efforts that many specialty groups have taken, in particular the Crestview Scouts, who have continued to do fundraising drives and food drives to ensure that they are trying to accommodate the needs of those people who are certainly in need.

And I notice in our St. James community—St. James-Assiniboia community that there are many people that are encouraging people to continue to go out and pat our front-line service workers on the back and indicate how great of a job they're doing.

So, Madam Speaker, I will end by indicating how proud I am of the constituents of Assiniboia, as well as the people of Manitoba. We will get through this.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Keewatinook, on a members' statement.

Shawenim Abinoojii

Mr. Ian Bushie (Keewatinook): I'd like to recognize the work of Shawenim Abinoojii.

Shawenim Abinoojii works in collaboration with the leadership of the Southeast Tribal Council First Nations and Southeast Child and Family Services to provide culturally appropriate placements for children in care in the eight First Nations that they serve.

Shawenim Abinoojii is the Anishinabe phrase which describes our sacred duty to love, protect and nurture the children. Currently, with 45 homes based on reserve, Shawenim's main goal is to keep First Nation children and youth rooted in their home communities, connected to their language, land and culture.

As the needs of First Nations' youth continue to grow, Shawenim adapts. In 2018, Winnipeg Street Census identified CFS involvement as one of the common paths into homelessness. Indigenous youth represent over 70 per cent of those reporting homelessness that year, many of whom shared they became homeless within 30 days of leaving care.

In response to these outcomes, Shawenim was able to launch the Memengoo program, which meets the needs of First Nation children—youth aging out of the child-welfare system. This prevention-based program focuses on reducing youth homelessness through a transitional home that supports them through their journey into adulthood with built-in resources that provide life skills and educational opportunities.

All of this important work would not be possible without the resilient leadership of Shawenim executive director Jason Whitford. Jason's a proud member of the Sandy Bay Ojibway Nation. Jason works closely with Victoria Fisher, a proud Indigenous woman and Shawenim foster-care director, another characteristic that shows Shawenim's commitment to providing culturally appropriate care, which can be found in the Indigenous staff and caregivers throughout the organization.

Partnerships are critical for Shawenim's effectiveness. Their commitment to supporting Indigenous family rights is greatly supported by Rhonda Kelly, executive director of Southeast Child and Family

Services, who should be commended for her continued positive support.

Governed by a board of directors made up of community members and leadership, Shawenim truly has the children's and community's well-being at heart. With the help of these individuals, Shawenim Abinoojii has been able to grow and to remain committed to their primary goal, rooted in their namesake, which is their sacred duty to love, protect and nurture our children.

The programs that I've mentioned are just a few of the programs that Shawenim offers. I invite everyone to visit shawenim-abinoojii.ca to see all the great work being offered.

I ask my colleagues to rise and show our appreciation for the hard work being done by Shawenim Abinoojii in bringing our children home.

Miigwech.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Waverley, on a member's statement.

Could the member please—

Mr. Jon Reyes (Waverley): Madam Speaker, I have no member's statement for today.

Supports for Women During Pandemic

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): One day, history will show a Premier (Mr. Pallister) missing in action and of blame, a Premier whose austerity measures left a health-care system vulnerable and unable to fully respond with enough nurses, health-care practitioners, ICU beds, testing sites, contact tracers—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Ms. Fontaine: —and PPE, predominantly impacting on women, Madam Speaker.

The record will show that, while women are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, the Premier simply didn't care. Women are more likely to be working in high-risk front-line jobs, like health care, teachers, caregivers or essential service workers, or that women still bear the brunt of yesteryear gender roles, like home-schooling, child care, household management and caring for aged loved ones, while pushing aside their own mental health instead to focus on the emotional and mental well-being of our own families.

Did the Premier lift up and protect women? No, Madam Speaker. He is responsible for increased stress in the lives of women by mishandling child care and

by ensuring child-care centres were threatened with funding cuts early on in the pandemic. And the Minister of Families' (Mrs. Stefanson) offer of Subway sandwiches to child-care centres just doesn't cut it.

History will show that no additional supports for women's organizations came from the minister of Status of Women, no additional supports for women entrepreneurs and women workers came from the Finance Minister. They will find that while the Manitoba Institute for International Women's Rights called on the Premier to adopt a gender-based analysis in decision making, the Premier has not ever once offered a commitment to a 'she-covery' plan.

Madam Speaker, Manitobans deserve better than this Premier and his Cabinet.

Miigwech.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for—*[interjection]* Order. Order.

Bill and Sue-On Hillman

Mr. Greg Nesbitt (Riding Mountain): A love affair with each other and music that began in the mid-1960s continues on today. Bill and Sue-On Hillman were married on August 29th, 1966, beginning their life-long love for each other and the opportunity to enjoy their passion for music together.

At the age of two, her mother pressed Sue-On Choy into the arms of a neighbour fleeing to Hong Kong from the oppression of the communist government in China. Even after her mother Jade managed to join her in Hong Kong, it would be eight more confusing years until the family, including her father Soo, could be reunited in Canada.

The family made their way to Newdale, Manitoba, where Sue-On eventually went to school and worked at the family-owned Paris Café. At the age of 15, she fell in love with a Strathclair boy and musician, Bill Hillman, and they married when she turned 18. Both attended Brandon University and performed nightly in Brandon nightspots to earn enough money to earn five university degrees and become high-school teachers.

Bill taught in Strathclair for 30 years. Together with Barry Forman of Rivers, the Hillmans formed The Western Union, performing at area dances, touring western Canada, the United States and England during the summer and recording albums in the early 1970s. In total, the couple cut 12 albums of

original music and were featured regularly on CBC television.

The Hillmans also found the time to raise three children, Ja-On, Robin and China-Li, who are all actively involved in music.

Madam Speaker, on behalf of all Manitobans, I want to recognize Bill and Sue-On Hillman for their 54 years of marriage and their contribution to the vibrant music industry in Manitoba over the past six decades.

Thank you.

* (13:40)

Housing the Homeless

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): Madam Speaker, being homeless in winter is preventable. There is a solution: organize like Medicine Hat and get the job done.

Another option is to rent empty hotel space for people to stay. This would need help for—with addictions, mental illness, security and getting people back on their feet. With leadership, it can be done.

More than half of people experiencing homelessness were in the care of Child and Family Services as children. NDP and PC governments took away monies in trust for these children. Instead of funds being there when they aged out of care, there was nothing. Can you imagine being sent to a homeless shelter as a present on your 18th birthday? Money stolen from children in CFS care should be returned. Many would no longer be homeless.

NDP and PC governments have undervalued public health. Lead exposure in early childhood is a risk factor for homelessness. Children must be screened early in life to prevent health and social issues resulting from lead poisoning.

Helping our friends on the street experiencing homelessness is possible.

In England, a survey last autumn found 4,300 people sleeping rough. March 26th, after COVID arrived, Britain's government told local authorities to move homeless people into appropriate accommodation by the end of the week. The official target ending rough sleeping by 2024 shifted in the blink of an eye to a goal of three days.

By April 10th, more than 1,000 homeless in London were in hotel rooms, and all over England

those on the street decreased from 4,300 to between five and six hundred.

We have the power to act. We must act.

Thank you.

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Government House Leader): Is there leave of the House to revert back to tabling of reports?

Madam Speaker: Is there leave of the House to revert back to tabling of reports? *[Agreed]*

TABLING OF REPORTS

Hon. Ralph Eichler (Minister of Economic Development and Training): It's my pleasure to table Communities Economic Development Fund second quarter financial statements for 2020-2021.

ORAL QUESTIONS

Second Wave of COVID-19 Pandemic Request to Hire Front-Line Workers

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Absurd and outrageous. That's what some everyday Manitobans are already saying about the Premier's call for volunteers today, and I would just say, you know, things are going pretty badly for you when Manitobans are mad at you for asking them to volunteer.

Again, asking Manitobans to volunteer—it sounds like a good thing when you first hear about it, until you remember that the person asking you to volunteer is the same guy who fired everybody. This is a Premier who laid off 10,000 people during the first wave of the pandemic. This is a Premier who cut 500 nursing positions. Again, after all those thousands of Manitobans pushed out of work, the Premier is now asking Manitobans to step up with free labour.

We know we're not going to get through this pandemic on the cheap.

Will the Premier just commit today to finally hiring some front-line health-care workers?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): Well, things must be pretty bad for the opposition, Madam Speaker, when they have to make things up every day, when they have to resort to trying to frighten Manitobans already quite rightly worried when we're in the middle of a pandemic. But then again, there's always, in every community project of any kind that I've ever participated in, and there have been a few, there's always somebody sitting over on the side, acting like they know everything, telling everybody else what to

do but never carried a board or put a nail in it, that never did any work. Just an expert, you know, that knows everything.

Madam Speaker, the member doesn't know everything. For example, he doesn't know that we hired 1,300 nurses over the last year.

Madam Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Kinew: Madam Speaker, what Manitobans are worried about is having a Premier who doesn't appear to understand the basics of fighting a pandemic.

It was just yesterday in this Chamber where the Premier said that preparing for the second wave would amount to idiocy. That's a direct quote. He said that preparing for the second wave was idiocy. When asked several times to admit that that was a mistake to say that, especially during a pandemic, the Premier instead chose to double down in a committee of this House and say that investing in contact tracing and investing in expanding testing capacity during the summer in order to prepare Manitobans for the second wave was, of course, idiocy.

Now, instead of making those preparations, this Premier decided to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in this ready, set, go billboard campaign. Will he now admit that that was a mistake, and he should instead be hiring front-line health-care workers?

Mr. Pallister: Well, the member continues along the same line, Madam Speaker: the expert sitting up on the side not doing any of the work, none of the heavy lifting, just an expert who doesn't help. In fact, he hurts.

And I was responding yesterday to the member's continued suggestion that asymptomatic people should go for tests. That's what he suggested in the summer; he seems to want to continue with that fallacious argument. That people who don't have symptoms should go and block the line for the people who do would be idiocy.

What I was referring to and I'll continue to refer to it as such: the NDP leader was calling—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Pallister: —for asymptomatic testing, as a non-expert, not-doctor of medicine, Madam Speaker, while Dr. Brent Roussin, who is—by the way—a doctor, was cautioning against it and said asymptomatic

testing was dangerous and it most important to test individuals who have symptoms.

So I'll stick up for Dr. Roussin, and the member can be the expert criticizing him.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member—the honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a final supplementary.

Mr. Kinew: Madam Speaker, there are more than 200 doctors who have signed an open letter to the Premier and this Health Minister saying that what they're doing so far isn't enough and they need to dramatically increase the scale of their investments and their interventions.

The Premier and this Health Minister, they always want to compare Manitoba to the worst jurisdictions out there when it comes to COVID and say that, oh, it was unavoidable, we couldn't have done any better.

Why don't they try and show us some leadership and compare us to—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Kinew: —those jurisdictions that are having success. Why not take a lesson from New Zealand? Why not take a lesson from Australia, where aggressive targeted interventions made a real difference?

Instead, we have a First Minister who stood in this Chamber yesterday and said that those targeted interventions, according to him, there is no scientific basis for them. Well, I would refer back to the 200 doctors who suggest otherwise.

Will the Premier listen to the science? Will he listen to the experts and invest in front-line health care so we can get through the pandemic?

Mr. Pallister: Before COVID hit us, we were investing, this year alone, \$648 million more in health care than the NDP ever did. Now, Madam Speaker, the member who stands in this place today as a imaginary expert—self-appointed—over on the side and talks about listening to experts, appointed himself an expert in the summer and contradicted Dr. Brent Roussin, who is an expert.

So when it comes to listening to experts, we'll listen to real experts, not the pretend, fake experts.

Madam Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a new question.

Health Spending During Pandemic Provincial Government's Record

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Shall we talk about the lack of investments in health care then, Madam Speaker?

Here we are in the second wave of the pandemic and too many nurses, too many health-care aides still don't have access to life-saving protective equipment. Too many front-line health-care workers are still asking for reinforcements to join them at the bedside so that we could have adequate capacity in our hospitals.

Now, of course, this government likes to claim that they're doing something on health care, but we see, according to freedom of information, that it's actually another thing.

The funding letters that they sent out to the health regions this year didn't have any new money in them, didn't say that there was increased funds to fight the pandemic; all that it said was keep your receipts. They have to keep their receipts every year, Madam Speaker. It sounds like this government did absolutely nothing to reward new and allocate new expenditures to help us get through the pandemic.

When will this government stop trying to get through the pandemic on the cheap, and when will they provide resources for health care in Manitoba?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): Well, the member speaks about best practices and then demonstrates some of the worst practices in his conduct and his comments, Madam Speaker. He misrepresents the facts again.

I will say, this government's invested, before COVID, Madam Speaker, \$648 million budgeted this year more than the NDP ever did for health care. The difference is we listened to the experts when we target the money to achieve better outcomes, and that's what we're focused on doing now and that's what we'll continue to focus on.

* (13:50)

When the member disparages our front-line people, our advisers—and he does that again today—I tell him he's wrong. Investments are being made, and they're being made in a focused way. Our testing has quadrupled over the last two months, Madam Speaker. Our procurement has us having six months of available—in almost every category, and more than a year in many other categories of supplies. When that was a significant issue some months ago, it is not now.

ICU planning, Madam Speaker, has proceeded through the summer, as has every aspect of planning and preparedness led by real health experts who are part of Team Manitoba. And I encourage the member to get on board with the team.

Madam Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Kinew: You know, that government press release that said they only reactivated the incident command structure yesterday seems to contradict in a very direct way any of the bluster that we hear from the Premier today.

But when we refer to the facts at hand, the funding letters that were sent to the regional health authorities by this government, by this Cabinet, again, what we see is that there's no news on how many additional investments in intensive-care-unit beds will be coming. There's no additional investments for protective equipment. There's no resources to hire more health-care aides or people to run diagnostic tests. All we see is a vague direction to keep their receipts.

We know that as we stare down a potential crisis in intensive-care units across Manitoba that new investments are needed.

When will the Premier face the facts and allocate those resources to life-saving medical treatment?

Mr. Pallister: Well, it's clear, again, that the member is desiring to be on the side of COVID rather than on the side of fighting COVID.

Madam Speaker, it seems to me that the member has failed to understand what involves an incident command structure is invoked, and it—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Order.

Mr. Pallister: —apparently is something he fails to understand.

So you'd do well to listen and try to elevate his level of understanding, because incident command structure is brought into place when we have a lockdown. And they were, and they are again. But we didn't have a lockdown for six months.

Instead, we had a provincial respiratory virus steering committee comprised of many of the same people, who proceeded to work very, very hard all summer on preparatory work on testing, bringing it up, procurement, activating it, ICU planning, achieving major progress in every respect in planning throughout the entire summer.

Madam Speaker, the member fails to understand the basics of the organizational structure of the response and can't even get a three-word slogan properly recreated in this House. It's called Ready. Safe. Grow. And it's the safety the member ignores as he makes his comments.

He endangers Manitoba's efforts.

Madam Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a final supplementary.

Mr. Kinew: Madam Speaker, you know, I realize the Premier, his full day is trying to convince his Minister of Finance (Mr. Fielding) that the QAnon conspiracy is not real, but he still needs to be able to find time to bolster health care.

Again, here in Manitoba the provincial health authorities were told this in their funding letters, which I will table for the Premier, that not only were there new investments not on the way, not only were new ICU beds not coming, but also—and I quote here—any organization that may experience cash or liquidity challenges should report such instances immediately.

Basically, hey, if you run out of money, here's the number to call. Also, by the way, we think you're probably going to run out of money. That doesn't sound like a government that is focused on health care or fighting the pandemic.

When will this Premier step up with the necessary investments to keep Manitobans safe and defeat the pandemic?

Mr. Pallister: Greater investments than ever before, spiked up dramatically during this period of unprecedented challenge for our province, and not really helped at all by self-appointed experts on the other side of the House, Madam Speaker, who criticize public health officials and who criticize their decisions—in fact, contradict them.

Dr. Tam said it's important to test the right people at the right time in the right place, and she complimented the strategies of going hard on making sure testing was available, Madam Speaker, for those who have symptoms. That's what we focused on doing, while the member opposite is contradicting our leading health experts and advising asymptomatic people to go and get tested.

When will he stop, Madam Speaker? Should they go and get tested today? Should they go again tomorrow? Should they go every single day? That's what he's suggesting. He is endangering our plans in

this way, that he is contradicting science and well-studied leaders in our health-care field.

And, Madam Speaker, I'd encourage him not to do that. I'd encourage him to get on the team and help us fight COVID rather than trying to serve his partisan goals as he does.

Personal-Care Homes Pandemic Funding Plan

MLA Uzoma Asagwara (Union Station): Madam Speaker, personal-care homes don't have what they need to provide safety to staff and residents. That's what staff are saying and that's what families are saying.

The Pallister government should have laid out a comprehensive and funded plan months ago for these facilities to increase staffing and personal protective equipment.

Instead their message is keep your receipts. That's not a plan for government—for what government will actually pay for. Our personal-care homes have no certainty that they will be paid back for what they actually need. That's not leadership.

Why is the minister nickel and diming personal-care homes in the midst of a pandemic?

Hon. Cameron Friesen (Minister of Health, Seniors and Active Living): Another false assertion from—by the member of Union Station, who has continued to put false statements on the record day after day after day in this House.

The fact of the matter is, Madam Speaker, that even at Parkview Place there have been 35 new workers hired in just a matter of the last few days.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Union Station, on a supplementary question.

MLA Asagwara: That's still almost 30 workers short of what the WRHA has indicated they need at Parkview, but that's fine. Thank you for that update.

Madam Speaker, I'll table the Pallister government's directives and correspondence with personal-care homes. Months into the pandemic, the government was still considering how it might provide financial relief to overwhelmed PCHs. Their message: send us your receipts and we'll settle up with you at a later date.

That is a complete failure. Government should have directed staffing, should have demanded appropriate personal protective equipment, and it should

have communicated the amounts of additional funding up front, before the second wave. It's a complete collapse of leadership.

Why didn't the minister have a comprehensive funded plan for personal-care homes this summer?

Mr. Friesen: Madam Speaker, it's a complete collapse of credibility on that side of the House.

These members have, for days and days, continued to put false statements on the record when, in fact, it's well-known that what we have done is not require personal-care homes to wait in—a whole annual year for reimbursements. Instead, all members of this House know that those reimbursements have gone out in respect of quarter one for this year, and quarter two are under way, making sure that these personal-care homes are made whole for all the expenses that they are incurring in respect of COVID.

This includes the very significant investment that we have made in respect of hundreds of these visitation shelters for personal-care homes to make sure that residents and their loved ones can continue to visit.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Union Station, on a final supplementary.

MLA Asagwara: Madam Speaker, medical researchers have found that decisive action, co-ordinated central planning and funded initiatives were critical to saving lives in personal-care homes in other jurisdictions affected by COVID-19.

But on the eve of the second wave here in Manitoba, the minister's message to long-term care in this province was keep your receipts and we'll consider how to settle up in the future. We are eight months into this pandemic and too many personal-care homes are falling apart.

Why didn't the minister reinforce our personal-care homes when he had a chance?

Mr. Friesen: More false statements from the NDP. Madam Speaker, the facts are these: we were one of the first provinces in Canada who created this one-worker, one-personal-care-home strategy that has kept residents and staff alive. We were quick to bring PPE into these personal-care homes. We were quick to respond and make sure that personal-care homes had the resources that they needed. We have hired staff in personal-care homes that—[interjection]—even as I give the responses, the member for Union Station continues to shout and become more and more angry.

But the facts are these, Madam Speaker: This government—[interjection]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Friesen: —has been responding; this government will continue to respond and put our focus on— [interjection]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Friesen: —the safety and well-being of all Manitobans.

* (14:00)

Child-Care System KPMG Report

Ms. Malaya Marcelino (Notre Dame): In May, the Pallister government doubled the value of their contract to \$600,000 for KPMG to do a review of the child-care system. According to government briefing notes, the president to Treasury Board authorized the significant increase to complete what they call a transformation of the child-care system in the fall of 2020.

Madam Speaker, it's now November 3rd. The minister has done first reading on the bill to effect these changes, but hasn't released the legislation and she has not released the KPMG review.

Why won't she show us the KPMG review? What does she have to hide?

Hon. Heather Stefanson (Minister of Families): Very, very scary. I think Halloween is over, Madam Speaker.

But I will tell you that the reason that there is a need for a major transformation within the child-care sector, Madam Speaker, is because of the previous NDP government having neglected the child-care sector for 17 years.

We have been listening to parents. We've been listening to those in the child-care sector. We know that change needs to take place. That's why we're moving forward with those changes. We'll continue to work with parents, with those in the child-care sector to make sure where they failed, we get it right.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Notre Dame, on a supplementary question.

Ms. Marcelino: KPMG has led the Pallister government's austerity agenda. Recall, they proposed cutting social housing, cutting Rent Assist and privatizing core government services. Now, under the

cover of the pandemic, the secretary to Treasury Board has authorized a doubling of the contract to KPMG to transform child care; in other words, fee increases and cuts for Manitoba families.

But the minister hasn't shown the House the legislation and she won't release the bill.

Will the minister release the KPMG review of child care today?

Mrs. Stefanson: Certainly, this is all about why we need transformation in the child-care sector in Manitoba. Again, it was 17 years of her previous NDP government that neglected the sector, causing huge, long wait-lists, Madam Speaker.

That is not the direction that Manitobans have asked us to go in. That's why we will transform child care in Manitoba to make sure that child care is there for Manitoba families when they need it.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Notre Dame, on a final supplementary.

Ms. Marcelino: KPMG called for closing schools across the province and moving to a voucher system for social housing. They called for reductions in disability benefits. They recommended, and this government accepted, cuts of tens of millions of dollars in supports for students. And now the secretary to Treasury Board doubled their funding to transform child care, including increased fees and cuts for families.

Why won't she let families see the KPMG child-care review? What does she have to hide?

Mrs. Stefanson: Well, again, Madam Speaker, with the litany of false accusations just put on the record by that member, I don't know where to begin, but what I will say, when it comes to child care in Manitoba we need to ensure that we have a system that is there for Manitoba families when they need it.

That's why, over the course of the next number of months, we will be working with the child-care sector, we'll be working with parents to see what kind of child care they need and want and deserve for their children, and we'll make sure that that system is there for them when they need it.

Provincial Parkland Service Rotation

Ms. Lisa Naylor (Wolseley): Madam Speaker, last week we presented this House with clear evidence of the Pallister government's plans to privatize our parks. Government has put out a request for proposals

exploring divestment—code word for privatization—and we also showed that the Pallister government intends to sell off park cottage lots.

But this is just one part of the government's plan. Earlier this year the Pallister government began, in their own words, to significantly reduce services available in Whiteshell Provincial Park.

Why is the Pallister government cutting park services?

Hon. Sarah Guillemard (Minister of Conservation and Climate): It always gives me pleasure to speak about our beautiful parks that we have here in this wonderful province.

I think that the opposition has been confused on a number of fronts, especially on this topic. They're equating selling of any properties or even looking at private investment as equal to privatization of entire jurisdictions. That's the equivalent of saying that buying a home in Winnipeg means that the public parks and city parks are no longer available to the public.

It's ridiculous, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: The—[interjection] Order. Order.

The honourable member for Wolseley, on a supplementary question.

Ms. Naylor: Madam Speaker, according to the briefing note we received through FIPPA, this reduction in services is part of the Pallister government's cost-saving plan.

Levels of service have already been reduced for waste and recycling collection in the Whiteshell and I've previously shared with the minister my concern. The reduced service means much longer drives for cottagers and campers to remove waste and has created access concerns for folks with disabilities.

But we know this is just the beginning. The minister intends divestment of our park assets and her government has already directed the department to develop a plan to sell off cottage lots in our provincial parks.

Why is the minister reducing services and selling off park land?

Mrs. Guillemard: I appreciate the question from the member.

Clearly, we have much to discuss because there's much that I would like to clarify for the member. Her understanding of the dealings within our department

is quite lacking, and I have offered her many opportunities to meet with me and to provide those questions and I'd be happy to fill her in.

Madam Speaker, this gives me an opportunity to talk about a number of our private investments within our public parks that actually have improved services for all users and all visitors. For example, we have Asessippi park, the ski and mountain bike facilities and additional camping opportunities that is a private investment and run.

We have Birds Hill park and a Folk Festival investment in the—investment in additional facilities that has really improved the experience of all visitors to the area—

Madam Speaker: The member's time has expired.

The honourable member for Wolseley, on a final supplementary.

Ms. Naylor: Perhaps the minister does not understand that QP is an excellent opportunity to actually answer some of these questions which I'm still waiting for answers to most of what I've asked over the last two weeks.

Our parks should not be for sale, yet the minister has put parks under review, exploring selling off assets and making plans to sell off cottage lots. And now the minister's reducing service levels in provincial parks such as the Whiteshell.

Perhaps the minister doesn't understand, but provincial parks are not profit machines. They are generational investments for the good of all Manitobans.

Will she back off her plans to cut and privatize our provincial parks?

Mrs. Guillemard: Just because the member wants to say and repeat something over and over doesn't make it true.

Madam Speaker, as I was saying, in Falcon Lake we have a golf course that had a \$1-million clubhouse there's—redeveloped. That's private investment.

And I will note that as I'm listing a lot of this private investment and privately run facilities and activities for all park users, a lot of these initiatives happened under her own NDP government. Why now are they afraid of private investments?

Premier's Legislative Plans Priorities During Pandemic

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): It is shocking but sadly not surprising just how secretive and underhanded the Premier is currently acting. The Premier makes every attempt to stifle and suppress legitimate criticism. We know how he feels about that.

* (14:10)

Whether it's hiding legislation from the public or undermining the freedom of information legislation or criminalizing protest, to bury terrible and regressive bills in a massive omnibus legislation, these are the actions of a Premier who refuses to listen.

Will the Premier stop his plan to ram through his regressive agenda in the middle of a pandemic, Madam Speaker?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): I remember watching with some amazement some video that the member posted of herself standing with blockaders on a rail line in Atlantic Canada; expect the protest was not demonstrating social distancing. Neither was she. This was to blockade supplies getting along main rail lines to northern communities and places in Manitoba and elsewhere.

I remember the member doing that. I remember thinking, I wonder if the taxpayer paid for that. Maybe the member would like to respond to that.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for St. Johns, on a supplementary question.

Ms. Fontaine: Well, Madam Speaker, it's becoming more and more clear just how desperate the Premier is and how he's using the cover of a pandemic to push through a regressive agenda that he refuses to reveal to Manitobans.

We know he tried ramming through legislation last April, when Manitoba was caught up in the first wave of COVID-19, to raise hydro rates and undermine families. And now he's doing it again, Madam Speaker. He's abusing every democratic norm to force through hydro rates just when the pandemic is rising yet again.

The Premier needs to stop.

Will he stop his plans to ram through his regressive agenda in the middle of the worst pandemic Manitoba has arguably ever seen?

Miigwech.

Mr. Pallister: Gee whiz, Madam Chair, gee whiz. I—all I can say to the member is if it's the worst pandemic we've ever seen, I'd agree with her. So why was she organizing a blockade, not in Atlantic Canada but right here in the Legislature, all spring and avoiding debating and promoting the issues that would have helped Manitobans through that pandemic?

There's a contradiction in her comments, Madam Speaker. It's pretty obvious. And the fact of the matter is that the member's vitriol could be replaced by being part of working towards the best interests of Manitobans in a time where they need help, but instead she chooses—she chooses the hurtful personal attack line, and I'm just the guy that can handle it.

I'd encourage her, though, to get with the facts, and the facts are these: she blocked this Legislature to obstruct the work of it at a time when Manitobans were facing the biggest threat in terms of a pandemic that they had faced in decades. That's the fact.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for St. Johns, on a final supplementary.

Ms. Fontaine: Suppressing protest and refusing to reel the—reveal the content of legislation will radically change education, child care and justice for Manitobans, raising Manitoba Hydro rates for regular families—all of this in the middle of a pandemic—that is what the Premier is doing. That's the mark of a Premier who thinks there is one set of rules for himself and one for everybody else.

Manitobans want leaders to be fully focused on fighting the pandemic, but this Premier clearly has other priorities, Madam Speaker. It's just egregious and wrong.

Will the Premier stop his plans to ram through his agenda in the middle of a global pandemic?

Mr. Pallister: Madam Speaker, I have stood by the rights of protesters to protest throughout my time in public service and before, and I will continue to. What is egregious is when the member conducts herself in a manner that disrespects those rights and freedoms, and I've watched this member do that.

I watched her do it by trying to shout down women—Indigenous women—testifying at a House of Commons committee on the issues facing—the challenges facing Indigenous women, when she was working for the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs. I watched her lead the shout-down to try to silence Indigenous women. That, Madam Speaker, doesn't

demonstrate anything but a crisis of principle on the part of the member.

And I would encourage the member that, really, this is an opportunity for her to rise above her own personal vitriol and join—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Pallister: —in the challenge, Madam Speaker, join in the challenge we must all face together of standing up for Manitobans, their freedoms and rights and their best interests, as well.

First Nations Communities Request for Pandemic Support

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): Once again, today, the Premier has complained—has claimed his government is powerless to deal with COVID. In a press conference he said, quote: All we can do is our absolute best to react and prepare to react.

But was does the government's own Office of Disaster Management say? I table it. It talks about prevention; it talks about preparedness.

Now, while First Nations chiefs have done an outstanding job of keeping their communities safe, this Premier's recklessness and incompetence has exposed them to pandemic.

Will the Premier actually step up and commit to resources, personnel to ensure that Manitoba First Nations get all the support they need to save lives, or will he do what the federal Conservatives did in H1N1 and send body bags?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): Well, that's a nice piece of evidence, Madam Speaker, that the member cares not a whit about First Nations people, but rather is trying to frighten the hell out of them, and that's so sad and so disappointing.

I have a call with the Prime Minister this afternoon to reiterate our concerns. One of them is about the resources we need to get rapid testing in greater numbers to northern communities. We've already advanced as much as we could to northern communities. More, I hope, will be coming in short order, but I would just encourage the member, these are horrible memories for Indigenous people, it's true. They are horrible memories for all of us who care about Indigenous people in northern communities. I don't think trying to score political points using body bags as a reference point is a very smart thing to do or a fair thing to do in this House. *[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Order.

Just a caution to the member on language, and I'm encouraging everybody to be careful in the words that they choose to put forward on the record.

The honourable member for St. Boniface, on a supplementary question.

COVID-19 Testing Facilities Access to PPE and Rapid Testing

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): Testing has been a huge problem, and so is getting people results of those tests. Just as nurses in hospitals are being denied access to N95 masks, so are people working in COVID testing facilities.

I table a poster of the required PPE for testing sites, where workers spend their days face to face in close contact with people who have COVID—no N95s.

Yet, right now film crews operating in Manitoba are tested two to three times a week with rapid tests that are available in hours, including the film crews who are working right now in this building.

Why don't people who work in testing clinics have access to PPE and rapid testing right now?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): Again, Madam Speaker, sadly, when there are genuine fears out there, the member introduces phoney fear to the mix for some undefinable reason.

We have N95 masks in surplus at this point in time. We're fortunate, too, because of the diligent work of our team of civil servants and led by our Health Minister and by our—the member for Brandon West (Mr. Helwer) in his ministerial capacity, and I compliment both of them for this.

We also, Madam Speaker, have ramped up testing significantly, as the member knows, and that adds to requirements that follow in terms of notification. He's quite right to point that out because that follow-up work is very important, and this is part of the reason that we did ask for Manitobans' help, for volunteers to come forward. There's a surge in need right now and we're asking Manitobans—they always have—to step up and join with us, join with our public service, work together. We're all Manitobans and I'd encourage the member to get on the team.

Children Aging Out Of CFS Care Call for Housing Support

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): Madam Speaker, it is cold and life-threatening to be homeless in Winnipeg in winter, especially during the COVID pandemic.

Special allowance money unjustly taken from children in care by the Province has made it worse. More than half of those experiencing homelessness today were children in care. Instead of sending children to homeless shelters when they age out of care, the Province should return the money stolen from these children.

When will the government return the money to these children so that fewer will be homeless, and when will the government act to provide hotel rooms for those experiencing homelessness so they don't have to sleep where they are at greater risk of COVID-19?

Hon. Heather Stefanson (Minister of Families): I want to thank the member for the question, and it gives me an opportunity to point out that those children that were aging out of care, we are—we put more resources there to ensure that they don't age out of care and that they have the resources that they need to move on and get the housing and get the supports that they need in a community. So we are doing that.

* (14:20)

With respect to the other incident—or, the other issue that the member mentioned, in terms of the children's special allowance, Madam Speaker, it was the previous—it was the practice of the previous NDP government that put that into place, and we have ended that practice to ensure that children in care get the resources that they need in order to get them back with their families, reunited with their families and to be able to stay with their families. That's the important thing here.

Threats to Moose Population Mitigating Population Decline

Mr. Rick Wowchuk (Swan River): It's hard to be a moose is a document that has received a great deal of attention recently.

Can the Minister of Agriculture and Resource Development share with the House what the main messages are and why it is important that all Manitobans take the time to read this important document?

Hon. Blaine Pedersen (Minister of Agriculture and Resource Development): I thank the member from Swan River for asking that question, and he certainly—I appreciate his passion for the moose population and I certainly appreciate and acknowledge his knowledge of the Duck Mountain and Porcupine mountain area. He has a vast knowledge of that.

There's critical threats to the moose populations right now: everything from parasites to predation, changing landscape, climate change and, of course, illegal harvest. And with this, we published an—a brochure that—it's called moose—Hard to Be a Moose in a Changing World. And I encourage everyone to have a look at that short document. It's really very explanatory.

Madam Speaker, it's important to realize we only have one moose population and we need one plan for the moose.

COVID-19 Case at Keeyask Generating Station Spread Prevention Across Northern Manitoba

Ms. Danielle Adams (Thompson): Madam Speaker, yesterday MKO and the four Keeyask-partnering First Nations sat down with Manitoba Hydro to discuss the current outbreak situation at Keeyask and to get details on the next steps and what plans are in place to get the situation under control.

Confirmed cases continue to rise. Sadly, it appears there is—no plan exists, and initiatives could be taken by this government to keep employees and neighbouring First Nation communities safe. The minister's failure to address the situation in an urgent matter will not only lead to terrible consequences for northern and First Nations communities, but the entire province's health system.

Will the minister declare an outbreak at Keeyask and immediately move it to code red?

Hon. Jeff Wharton (Minister of Crown Services): Again, the health and safety of the Keeyask employees and the surrounding communities has been and will continue to be our No. 1 concern, Madam Speaker.

You know, Madam Speaker, Manitoba Hydro continues to work closely with senior public health officials to ensure we get it right. And that's why—I'm not sure what call the member from Thompson's on but that's why, effective today, Keeyask is in code red.

Madam Speaker: I would just point out to members that are on the virtual component of our proceedings to indicate that no exhibits are allowed.

Even though you're not in the House, but—you are still part of the proceedings, and exhibits are not allowed at any level, whether it's here in the House or on Zoom. So I'd like to point that out for all members.

Time for oral questions has expired.

Speaker's Ruling

Madam Speaker: And I have a ruling for the House.

On March 2020, the honourable Official Opposition House Leader (Ms. Fontaine) raised a matter of privilege regarding the lack of access to the government's education review and report and claimed that this impacted the ability of the member to perform duties of reviewing government legislation and communicating information to constituents. The honourable member further contended that the government ministers were providing misleading information to the House.

At the conclusion of the remarks, the honourable Official Opposition House Leader moved, and I quote, that this matter be moved to an all-party committee for consideration. End quote.

The honourable Government House Leader (Mr. Goertzen) and the honourable member for River Heights (Mr. Gerrard) also spoke to the matter of privilege, which was then taken under advisement. I thank all honourable members for their advice to the Chair.

There are two conditions that must be satisfied in order for the matter raised to be ruled in order as a *prime facie* case of privilege. First, was the issue raised at the earliest opportunity; and second, has sufficient evidence been provided to demonstrate that the privileges of the House have been breached in order to warrant putting the matter to the House.

Regarding the first condition, the Official Opposition House Leader offered her opinion that the earliest opportunity does not mean the next moment in time when a member has the ability to speak as, in her view, members need time to consult relevant authorities or study various experts on the matter. Her opinion is not in alignment with the advice given by procedural authorities. Joseph—[interjection]—order, please.

Joseph Maingot states on page 260 of the second edition of *Parliamentary Privilege in Canada* that, and I quote, it must be raised at the earliest opportunity. Matters relating to the rights, immunities and privileges of members of the House are of such importance that the regular business of the House is put aside so that members may immediately discuss the matter. Accordingly, the other condition for raising a question of privilege is that it must be raised at the first opportunity. Members have been thwarted in initiating privilege proceedings because of not

bringing the matter forward at the first opportunity. End quote.

Bosc and Gagnon advise on page 145 of the third edition of House of Commons Procedure and Practice that, and I quote, the matter of privilege to be raised in the House must have recently occurred and must call for the immediate action of the House. Therefore, the member must satisfy the Speaker that he or she is bringing the matter to the House as soon as practicable after becoming aware of the situation. When a member has not fulfilled this important requirement, the Speaker has ruled that the matter is not a prima facie case of privilege. End quote.

If there was some contextual reason provided, such as needing to wait to see words in Hansard, past Speakers have taken this into consideration. However, the question of timeliness still needs to be an important criteria. There was no contextual justification provided regarding the issue of timeliness and being raised at the earliest opportunity, so I must find that the test of earliest available opportunity has not been met.

The honourable Official Opposition House Leader (Ms. Fontaine) also identified that, in her view, that the Premier (Mr. Pallister) and ministers providing misleading information to the House. But, as Joseph Maingot states on page 241 of Parliamentary Privilege in Canada, and I quote, to allege that a member has misled the House is a matter of order, not privilege. End quote.

In addition, previous Manitoba Speakers, including Speakers Walding, Phillips, Rocan, Dacquay, Hickes and Reid, have all ruled that in order to prove allegations that a member deliberately misled the House, it is necessary to prove that there was clear intent to mislead by knowingly making statements that would mislead. Therefore, the burden of proof is placed on the member to demonstrate this by absolute proof, including a statement of intent to intentionally mislead the House by the member so accused. Showing that some facts are at variance is not providing proof of intent to mislead.

Also, in the raising of the matter of privilege, the honourable Official Opposition House Leader advised that the privileges of the member had been breached because of lack of access to the educational review and report, which had the potential to impact information that would be shared with constituents. It is worth noting for the House that privilege only provides protection for proceedings or actions in Parliament and does not provide protection for an

outside activity such as communications with constituents.

In assessing the comments made by the honourable Official Opposition House Leader, the crux of the argument appears to be that the official opposition did not have access to an education review and report being prepared by the Department of Education. I would note for the House that, at the time of the raising of the matter of privilege, the report had not been publicly released and nor was there any official information advising that the review and report had even been completed and released.

While the honourable member may wish to have a copy of the report, parliamentary privilege cannot compel a review to be completed and reported on and publicly released. It would be a different situation if the report had been released and there was a refusal to table or share the report with the House, but that is not the circumstance faced in this instance.

I would therefore respectfully rule that the matter raised does not fulfill the criteria of a prima facie case of privilege.

* (14:30)

As a final comment, I would note that in the raising of this and other matters of privilege, the honourable Official Opposition House Leader has made the comment that her privileges have been molested. Although there is a heading in House of Commons Procedure and Practice that reads freedom from obstruction, interference, intimidation and molestation, this refers to attempts to obstruct, impede, interfere, intimidate or molest members in a physical sense.

I would respectfully ask the honourable member to be mindful of this, as her use of the word is giving the impression that she has been improperly interfered with in a physical sense. I hope this will never happen to her or any honourable member, and I would ask that care is taken in the use of the word.

* * *

Madam Speaker: Petitions?

The honourable member for River Heights. The member, please unmute his mic.

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): I won't be reading a petition today, thanks.

Madam Speaker: Does the member for Tyndall Park (Ms. Lamoureux) have a petition?

I'm in—I have been indicated, too, that there—that is a no, so I will move into grievances—or, are there any other petitions?

I will move, then, to grievances?

ORDERS OF THE DAY

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

House Business

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Government House Leader): On government—or on House business, pursuant to rule 33(7), I'm announcing that the private member's resolution to be considered on the next Tuesday of private members' business will be the one put forward by the honourable member for Selkirk (Mr. Lagimodiere). The title of the resolution is Inclusion of Sergeant Tommy Prince on the Five Dollar Bill.

Madam Speaker: It has been announced that—pursuant to rule 33(7), it has been announced that the private member's resolution to be considered on the next Tuesday of private members' business will be one put forward by the honourable member for Selkirk. The title of the resolution is Inclusion of Sergeant Tommy Prince on the Five Dollar Bill.

* * *

Mr. Goertzen: Could you please canvass the House for leave to alter the Estimates sequence for today only so that the Department of Economic Development and Training will be considered in room 254 instead of Executive Council from 4 'til 5 p.m.

Madam Speaker: Is there leave to alter the Estimates sequence for today only so that the Department of Economic Development and Training will be considered in room 254 instead of Executive Council from 4 'til 5 p.m. Agreed? *[Agreed]*

Mr. Goertzen: Could you please resolve into Committee of Supply.

Madam Speaker: The House will now resolve into Committee of Supply to consider Estimates.

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY (Concurrent Sections)

EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

* (15:00)

Mr. Chairperson (Greg Nesbitt): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This section of the Committee of Supply will now resume

consideration of the Estimates of Executive Council. As previously announced, as there is only one resolution, the discussion will proceed in a global manner.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): I just want to begin with a logistical question more than anything because I hadn't had the ability to co-ordinate this offline. But I understand that the Premier has an important forum—phone call in about an hour, and, you know, I do hope that that call leads to some good things for all Manitobans.

So I just wanted to check in and—because I do want to respect the First Minister's time and ensure that he has adequate prep time for the call, so would 45 minutes of questions here provide enough opportunity for him to set up for that appointment coming up?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): Yes, thanks very much to the Opposition Leader for that understanding, and I apologize for this interfering with our Estimates process. It's just—seems unavoidable. In any case, I share his concerns that we make some progress on a couple of fronts for sure, and I hope to be able to share some positive news with our—with my colleagues as early as the next couple days on a couple of fronts, some issues of—I know that we all support, that we want to see addressed, some federal commitments that had been made that have yet to be—things like that. So we appreciate—I appreciate your understanding.

I'll try to—it's officially 4:15. I do—I would like to—if I could have a couple of minutes to get away from the hustle and bustle and tension the Opposition Leader's about to cause me, to calm down a little bit before I take it all out on the Prime Minister, that'd be good.

I guess, seriously, if I could—I'll try to go as close as I can to 4:00, if that's okay with my colleagues.

And if I could, Mr. Chair, I neglected to do something yesterday and I want to address that. I didn't share with colleagues who is here in the room with me. Obviously, we had some limits to our technology. I wanted to do that.

I have the Clerk of the Executive Council and Cabinet secretary here, David McLaughlin. I have the associate clerk of the Legislature and reg. affairs and secretary to the Regulatory Accountability Committee, who has the longest title in government's history, Eliot Sims, with me. I also have my special

assistant, Braeden Jones, here, and, in addition, Ryan Klos is here, who is the assistant deputy minister for central finance and, as well, the member for the Interlake has joined us here in the room and is with us at this time.

So I hope that'll work for everyone, and again, I say thank you to all of my colleagues for accommodating the bit of a challenge here that we have today.

Mr. Kinew: All right, fair enough, and we'll just watch for the clock to strike four.

Just while we're on the subject of staff that works with the Premier (Mr. Pallister), could I ask the Premier to undertake to provide an org chart of the staff who work in Executive Council?

Mr. Pallister: Yes, certainly I will do that. I will undertake to do that. I appreciate—and I know the Opposition Leader didn't—and this isn't a criticism at all, but doesn't perhaps know how difficult it was to get information like that from a previous premier.

I'll just say this: Every year, I've undertaken to the best of my ability to provide all the information the member's asked for, and I'll keep doing that, and most certainly, I'll get him that organizational chart. I don't have everything that I would need to give him right here, or I would table it, I guess. But I can get him that in a reasonable period of time, I hope, and I'd be happy to do that.

Mr. Kinew: I thank the Premier for that undertaking, and maybe we'll start with a little less tension at the outset of today.

Just returning to the subject of the phone call, I'm just wondering if the Premier can tell us some of his goals and what does he hope to get out of this call with the Prime Minister this afternoon?

Mr. Pallister: It's like—reminds me of when I hitchhiked to university and back for a few years there, this technique we have to use to signal each other.

In any case, yes, it's—the call is centred on COVID-related issues, as the members might expect, although I do use the opportunity whenever I have it, in speaking with the Prime Minister and with our federal colleagues, to emphasize some other issues as well, and I may use the opportunity to present some of those.

I will, for the interests of members, certainly share with the PM our unanimous resolution today. I think that he needs to know that this doesn't need

to be—this support-for-health-care-across-the-country opportunity for his government doesn't need to be a partisan issue and, you know, it's supported by us here unanimously, with some absences duly noted.

That being said, it's also more than a sentiment. It's been adopted supportively by governments across Canada—and the territories, I might add, shouldn't forget the territories in this. And I would also say that opposition leaders—Mr. Singh has come out strongly in support of additional resources for the provinces, the official opposition leader Erin O'Toole has said the same thing, and so we know that the opposition parties are ready to step up and are supportive of our shared goals of strengthened federal support for health care.

This does—this is a critical issue, and it's one that I will use today's discussion, as I have over a number of years now, as an opportunity to reinforce that message and also the urgent and compelling need for us to have a meeting now. This is tough in COVID, right? We all know.

You know, knowing some of the MLAs whose faces I'm seeing here have a reputation for working pretty hard in their constituencies already, some of them very new. And they've done that in previous roles. As I look, the member for Fort Garry, (Mr. Wasyliv), I know that he was involved in the school board, worked for many years, as was the member for Wolseley (Ms. Naylor). In terms of community involvement, the member for Southdale (Ms. Gordon) has demonstrably made efforts. But in this COVID period, we all know that it's extremely challenging, right, to have gatherings of any size, clearly now that's impossible.

* (15:10)

And so, I'm concerned that, with respect to the proposal the premiers unanimously have agreed on, and I've asked for some time to be met by the federal government that—of a national meeting to discuss health care funding, that it's going to be difficult to have an in-person meeting, I know that.

And I'm worried in a way that these types of structures, as good as they are, as good as the tech is and so on, just aren't always as good as a good, old-fashioned face-to-face meeting. I think probably the members will know what I mean who have worked so hard to have those in their ridings, not just constituency work but consultation on a broader-based level. Really an important thing to do.

So, I cannot read my clerk's writing, and he's handing me a note, I'm going to hand it back to him. I'll just share that with my colleagues here.

So, there are just some thoughts. I think before this COVID thing hit us, we all knew that health care was a top priority. We all knew that.

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And now we know it's certainly in spades. And so, any weaknesses in federal-provincial partnerships are demonstrably exacerbated by the realities of what we're having to face now.

We've got hundreds of thousands of people across the country waiting for procedures that have been delayed. We all know it.

I certainly get correspondence all the time, and expect my colleagues do too, from folks who've had their surgery delayed, whether—it could be any number of things, and it's painful and it's hard for people to suffer that way. Those wait times have grown so much over the year or so.

I'll leave it to you, Mr. Chair. I know I'm at the end of my time.

Mr. Kinew: Thank you, Mr. Chair and I thank the Premier (Mr. Pallister) for that answer.

As we all know, the situation in Winnipeg, in particular, but Manitoba generally, has become quite dire with respect to the impact of COVID, both in terms of new case counts but also in terms of what's happening inside the hospitals.

And we've heard many concerning statements made by physicians and people who work in health care who are warning about what is to come in our hospitals over the next, you know, week or two.

So I'm just wondering, with that sort of situation in mind, can the Premier share, like, what sort of asks to respond to this immediate surge that we're seeing, this immediate second-wave impact from COVID, will he be asking the Prime Minister for?

Mr. Pallister: Yes. No. Thank you for the question.

Obviously, I'll start with what I hope is the beginning of greater hope for people and that would be the vaccine.

National vaccine preparedness is really, really critical, and we need a strategy nationally on this. And I'll dive into this a little bit because this is really, really

important. We've got so many vulnerable people out there who are praying every day for a vaccine to come, people whose families are so afraid. And the research is going on and, I mean, I can't say I'm on it every day, but I certainly am on it with regard to talking to Dr. Roussin and others in our medical advisory team that are giving us progress reports.

And we're all hopeful of a vaccine's development, but there are challenges with this, obviously, not just in the research side but let's go ahead for a minute and assume, as Dr. Tam has speculated on a vaccine's availability as recently as last Friday and said she anticipates there may be vaccine available to the tune of, I think she said, 2 to 3 per cent capacity, well, by the end of January, if I remember right, and I'm sorry I don't have the news article here, I'd share it with colleagues, but you know, 2 to 3 per cent availability, okay. So, imagine that in your constituency, that 2 or 3 per cent of your constituents might be able to get the vaccine. That could be chaotic, to put it mildly.

What we need to do here as a country is make sure that we're very, very clear, very quickly, very soon about what the criteria are for vaccine availability, because there's a lot of fear out there and it's not confined to 2 or 3 per cent of the population. We're not going to edify the fear by just making a vaccine available in 2 or 3 per cent of your constituents, and we know that. And so the reality is that currently we have to have those who are at highest risk and those on the front lines as a priority. I think all of us would concur with that. But then what happens as more becomes available? Then what's your criteria? Is it a—what's the federal government going to propose?

What I wouldn't—what I would not want to see, given that the federal government has basically prohibited us, blocked us—water, please—that the federal government has—there's—here—sorry, Braeden—right here—sorry, guys—that the federal government has blocked our ability to order vaccines and rapid vaccines. We all know that and there are arguments for that. I'm not a fan of that but that's what they've done.

They have to also take the ownership of the criteria. They can consult with provincial officials all they want, but what we can't have here is a bunch of provinces with different criteria going out there saying, well, we're doing it this way in Yorkton and we're going to do it this way in Russell. This is a recipe for confusion, potential tragedy. So I don't want to overemphasize this. I don't think I can.

It's really, really critical that we have a national strategy for vaccine availability that everybody can understand. It's not going to make everybody happy, but the fact of the matter is everybody will know that's the rules, that's the way it's going to be, coast-to-coast-to-coast. And I think this is something other premiers have agreed with, that we need to communicate to the federal government. And I need—I think it needs to get out there fairly quickly so people understand this is how it goes, this is how it's going to go.

Sure, we all sincerely hope there's a vaccine for everyone and not everyone will want a vaccine. We know there are some people who don't believe in vaccines in our province, but most certainly some estimates say 65 to 75 per cent of people would want a vaccine in Manitoba.

If that's the case, having a 3 per cent availability is a recipe for real problems, unless we make it extremely clear right away who is going to be able to count on getting that first and then having a criteria established thereafter.

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

So, I didn't answer every aspect. I tried to emphasize something I care about, I guess, there for colleagues, and I hope they think about it and give us their advice and thoughts on what we should do on this one. I appreciate, always, input from our MLAs, but I will say that, I'll share with you more germane to what the Opposition Leader had just asked me about other items, as well, here in a sec.

Mr. Kinew: You know, I would invite the Premier to continue.

Maybe he could also just answer: is this the sort of regular call that the Premier has—or that the Prime Minister has convened with all the first ministers across the country, or is this a one-on-one conversation that's happening today?

Mr. Pallister: Yes, this one is a one-on-one, I'll share with the member, and we have had numerous one-on-ones. I want to say that I thank the Prime Minister for his willingness to have that dialogue. We have had, just for example, yes, we've had a number of premiers' calls, you know, the conference call format that you're all familiar with. We've also had those just with premiers, clearly, as well, on an almost weekly basis during the entire time of COVID but the—but this Prime Minister has made himself available.

Look, we're all strong-willed people. We wouldn't be MLAs if we weren't. And as my grandfather used to say, if two people are always in agreement, it's pretty obvious one of them ain't doing any thinking. So we're going to have disagreements. That's an honest thing and that happens. I don't agree with the Prime Minister on everything. I'm sure he doesn't agree with me on everything, but he's been willing to have the dialogue and that's a really good thing and I congratulate him and thank him for that.

And so we have had very good, I think the more—and I think it's true in most relationships—the more that you can get to understand one another, the better chance that you're going to—you don't have to fall in love with each other, but you can understand each other and have more empathy towards what the other person is trying to accomplish. I've always believed that and I think that's an important aspect of what we've tried to do. Not just me but our entire Cabinet has endeavoured to reach out regularly and consistently to colleagues across the country, as well as experts in various fields.

* (15:20)

I'll say just three weeks ago we had another very productive one-on-one with the PM. It had to be. It was supposed to be face-to-face. As you colleagues remember, we were in Ottawa. Had to be shifted at the last minute and that was—if you remember, that was for good reason. I'm not criticizing the PM for shifting it to a virtual meeting.

It was a good meeting on a number of good topics. I'll just state that was the—three days after the report came out that Erin O'Toole had COVID. Premier Legault had had a meeting with Erin O'Toole. I had had a meeting with Premier Legault. Everybody was scared. Everybody was getting—you know, monitoring symptoms or getting tested at that point in time.

And so I'm defending, I guess, the Prime Minister—meeting with PM, very good; meeting with the Infrastructure Minister, very good, virtual as well. I'm looking to my clerk to remind me of the other—oh, Intergovernmental Affairs, Minister McKenna—Infrastructure. And colleagues will all know, very likely, what some of the topics were that were raised on each of those calls and each of those meetings.

In addition, we were able—I'll just elaborate on that bit because that was a really intense—about five days, about 15 meetings in that period, plus the national event with the other premiers where we pushed for the health-care motion, which essentially

is what we supported unanimously in the House the other day. And we met with senior think tanks, experts, conference board, national chambers of commerce, Canadian Labour Congress. I could go on.

Face-to-face meetings work better most of the time. Some day, maybe we'll get back to where we can have them. I hope so. I think we all hope so. More frequently would be better, you know, I think, to get our points across.

On this call—back to what the Opposition Leader was just asking me about—I'm very, very concerned and we all are, I think, about the situation with respect to northern communities and the northern communities' response, not exclusively First Nations communities—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: —thank you, Mr. Chair—is really important. It's a federal obligation there that we need to see addressed, and so we are very anxious to make sure that we're getting the message through to the federal government to step—frankly, step up their game in respect of First Nations supports, not exclusively on COVID either.

Lab support on testing, clearly, has always been a concern on an ongoing basis since COVID began. We're concerned about the accuracy. We're concerned about the efficacy. We're concerned about the turnaround times too. And I've got about three more items I'll share with the members that we're talking about today.

Mr. Kinew: I would welcome to hear about those three additional items, but I also want to put an item on the Premier's (Mr. Pallister) radar, maybe flag it for him and do so by way of a question, which is to ask whether the Premier is going to be raising, as a contingency possibility, with the Prime Minister about potentially activating the military to assist with the pandemic response here in Manitoba.

There's been a few situations in which this has been explained to me as potentially being beneficial. You know, to build off the Premier's previous answer, in which he spoke about, you know, the COVID response in northern First Nations, if hospitals in Winnipeg are at capacity, one solution that has been proposed by some folks in health care is, you know, that the military be brought in to help with some of the local response in some of those regions.

Mr. Pallister: There—can you guys hear me okay? No? Not getting through.

Mr. Kinew: You can't hear me? Oh, such a great statement. We'll have to restart it all.

Mr. Chairperson: We can certainly—we can hear you, First Minister. Can you hear us? [*interjection*]

The honourable First Minister, can you please mute your microphone? Can you please mute your microphone? They're trying to work out the technical difficulty here. Can you hear me?

The honourable First Minister, can you hear me?

Mr. Pallister: I do.

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Moses, this is the Chair. Can you hear us?

Mr. Jamie Moses (St. Vital): Yes, I can hear you.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you.

The honourable First Minister.

Mr. Pallister: You guys hear me okay now?

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, we can.

Mr. Pallister: Now? Okay, good, thank you.

Mr. Chairperson: I'll—

Mr. Pallister: Thanks, Mr. Chair, and—sorry.

Mr. Chairperson: —let the Leader of the Official Opposition (Mr. Kinew) finish his question.

Mr. Pallister: Oh, okay, sorry.

Mr. Kinew: So, he can hear us now?

Okay, well—

Mr. Chairperson: Yes. The Leader of the Official Opposition.

Mr. Kinew: Oh, sorry.

Yes, well, this is the new normal, as they say, and it kind of reminds me of my kids trying to explain TikTok to me, but c'est la vie, so we'll work along with it.

So the question I was just asking is whether the possibility of, you know, the military potentially being called into Manitoba, as a contingency—not saying, you know, that the Premier should ask for that today, but whether the Premier would just put that on the Prime Minister's radar should things, you know, turn out poorly in northern Manitoba or other regions where they may assist. Would that be a topic of discussion today?

Mr. Pallister: Well, I'd say it'd be a topic only of last resort. There's no disputing, though, that the military have lots of resources and there's precedents, clearly, here in Manitoba and elsewhere for calling upon military resources. As recently as a few years ago, I remember throwing sandbags somewhere along the Assiniboine River with military personnel during a flood, and there's probably a lot of Manitobans who have similar memories and similar appreciation, as I do, for great people, the great men and women that work in our military, and their willingness to come here and offer their support when needed.

So it's a backup. I'd say to the member, though, that the, you know, the efforts here, of course, that we're expending on our own preventative work that would make that unnecessary, one of the resources that we hope we don't need, clearly, would be, you know, backup military people in the testing facilities or in the ICUs and things like that. And the way to prevent that, of course, is more rapid testing capacity. We know that it's a real hardship on our front-line folks when they can't get a rapid test, because they'd like to be at work. I think of my friends who are nurses, men and women who are dedicated to the task of helping, and they're—when they get a symptom, they're very worried; they don't—so, clearly, they want to get a test, but if they go and get a test, then, you know, without rapid testing, they're waiting and they're off work a few days. And that's been happening, as we know, on the front lines not just at ICUs or emergency rooms, but elsewhere throughout our facilities.

* (15:30)

So rapid testing is a big deal and we have been pushing—as you know we did—and this is—again, I worry sometimes that we try to make a lot of things partisan, and I'm as guilty as anybody or worse, but I still think we try to make a lot of things partisan on health care that we shouldn't.

This is not a partisan statement. The feds wanted to co-ordinate stock, so they said—do you remember back in the spring when we were having trouble getting PPE? The feds said, well, don't worry; we'll look after it.

Well, it's a good thing that we didn't believe that, and it's a good thing we took immediate steps to go and work really, really hard to generate our own PPE. And we took those steps and it ended up, well, over half of our PPE came from Manitoba-made product, and a lot of it, also additional product beyond that, was

procured through Manitoba connections, not through the feds.

This is—again, I don't want to take this as a criticism of the feds, but when the federal government says they're going to look after it, it doesn't always work out quite that way.

So on the testing issue—rapid testing—they blocked our orders, and I'll be clear about when I say they blocked our orders what I mean is, they signed agreements with lots of producers of vaccine—rapid vaccine and other materials—antigens and so on, that those agreements were signed with the federal government.

And those companies, as part of those agreements, they blocked any orders under the agreements they made from sub-national governments, meaning us, okay. So provincial governments were not able to go to the same suppliers and say, okay, look, we understand that you've got a big order with the federal government here. Once you've satisfied that order, could we get into a line and we may need additional supplies, right, or backup in a variety of categories.

Our civil servants have been working very hard to try to procure additional supplies in many categories. We've succeeded to a great degree, thanks to the efforts of some really dedicated civil servants to get a lot of the PPE categories stocked up now. But it's on this rapid testing issue that we are very much, at this point, dependent on the federal government.

So I say that and I say, well, thank you to them for making available to us—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute.

Mr. Pallister: Thanks, Mr. Chairperson.

The Abbott test you're familiar with, I think. More reliable than some of the broader testing materials that—rapid testing materials that are out there. The Abbott test, we have 4,500 of those. Most of them we got in the last three or four days. All of that will be out in the next three or four days, and that's really good because the long answer to the member's concern is we do not want to run out of front-line personnel in any category, and rapid testing is a key part of making sure we keep our people safe and able to go back to work safely, protecting their, you know, their patients if it's a health-care institution, or clients if it's a personal-care home.

Really good progress there. More to be done and more of that on the agenda today, and I still didn't get

that other three items I'll share with my colleagues, but I'll do that, Mr. Chair, in a sec.

Mr. Kinew: So I just want to pick up on a few different things that the First Minister raised in that previous answer.

The first is really just more of a comment, and just to share this in good faith with the Premier (Mr. Pallister) about, you know, the potential for the military at some point to be deployed. Again, at this point, that's just a contingency option, and I take seriously that the Premier's comments suggest that that's at least, you know, some part of the conversation going on in government.

But I just wanted to just share with the Premier, in case he hasn't heard this sort of advice, is that from some people on the front lines of our health-care system, they do expect capacity to be reached within Winnipeg hospitals and across the Manitoba system over the next few weeks.

At the same time, we see outbreaks happening in other areas, particularly in northern Manitoba. There's some large First Nations, unfortunately many people there have to endure very poor living conditions, some of which, like the lack of housing and the lack of clean drinking water, will make it more difficult for people to self-isolate or to abide by the other public health recommendations that could help slow the spread of COVID.

And, of course, even if the majority of cases are mild in these communities, there will be some people requiring hospitalization.

And so it was suggested that, because the real bottleneck that we are looking ahead at, at hospital capacity in Manitoba is related to the number of people who can work in those hospitals, that if more cases arrive, whether from northern Manitoba or from other regions, that the military—on a contingency basis—being activated in that scenario could potentially help fill the need.

And I do acknowledge what the Premier said about rapid testing potentially allowing health-care workers to return to the job more quickly, and so I do take that answer seriously. So that was the first piece that I just wanted to share.

The second piece of that previous answer that the First Minister shared about was talking about attempting to procure protective equipment. Now, we did some back and forth with the Central Services Minister making some claims and then, eventually, I

believe it was one of the suppliers in question that contradicted what the Central Services Minister made there. So, trying to get at the heart of the matter here.

I would ask the Premier: Can he undertake to provide a list of the providers where the feds blocked our orders, in the words of the Premier?

Mr. Pallister: I've been trying—just trying to take some notes there to make sure I do justice to the issues the member raised, Mr. Chair, and I've—I have, I think, got a handle on three of the things he raised.

The first was in respect of the rapid testing and the reference to the military. The military is there as a backup. There is a danger in starting to talk about going to the military. There's a danger—the member knows this—in creating the sense that there's going to be a need for the military, when, in fact, the preventative work that's been done is making it less and less likely as we go forward.

With respect to the issues around the group—the incident command group—kind of misinformed. A couple of media reports today confusing the issue and I would clarify for our committee members: incident command is stood up when there's a lockdown. We stood up instant command, as you remember in the spring, restrictions—with tremendous work from a lot of people, including our caucus members, who worked very hard on protocol development in various sectors in the economy. That was a real good effort on their part, resulted in us being able, as the numbers began to flatten and then to drop, to start to allow businesses to reopen. And everyone remembers that and I hope everybody was happy about that because it got a lot of Manitobans the jobs back and their lives back.

But then it isn't like, well, there's no incident command so there's no leadership. And the important thing to understand here is that the provincial respiratory virus steering committee is the ongoing leadership group, that it was always in place before the command centre was activated after and that work all continued—so, most of the same people involved in that. So, I would just share that with members that that understanding be there, because the work of our leadership team in the health-care system and our, frankly, our executive leadership team at the Cabinet level, whether it be at the deputy minister level right up—all the way down was—never stopped—ever stopped. Work continued throughout the entire period, so work done on testing, on procurement, on nurse hiring, expansion of personnel, protecting PCHs—all of that work, all that planning continued.

The member asked about ICU specifically and I wanted to make an offer to he and all the members. The work in terms of the ICU planning, the capacity planning, the strategy there, the multi-layered planning that has to happen was months in the making and that plan is there. I would like to offer the—I'll—I will ask, on behalf of our legislators, that there be a briefing made available so that all members of the Legislative Assembly who are interested in knowing how that planning works—how that plan works, get a special insight into that. I think it would be helpful. It's a ton of work. I'm not the health expert, but I understand that it's incredibly complex, multi-layered work and I really respect the people that did the work.

So if I could just put that offer out there, I think that could be arranged maybe early next week. I shouldn't speak because it's not like these folks don't have other things on their plate right now, to put it mildly. But I think if we could get a briefing for the MLAs, I think that would be helpful, and that was the second issue the member raised.

* (15:40)

The issues around PPE, we'd have to get a list from, I guess that would be—is that—*[interjection]*

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: Yes, thanks, Mr. Chair.

I think we should be able to get that for the Opposition Leader, the list of people that we've asked so far who've told us no because they have the federal government blocking us is, I think, is to be clear, is I think what he's asking for, and it seems like it's pretty much all the major providers, not just on vaccines either, but on a number of other fronts.

We're, as I said earlier—I'm being blunt here—we're not happy about this, but this is the nature of what the feds have chosen to do. And I get that they did it for their own good reasons, but it does limit our ability to some degree to access, just to put it mildly, access additional resources we would all like to have to protect our people here in Manitoba.

I hope that was addressing—I may have missed one of the Opposition Leader's issues there, Mr. Chair, but I'll be happy to follow up with him as you wish.

Mr. Kinew: So I'll appreciate that undertaking on providing a list from Central Services, the department there, and also, you know, I would take the Premier up on the offer to have a briefing about the ICU capacity and the plans to flex that up. Yes, so schedules permitting, I guess we'll follow up off-line

on that one, and I do appreciate the offer. I'm sure many of my colleagues would do the same insofar as they'd take him up on that, and, yes, we'll just look forward to setting that up off-line.

When it comes to the incident command structure, what the Premier (Mr. Pallister) touched on there, can the Premier explain who is a member of that incident command structure and tell us who decides who is a member there?

Mr. Pallister: I want to do the member's—I'll undertake to do the member's request justice here, and I won't—I'm not going to try to impersonate a detail guy on this one except to say this, I'll undertake to get the member a detailed list of who is on these groups, but I'll simplify it in this way: incident command goes deeper. So, incident command would go further down the food chain, if you will. You've all seen in your Public Accounts books org structures in various departments and so on. The incident command will go down more into some of the specific areas, examples could be in the lab area or that type of—the ongoing respiratory virus steering committee structure is broad-based, includes all the same people. So it would be a subset, sort of higher up the food chain; it's the head people of the various—but when you get into incident command, you may go down further.

So, for example, the EMO, the Emergency Measures Organization, is part of the respiratory virus steering committee, but when you get over into the incident command side, may go down; there may be three people from EMO involved in that structure and that discussion. So one is a subset of the other.

This is why, for clarity, it's important to understand. When you expand to incident command, that doesn't mean there wasn't a structure in place between, you know, June and the end of September. Because there was, and there were lots and lots of people on it. But when you go into a pre- or during lockdown situation, then you go to incident command to expand down into the system to get closer, more immediate feedback more rapidly than would be the case with the simpler structure of the respiratory virus steering committee.

So I hope that—that's a layman explanation. I hope that helps. And I will undertake to give the member—members of the committee a complete list of the personnel involved in those calls.

I will also say, though, in addition to these calls, are ongoing consultative calls with our small business sector, our—I don't know, you can call it what you like,

enterprise sector. I forget what the exact name is. *[interjection]* This isn't what I need. But I'll get—I'll give you some examples in a moment when I can obtain them.

But I know that in terms of the representative group, it was close to 50 different employer groups. We'll go from chambers of commerce right over to manufacturers to business council to sector groups of various kinds. There are dozens of these folks who were on calls—most weeks throughout the entire COVID period, two calls, and then for a brief time I think in July there was one call a week, back to two now. These are consultative calls to get input: how's this working, what's going on, what do we need to do to improve things, what other suggestions or concerns do you have, that type of thing.

That's also going on on the economic side, if you will, while the health-care structure, which doesn't—I mean, they work in conjunction in a sense, but there are—they are separate structures.

In addition to that, of course, are almost daily ministerial calls with senior officials, as well, to make sure there are no silos existing here in government and that we're aware of what each other's doing and can complement and work effectively together across government. Those undertakings are on a very, very—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: —regular basis as well.

And I would also mention the tens of thousands of Manitobans who've been gracious enough to give us feedback on the website through EngageMB, Engage Manitoba site. You know, at every approach, every time that we've gone to a phase, we've floated it first with Manitobans to ask for their views, as you know, and then we—Dr. Roussin's done so, as we did last Friday, then Dr. Roussin sometimes comes in or I come in or the Health Minister; it depends. And we announce the actual plan, the actual implementation strategies.

But Manitobans have had a role in helping in that, and I wanted to thank Manitobans for that and say that's something I would encourage all MLAs to encourage their constituents to be aware of and to use as a vehicle for expressing ideas that will be listened to and respected.

Mr. Kinew: So, as we talk a bit more about the federal government and the provincial government's work together to try and help Manitobans through the pandemic, I'm curious to know about how some of the

programs to date that came as part of the Safe Restart Agreement, how those are doing?

So I'm wondering if the Premier (Mr. Pallister) can talk to us about, maybe starting with the testing, the contact tracing and data management aspect? I believe that the estimated amount for Manitoba was \$108 million. Can the Premier provide an update on how much of that money has been spent to date?

* (15:50)

Mr. Pallister: Because I'm going to go in a few minutes and I don't want to be, you know, harshly accused by the Opposition Leader of ignoring his requests here on agenda items, and I know he would never do that to me. I would share with him a couple of other things we're going to be talking about with the PM and then I'll go back to his questions in the time I'm allotted I, hope, Mr. Chair.

I mentioned the rapid testing, he had raised the issue—just waiting for the door to close here—that the rapid testing, he raised the issue of the military backup, that was in respect of, I think, more the ICU capacity as much as anything else; I think that's the concern. At least, from our end, that's one of the principle concerns. ICU overflow issues.

Red Cross, I should mention that one as well. Red Cross support for staffing. Isn't it StatsCan as well, eh? StatsCan, federal government offered us support for from Statistics Canada, this was more on the, I think, the bookkeeping side, but also in part it was, wasn't it on the tracing testing as well? So just to verify and clarify that the feds are forthcoming on those commitments they had made earlier, we'll be raising that. I mentioned the lab support for testing I think earlier, and the northern community issues. Those are ones. I try to stay focused on four or five key issues in these conversations with the PM because he's clearly got a lot on his plate, too. And these are—those are all priority areas, I hope the members of the committee would agree.

And I'll go a little faster on this one and just say to the member, I'll undertake to get him an update on where the money situation is under the Safe Restart Agreement so that he can actually see where we're at in terms of the accounting for additional federal supports. I would emphasize it's, you know, not to suggest anything but genuine desire to help is the motive of the federal government, but I have noticed, occasionally at least, tendencies for the federal government to want to get noticed when it spends money. I don't think that's unheard of or wrong, but I

would say it should be noted that, for example, I've mentioned on the education funding there was much hoo-haing from the federal government about supporting education, and we know that 97 per cent of our budget this year will come from Manitoba taxpayers and 3 per cent will come from federal government's fine generosity in adding to it.

So let's not be confused here about who's paying for this stuff. It is mostly Manitoba taxpayers. And that isn't wrong, but let's remember that the exceptional increases in our health-care budget under this government are being invested and supported by much, much smaller amounts coming from the federal government.

So, proportionately, basically, when the federal government has said they're giving us money for testing, we thank them, we appreciate that; it's a fraction of what we'll be spending. When the federal government says it's going to help us build capacity, thanks very much, we've been doing that, we were doing that long before you guys showed up and came over the hill acting like cavalry. And we appreciate and thank you for showing up with that additional mine, but it is not very much compared to what we're already investing, what we're committing to invest.

And as all members of the Legislature know, we've added significantly, as a consequence of COVID, to our spending commitment this year, of well over a billion additional spending just on health care alone. So the federal government's contribution is meaningful. It's appreciated, but, again, to put it in perspective, it's Manitobans. It's our constituents that are paying the freight for the vast majority of these things and I thank the federal government for supporting the effort.

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: So I'll be able to give the member a better breakdown—I can—thanks, Mr. Chair—I'll be able to give the member a more detailed breakdown. I'll just simply say in a general sense that the bulk of the money on health-care-system capacity's already been expended; that's about \$43 million. Vulnerable populations, I think that's all out; that's \$27 million.

And I mentioned we also did our own program, of course, for the disabled in our province that was well received and needed, that was more than this. Municipalities; that money's all been committed and out. All municipalities in Manitoba of interest to all our members will be in a surplus based on their budgeted projections and anticipated additional

losses and revenue at their end and so this is as a consequence in part of the basket funding we negotiated with the federal government and our commitment to maintain funding. City of Winnipeg will actually be in surplus this year.

Mr. Kinew: I do thank the Premier (Mr. Pallister) for undertaking to provide the update for the restart agreement funding.

I would note that he had an opportunity, I think, to touch on about three of the points. The one that I asked about I don't think he had an opportunity to touch on that yet, which is one of the ones that I think there was a bit of back and forth between federal Minister Vandal and this government which is the testing, contract tracing and data management. And then, of course, early learning and child care and then, you know, the sick leave, I guess, is a bit of a grey area there. So I do look forward to that undertaking and I do appreciate the First Minister's ability to provide an update there.

I also do want to thank him for sharing a bit of the agenda of what's going to be discussed on the call with the Prime Minister this afternoon. I anticipate that the Prime Minister's going to have his own agenda items and so whether all of these issues get covered off, you know, we'll look forward to that update from the First Minister.

If I could just extemporize for a bit before we adjourn this part of the Estimates committee, I do want to just share that when it comes to the vaccines, of course the federal government does have an important role ensuring that there's an adequate supply prioritized to those who need it most, be they vulnerable people or health-care workers who could benefit from it and I really do hope that we do get a vaccine that's safe and effective and that it gets rolled out quickly.

And I would just add that it's incumbent on all members of the Premier's Cabinet to send a strong pro-vaccine message out to the people of Manitoba. Unfortunately, we've seen some flirting with the anti-vaxxer movement which, of course, is counter-productive to our goals right now, and so we would hope that everyone can just band together and reiterate to Manitobans why it's important for us all to get vaccines, be that for the flu and then hopefully for COVID, should that become available.

Again, I spoke to some degree about the importance of preparing for what may be increased hospitalization needs for people in the North. So if,

you know, the northern communities point does come up, I would encourage the Premier (Mr. Pallister) to just send the message that, yes, all of Manitoba is concerned about that issue and we do want people across the province to be healthy. But, of course, I would hope that a Jordan's Principle kind of approach could prevail, which is that people get the health care when they need it and that the various levels of government worry about paying for it after the fact.

When it comes to lab support on testing and rapid testing, you know, I do think that that is another important area. We know that there are too many health-care workers, health-care-front-line heroes who are currently self-isolating or who are awaiting test results. We know that there's been some rapid testing capacity added in Winnipeg and so that has been welcomed.

But, again, any progress we can do to that would help to make a difference. And when we're talking about the ICU-overflow situation, I know that this week the Province started talking about a total of 80 beds. I've heard from some sources that, you know, we'd be able to increase that up to 100, giving the current space and ventilators and staff working across the province. But, hopefully, some of the resources that the First Minister may be able to acquire from the federal government would help us, be those human resources or otherwise, that that could potentially help us expand beyond that, potentially even maybe inviting health-care workers from other jurisdictions to come into Manitoba and help staff those additional ICU bed spaces.

* (16:00)

Mr. Chairperson: Order, please.

As agreed to today in the House, this section of the Committee of Supply will now move from consideration of the Estimates of Executive Council to consideration of the Estimates of the Department of Economic Development and Training.

Shall we briefly recess to allow the minister and critic the opportunity to prepare for the commencement of the next department?

The committee recessed at 4:00 p.m.

The committee resumed at 4:02 p.m.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

Mr. Chairperson (Greg Nesbitt): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. We will now consider the Estimates of the Department of Economic Development and Training.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Ralph Eichler (Minister of Economic Development and Training): I do.

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable Minister of Economic Development and Training.

Mr. Eichler: Twenty-twenty has proved to be a very challenging year so far for all of us as a result of COVID-19 health pandemic, and we truly appreciate the sacrifices Manitobans have made.

Our protecting Manitoba agenda includes five guaranteed commitments to protect Manitobans during the pandemic and see Manitoba prosper after the pandemic. One of those commitments is protecting jobs and restarting our economy with new investment as business supports to create even more new jobs. This includes look at—looking at the economic development landscape in our province, access to capital, tourism and incoming skills and talent knowledge strategy. *[interjection]* Having a few technical difficulties getting up and running here. Here we go.

Our restart Manitoba campaign focuses on the importance of public health fundamentals as we learn to live with and rebound from COVID-19. From the beginning of our recovery plans, we have targeted our restart Manitoba program with a focus on getting Manitobans back to work safely. Our government has committed to supporting businesses in our communities as we work to create jobs and contribute to the growth of our economy.

Our economic relief and recovery programs have included support such as conditional non-repayable loans, targeted wage subsidies, rent supports, deferred fees and interest rebates, infrastructure spending, as well as non-financial support. The Back to Work initiative, which provides private sector non-profit employers up to \$100,000 to subsidize up to 20 new employees to hire since July the 16th—this initiative was extended until December 31st and expanded to allow employers to rehire students that were previously hired through the Manitoba Summer

Student Recovery Jobs Program, Canada Summer Jobs program and Green Team program.

The Manitoba Job Restart program, which successfully supported the transition of over 4,200 people off the CERB program and back to work during critical phase 2 reopening of Manitoba's economy in late June and July.

The Province is also making an increased investment at \$5.7 million in the Canada-Manitoba Job Grant program for 2020-2021 to better assist businesses with staff training costs as they recover from COVID-19 pandemic.

In support of the tourism and hospitality sector, Travel Manitoba has engaged in a \$2 million campaign called Home is Where the Heart Is, safely marketing Manitoba to Manitobans and nearby jurisdictions when it's safe to do so.

Our government's COVID-19 recovery investments have supported business to create jobs and encourage employees to safely return to work.

Stats Canada released, in September, labour force numbers. I'm pleased to say that Manitoba is leading the country in private sector job recovery, the employment rate has dropped to 7 per cent from 8.3 per cent in August, and we have gained 15,100 jobs.

The Province is protecting Manitobans through significant investments that have supported students, including pausing repayment of student loans, providing wage subsidy programs to employers, creating incentives, and an online job-matching website that connects them to employers.

Nearly 2,400 employers applied to wage subsidy programs to hire nearly 5,000 students. To quote from one employer: The student wage subsidy program was a lifeline during the summer when many small businesses had difficulty applying for federal support programs. This resulted in Manitoba having one of the lowest youth unemployment rates in all of Canada.

These students were able to make money to help them finance their education, at the same time gain valuable work experience. We are protecting access to post-secondary education by helping students get student loans and bursaries. This is especially important for those experiencing financial hardship due to COVID-19 pandemic.

We have made \$15 million investment in a Manitoba Scholarship and Bursary Initiative, which will match funding raised by our partners dollar for

dollar and provide \$30 million to students in scholarships and bursaries.

We have also increased the Manitoba bursary by \$1.8 million, providing upfront grants of \$2,000 to low-income students and an additional \$1,500 to Indigenous students.

We are taking steps to protect Manitoba's financial future by ensuring predictability and stability in funding our post-secondary system.

We are working closely with our post-secondary institutions to make sure they have the funds to adapt to new ways of learning for students and adjusting to labour market needs.

A strong and responsive post-secondary system especially is essential in our recovery, which is why we established a \$25.6-million transition support by moving money away from the planned regulatory 1 per cent budget reduction to operating grants. The fund will help post-secondary institutions respond to the challenges in building on opportunities that have come from the pandemic, including developing new online materials and tools, shifting programming where there are available jobs, and help dealing with other unanticipated challenges.

We are protecting Manitoba's future by addressing today's priorities. People are Manitoba's greatest strength, and new immigrants make Manitoba even stronger, enriching our culture, filling job needs and increasing new ones for themselves and others. Immigration is a key driver of our economic growth, a way to address targeted labour market needs and a gateway for innovation in our economy.

Manitoba's Provincial Nominee Program ensures the province continues to attract skilled workers and entrepreneurs with the potential to make the strongest contributions to our economy soon after arrival in Canada. Once our borders reopen, we'll be ready to welcome new immigrants into our province.

Manitoba's economic response to the pandemic has been shaped by input from frequent and regular discussions with stakeholders to protect Manitobans during this unprecedented time while built in our pandemic responses in a way to help working Manitobans take full advantage of the federal programs by tailoring strong provincial supports to dovetail with those federal programs.

*(16:10)

Our approach is working. More than 85 per cent of Manitobans who lost their jobs in March and April

have been rehired, making our unemployment recovery rate the best in Canada. I want to say that it's been an honour to represent our government in Economic Development and Training. It's been a rewarding almost a year now since my anniversary. In fact, it was October the 23rd.

So, we've had some challenges and I'm looking forward to getting into the Estimates process with my various critics, whether it be post-secondary, economic, immigration, tourism, et cetera.

So I'll close with my comments there, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: Does the official opposition critic have any opening comments?

Mr. Jamie Moses (St. Vital): Yes.

Mr. Chairperson: The member for St. Vital.

Mr. Moses: Thank you to the minister and the staff for taking the time today to meet with us and discuss the various issues. I think it's important that we sit down and do this and discuss how we can go about making sure our economy is thriving as much as it can be throughout this recession and pandemic that we're all facing.

And I think that's one of the critical parts to remain focused on is that the economy that we're in today is drastically different than it was a year ago when you took the role, as you mentioned your anniversary. And so I'm well aware that any plans that we would've—that you would've had for our economy and your job in, you know, creating jobs and growing business in our, in Manitoba, would be—you know, you should have a different approach than you did when you initially took on your role.

And I think that would be very appropriate because we're in a—we're right now living in a world with higher unemployment than we had last year; more people who are looking at, you know, desperate financial circumstance—personal financial circumstances, whether it's a loss of jobs, difficulty with affordability.

There are so many challenges economically and that is leaving out the fact that small businesses have been struggling recently with regulations, closures. And even this week going into the new code red restrictions, I think small businesses are facing even further pressure.

And as the Economic Development Minister, you should be well aware that these issues are—shouldn't be taken lightly. And, you know, I would hope that as

we go through this discussion we have, you know, strong awareness that we are in a different time and it needs to be attacked with a different approach, a new and an innovative approach in helping people through their difficulties, helping to bridge businesses 'til the end of our session, and ensuring that Manitobans can get this—through this as healthy and as safely as possible but also on the best financial and economic footing as possible.

So I'll conclude with that and I look forward to our time discussing today.

Thank you.

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

Does the committee wish to proceed through the Estimates of this department chronologically or have a global discussion?

Mr. Moses: I suggest a global discussion.

Mr. Chairperson: It has been suggested that we proceed with a global discussion. Is that agreed to? *[Agreed]*

Thank you.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Moses: I do want to begin with just simply touching on some comments that were made earlier today and announcement from the Premier (Mr. Pallister) as to calling on Manitobans to do some volunteering—specifically, volunteering when it comes to—in the health-care services or helping out in the ways they can in terms of the pandemic.

Now, we all know that, you know, Manitobans have a great spirit of volunteerism, and I think that's something that we all should be very—we should commend our citizens for that.

However, from an economic standpoint, I think we all know the value of adding jobs to our economy. And so if the Province is looking to get work done, wouldn't it serve our economy better to actually be increasing employees, even if it's on a temporary basis, so that money can get flowed through our economy and actually give people the enhanced financial benefit of working instead of just simply volunteering?

Mr. Chairperson: Could we ask the honourable minister to indicate by a raised hand when he's ready to respond?

Mr. Eichler: I'm getting used to this mute button.

It's interesting. Manitobans have, as the member opposite said, been very good at not only donating their time and their money, but their skills. And not everybody is in—to the point where they want to go back to work either part time or full time, but make a contribution and feel part of the solution when it comes to giving back and helping fight this pandemic. So I see nothing wrong with volunteerism. It's something that just comes natural for Manitobans, something that's been bred into our generations from generation to generation.

And I know in my family, my family donated time many, many times—not only their money but their time—to various things. And I never want to take away that for Manitobans, and nor would I. But I know my children do the same thing and my grandkids have done the same thing, especially during COVID. They feel that responsibility, that commitment in order to help other Manitobans. And quite frankly it instills the confidence in Manitobans that others are prepared to step up will have to be paid for it to do it.

So—but, you know, we're open to hiring folks too. We will be doing, similar to what we did with the COVID testing. We partnered with Red River College in order to ensure that folks have the right skill set to work in, whether it be the testing or the labs or others, in order that we have the skill set that we need.

So, yes, we'll be looking at all those things, but I, for one, will be ensuring that volunteerism stays alive and well in Manitoba while still creating jobs and economic growth within our province of Manitoba.

Mr. Moses: Thank you for that, minister.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to ask just to follow up on that a bit and say that we all know that volunteerism is very important in our province, and I think if you go to any community centre and ask them if they need to volunteer—need volunteers, they'd say yes. If you go to any church group—there's so many not-for-profit that are looking for volunteers. And I think there's many Manitobans who give up of their time.

The issue isn't that we need to encourage more volunteers. There are opportunities out there. The province—the problem is that we need more jobs in our province. This is an opportunity to pay Manitobans for

work that the Province is seeking and actually recycle some of that money to grow our economy.

By not doing so, is this a missed opportunity to actually grow our economy in Manitoba?

* (16:20)

Mr. Eichler: Mr. Chair, thanks for the question.

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable First Minister—oh, sorry, the honourable minister.

Mr. Eichler: That's a—that could be a position replacement for the Chair. No, just kidding; you're doing a great job.

Thanks for the opportunity to talk about this a bit more. You know, I—and like I said earlier on, I'm very much in favour, and the member talks about church groups. I know within my church group, we have volunteer cleaners; we have people that come in and make sure everything's sanitized. And there's a lot of opportunities for Manitobans that just feel the need that they want to do that.

Now we are listening to Dr. Roussin. We want to ensure that we have the protections in place, but, really, we have created a lot of jobs with our job program where we offer up to \$5,000 per employee, up to 20 employees. We have several businesses that have taken advantage of that, and they will take advantage of that; however, government will not be taking advantage of our own programs because that's not how it works. This is made for employers to create jobs, and certainly we'll be doing that, and we have been doing that. I know that when talking to businesses, they don't use that up-to-\$100,000 just for wage salaries. Some of them use it for PPE equipment; some use it for renovations. Some are using it to upgrade their restaurant or their business in order to ensure there's better, safe working conditions.

So the list goes on and on, but, yes, we understand that we want more jobs for Manitobans, and as I said earlier on in my opening comments, you know, just for the previous month, 15,100 new jobs speaks loud and clear that Manitoba's open for business. And we'll continue to work with business in partnership and non-profits in order to ensure that we have people getting back to work in a timely manner. And a lot of folks are working from home, and that's fine too, but that has a small ripple effect on our restaurants downtown, others that rely on that walk-up traffic. So it's a fine blend. It's an opportunity for us to make sure we get it right, so, really important.

I know our unemployment rate is at 7 per cent currently. On a national level it's 9 per cent, so Manitoba's doing okay, but we can sure do better, absolutely.

Mr. Moses: All right, so I'd like to ask and switch over a little bit to the Manitoba Restart Program, and if it's easier for the minister, I could—I'm looking for just some, you know, some facts and figures, information. Maybe it's easier for him to provide these to me, you know, endeavour to provide these to me at a date with—I'm looking for, you know, the budgeted amount and the actual spent amount for some programs, such as the Summer Student Recovery Jobs Program, with, you know, non-for-not-for-profits, as well, Manitoba gap program, Manitoba Job Restart program, risk recognition, commercial rent 'assints'—rest—rent assists and, you know, their event attraction strategy.

You know, if he—if we, you know, the minister could provide budgeted amounts to date, as well as actual spent amount to date for those items, either now or he can endeavour to provide those to me.

Mr. Eichler: Yes, our programs are very full. The timelines, some have lapsed but all the funding hasn't actually flowed. Multiple programs are still in place 'til December 31st.

What we will do is endeavour to get a most up-to-date numbers for the member, in order to ensure that he has the same data that we have, and as we talk, applications continue to come in on a regular, daily basis: people applying for funds; new businesses that are just starting up, trying to figure out what they can apply for, and also what it means—and with the federal programs changing on a daily basis—has a ripple effect on our programs, too.

So we will get the numbers for the member and will email them to him within the required time, if not sooner than later, so he has that good information.

Mr. Moses: Thank you. I appreciate the minister's efforts to send me that information. That's—would be much appreciated.

Looking at a couple of those specific programs—looking at, for example, the—sorry, I want to just touch on the ad campaign, when it comes to, you know, the Ready. Safe. Grow. campaign and wanted to touch on the allotted budget that that was allotted for that and how much of that has been spent. I wanted to talk about that one specifically and whether it was, when it was rolled out and continues to roll out now—be used now, you know, if the minister feels that that was and

has been an appropriate, you know, use of government resources throughout this pandemic, as we've seen increasingly high numbers over the last several weeks to have that message: ready, safe, grow out there with millions of dollars spent on campaign.

So I just wanted to just talk about the budget for that and then the minister's thoughts on that program, in light of recent COVID case numbers.

* (16:30)

Mr. Chairperson: Just a reminder to all members of the committee, if you choose to talk on your phone during this committee hearing, you should turn off your video, please.

Mr. Eichler: I thank the member for the question.

Our Province is committed to ensure the safety and healthy throughout the pandemic and provides access to healthy, safe resources. The restart Manitoba campaign focuses on the importance of public health fundamentals as we learn to live with and rebound economically from the pandemic.

It's imperative that we work with the information that employers and individuals need to safely do their business, return to work and move across the province confidently and safely. Restart Manitoba allows us to do that. This also has a lot to do with Shared Health, so it's a program that's going to help us make sure that not only the employees are safe, but also their customers and others that feel safe.

And that's really what we've been trying to do is 'calk' about the confidence that Manitobans need, whether it's the employee, the consumer, the customers, whatever it needs to do to help us restart our economy but in a way that's going to be safe. And that's been paramount through our Throne Speech, through the whole pandemic is that how do we protect Manitobans first and foremost.

Mr. Moses: Thank you for that.

I was also hoping to receive the amount spent for that, so maybe in the minister's next opportunity he can provide that information. I believe it reported in August that it was around \$425,000. I assume it's at least above that at this point, but wanted to get the minister's confirmation on that.

Additionally, I did want to ask about another program that the minister is looking at. And that's the, you know, even the rewards—Risk Recognition Program. You know, we know that that was a program that was offered back in the spring, early summer, for

essential workers. Right now we're in the thick of the pandemic. Essential workers have never been working harder than they are right now.

So is this something that the minister is looking at bringing back to show their appreciation for the extremely hard work that essential workers are doing today, this week, during the height of the pandemic?

Mr. Eichler: I thank the member for the question.

I can confirm that the original budget amount was \$425,000 for that program. We will confirm how much is spent to date when we get back to the member on the others. We don't have that at this point in time.

On the rewards risk program, that was run through Finance, so we have no data on that particular program. I would suggest that the member ask his critic for Finance to take that question forward through them as we don't have the data because it's not our program.

Mr. Moses: Thank you for that.

I also wanted to know, regarding the gap program, Manitoba gap program, whether you had data on how many businesses have actually received money from that program.

Mr. Eichler: Mr. Chair, I regret to have to do this again, but, again, that program was run through the Minister of Finance department. I don't want to put false information or, you know, unrealistic numbers on the record because I don't have them. But, again, I would suggest the member or the critic for Finance ask the Minister of Finance (Mr. Fielding) those questions. And they're ever-changing as well.

But I can tell you that as the Minister of Economic Development and Training, we did have a lot of folks that reach out to us and say thank you, we really appreciate that; even though it was \$6,000 in the gap program. For business it didn't seem like an awful lot of money, but for a small business it did a lot. And that was in the—managed of a line. It did not have to pay that back. It was a loan, non-repayable loan that was available for business.

But, again, that—that program was run through Finance.

Mr. Moses: Well, I would like to know—two parts—is that (1) I would like to know how many small businesses have actually closed down and shut down or had layoffs. I know that they—certain businesses do report their layoffs and their closures to the minister, so I wanted to get a report on that.

* (16:40)

But furthermore, we've heard many reports from media in the past few days as we've come into this code red, and they've used terms such as, small businesses are facing, you know, a long cold winter, you know, facing the weather indoors under code red restriction. And these small businesses are looking to get assistance.

I'm wondering whether the minister is considering proposing additional financial supports for small businesses in light of the recent code red put on, and again, the first part of that is to talk about the—how many businesses have actually shuttered already in 2020.

Mr. Eichler: I thank the member for the question.

As far as the business closures is concerned, we don't have that data yet, it falls underneath Finance, under the Employment Standards area. Layoffs and those enclosures are reported to Finance first. We hear rumblings about businesses closing; however, we don't have enough data on it to give the member the right information.

So, again—but in regards to our programs, Premier (Mr. Pallister) has been very clear, and from my stakeholder's calls that I've had with the various stakeholders—we've had 47 calls with the stakeholders, listened to their concerns, what programs are working, what programs are not. As the Minister of Economic Development and Training, we have a pipeline, if you will, to the federal government to provide feedback to, whether it be Minister Joly, Minister Ng, Minister LeBlanc, in order to reach out to them on weekly calls, I might add.

Up until just recently, with Minister Joly we were meeting on a phone call once a week, and she wanted that feedback just like we do: what's working, what's not working, how do we make it better, and then us as a Province, how do we fill the gap, fill the hole that we need to fill in order to make sure our businesses stay open and stay profitable and stay there for the long term?

So, we helped through a number of our programs, to hire youth and students.

Code red has added to our challenges.

We are acting under the health system and we have to make sure that when we look at these programs, that actually our businesses can qualify for Manitoba programs, federal programs so they're not seen as double dipping, if you will. A lot of the

employers in the province of Manitoba have taken advantage of the wage subsidy program, which is 'diminutive'.

Also, those programs change on a regular basis. For example, a business had an opportunity for a \$40,000-loan from the federal government, of which \$10,000 was forgivable and the money had to be paid back by December 31st of 2021. Just recently, as of last week, there was an additional \$20 million that was added to that to raise it to \$60,000 and another \$10,000 of non-repayable.

So really critically important that when we meet with business, when we talk to business, that we understand the impacts that it has on our business. And so it's not just all about Manitoba money, it's about federal money; making sure they get the right program for them. And that's what we've been trying to do to get through on these calls with our stakeholders: really, what is it that we need to focus on?

For example, the rent assist program, the first one was a complete failure. We could not bring anything together that was going to be substantial to assist our businesses. But I have to say that the federal government did listen to us and other provinces as well. This is not just Manitoba talking. This is all provinces talking with our federal colleagues.

So whether it be NDP government in BC or us here in Manitoba with our government or Alberta or others, but certainly we listened and they listened and tried to adapt—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Eichler: We tried to adapt these programs to make sure they are sustainable for our business in the long term, so we have the confidence for the employees and for the employers going forward.

Mr. Moses: So having said that, I can assume that since the minister didn't clearly outline anything that I should assume that there's no new programs coming in, even though businesses face a very difficult time over the next, certainly, few weeks under our code red situation.

But furthermore, to your comments about consultation, I did want to ask specifically about the opportunities—Economic Opportunities Advisory Board, whether we can get a list of participants and members on that board, and also any meeting minutes just so that we can get a scope of the type of

consultation that the minister is having with regards to decision-making on programs.

The other question that I want to ask is in regards to the minister's comments about, kind of, double-dipping of programs, federal and provincial, and why the minister thinks that is a considerable—an issue, right. I think every economist would say that during a recession you want to bring as many dollars into economy as possible.

And so where, really, does the minister's concern come in with double-dipping a program—of programs? If we can get more money into our economy, why wouldn't the minister be in favour of that?

Mr. Eichler: I'll give the member an example. Federal programs are very complicated. Our programs are fairly simple.

When a business applies for a \$6,000 gap program, it makes them ineligible for the 40-to-60-thousand-dollar loan program where they would get—if they borrowed the \$60,000 from the federal government, they would lose that \$20,000 benefit by taking \$6,000. So that's why it's important to understand the programs and business has to understand the programs so it don't make him ineligible for the funding that they might be able to get federally.

* (16:50)

So when we look at this we've got to make sure we're giving them the right advice. A lot of them don't have full-time accountants. A lot of them are small mom-and-pop businesses that could take advantage of these programs, and then there's others that are larger firms that can afford information. So when COVID first broke out and the federal programs started to get to where they were meaningful for a number of our businesses and we restarted our economy, we actually contracted with 24/7 to help us reach out because there was a number of businesses that really wanted to give some help and make sure that they got the right programs to match their business needs.

So these businesses that got the wage subsidy or the \$40,000 loan or the rent assist that didn't work, all these programs are interconnected so that's why it's important. I'll share with the member that it's not so much about double-dipping; it's about making sure they get the right program to help them stay strong and keep their employees employed and make sure when these other programs come out that they're eligible for them by not having a program as a provincial fund as opposed to that of a federal fund. So it's just not

allowable and we want to make sure businesses have the information they need to be most beneficial for them.

Mr. Moses: I also wanted to ask or I did ask about the Economic Opportunities Advisory Board in the last question.

So, wondering if the minister can provide a list of participants, members of that board, and any minutes that would provide us a example the advice the minister's getting as to new programs.

And that leads me to my next question is that, the minister's mentioned this a couple times that he's consulted with many businesses and looked at ways programs can be tweaked or made better, you know, and we've had the benefit of several months of being in this pandemic. We know what it looks like, and we're learning that and we've seen what it's done. But we haven't really seen new programming come out to assist small businesses in several months.

We haven't seen new financial supports for small businesses or individuals, and I'd like to know what the minister has been doing with some of this consultation, whether the minister is actually going to bring in new programming to support small businesses since that now we've had several months to be in this pandemic, and we're looking at being in a code red situation here in Winnipeg.

Mr. Eichler: I'm trying to be able to respond in a very quick manner to help my colleague from St. Vital.

The Premier's (Mr. Pallister) advisory committee was established on May the 13th. There was a document that's public information. I won't take time to read it all, but it's certainly there. If he has trouble finding it, send me an email; we can send it to you, but it's public documentation. So that's easy enough.

In regards to our stakeholders and the consultation, I won't share the list with him, but it's almost every sector, whether it be the Manitoba chamber, Winnipeg chamber, Manitoba heavy, the list goes on and on, but it represents hundreds of thousands of employees across the province. And when we talk about these programs, we need that feedback to try and make those programs better.

Coming back to what I talked about earlier—whether it's a federal program or a provincial program—we want to make sure the businesses in Manitoba have access to these programs. So, if they're not working, let's tweak them so that make sure they do work. And this is why it's critically important to

have these relationships with the business sectors, and I can tell you that they're not shy in sharing their information that what's working and what's not, so we'll continue to do that.

As we start to look towards Christmas, I know it's really important. I still get calls on a daily basis wanting to know what programs are out there. A lot of them are understanding it, but yet they still don't understand the programs. So as we ramp up for Christmas, we have applications still going out each and every day for businesses wanting to hire people back, hiring students back that's on the programs, those that went to—through the summer jobs, hiring them back to work in stores getting ready for Christmas.

So we'll continue to work with business to make sure our programs meet their needs now and into the future.

Mr. Moses: I'll ask this just again quickly, and then I'll pass any time I have over to the member for St. Boniface (Mr. Lamont).

Just want to kind of find out again from the minister, you know, we've been several months without a new—significant new program or new set of dollars for small businesses. They've been through a lot over the last few months and continue to be so and even more so now.

With that consultation is the minister looking at supporting and providing any financial supports? Whether it's through rent, whether it's direct financial supports for small businesses, whether it's even helping them with getting supply of PPE, these are all be things that I've talked to businesses that they would appreciate directly from the—from our provincial government.

Is the minister looking at doing any of these that would actually help small businesses in the short term weather the storm of being in a code red?

Mr. Eichler: Thank the member for the question.

We've expanded our wage subsidy program now not once but twice. We may well expand it again. What it is doing is helping people get their lives back; it's helping small business to address the cash flow demands. They've been paying 50 per cent of their salaries of employees, up to 20 employees, up to \$100,000 available for small business. The qualifications are not hard to satisfy, and the approval rating happens quite quickly so that businesses can

have the confidence to get people back to work and new employees started.

Also, in regard to training, we, through my department, has federal dollars that will help employees; they'll get back to work. We can help with those training dollars to ensure businesses have the right dollars in—allocated to them to train their employees to make sure they're not only safe, but in compliance with the regulations that we need.

Also, the elimination, or part of the elimination, of the education tax on property—we made that very clear that the education tax on property will be eliminated as we go forward—that'll help them.

Also, we need to make sure that these supports are there when they need them. Not everybody is in the—at the same time in the same place. So, as the member opposite talked, lot of small businesses are struggling; other small businesses are doing very, very well. So it's making sure we have the support for business at the right time for those businesses so they're able to be sustainable long term.

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): Yes, I just want to say that I think this was a—as big a waste of everyone's time, as it was of mine. The answers are absolutely pathetic. The fact that you're gutting post-secondary, you're—

Mr. Chairperson: Order.

The hour being 5 o'clock, committee rise.

CROWN SERVICES

* (14:50)

Mr. Chairperson (Andrew Micklefield): 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 Crown Services. As previously agreed, questioning for this department will proceed in a global manner.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Adrien Sala (St. James): I'd like to just launch right into some discussion around Manitoba Hydro International, and hoping to start off with having the minister describe how much profit was earned by Manitoba Hydro International for Manitoba Hydro over the past four years.

An Honourable Member: Hi. Thanks, everyone. I apologize—

Mr. Chairperson: Minister. *[interjection]* Minister, I have to recognize you for the sake of Hansard before you can speak, so—*[interjection]* No problem.

Honourable minister, go ahead.

Hon. Jeff Wharton (Minister of Crown Services): Mr. Chair, thank you so much. I apologize.

We're working diligently here to provide the member from St. James with the—those numbers and he has asked for four years and we're going to be able to do that. We ask the committee for a little bit more time.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you, minister. Just let me know when you'd like to speak.

* (15:00)

Mr. Wharton, can I ask you a question for clarity?

Mr. Wharton: Certainly.

Mr. Chairperson: Are you presently endeavouring to get those answers in the next few moments or are you requesting a longer amount of time—maybe a couple of days—to get back to the member for St. James?

Mr. Wharton: No, thank you. No. I'll clarify, Mr. Chair. We're endeavouring to get that answer for him right away. Give us another minute and, if not, we'll certainly move on to the member's next question, if that's acceptable.

Mr. Chairperson: I think the member's—*[interjection]*—I think there's a desire from the member to proceed with another question. So, minister, I'll give you 30 seconds or so and then if there's an answer forthcoming, that's terrific, and after about that amount of time I'll let the member proceed with another question.

Mr. Wharton: We do have and will endeavour to get the other two years, but we do have fiscals '19 and '20 available right now, and the department is working on getting the other numbers for the member of St. James.

Right now, we're looking at a consolidated net income in 2019 of \$118 million, and in 2020, \$99 million, and that's in consolidated net income.

Mr. Sala: I thank the minister for the response and I look forward to clarity on earnings in prior years.

I know that the minister is likely aware that Manitoba Hydro International does incredible work, world-class work, and that they've got experts in their fields with knowledge that really doesn't exist in many

other places, as can be told by their incredible contracts that they get all around the globe.

And I'm hoping the minister can comment on his perspective on the value of Manitoba Hydro International specifically.

Mr. Wharton: So, a little bit of a technical difficulty—I missed the last part of that question. It went blank. So could he just repeat the last part of the question please?

Mr. Sala: Gladly. I was just looking for the minister to comment on his perspective on the overall value of the work that MHI does.

Mr. Wharton: I thank the member from St. James for that question and, you know, with a business background—as the member shares, of course, maybe not quite as long or in depth as my career—think that from time to time, our corporations, our businesses, whether it be public or private sector, are in need of a review, simply because of changing times.

And speaking of changing times, we know where we're at with COVID right now, and they change not only by the day but by the minute, I would argue. However, that being said, certainly the member is aware that Manitoba Hydro and the Manitoba Hydro board commissioned a report of their entire operation with a scope of ensuring that they're meeting not only the needs of Manitobans today but the needs of Manitobans for generations to come.

And, certainly, the member would agree and probably commend the fact that they are taking a look at the future of Manitoba Hydro, which includes their subsidiaries like Manitoba Hydro International. So, good for them. We—certainly, we support their initiative, this initiative that was first started by—it was started by Manitoba Hydro and continues to be the focus of Manitoba Hydro's plan going forward to ensure that, as we talked about yesterday, that Manitobans are protected, whether it come to rates or other aspects.

So, certainly, we support that ongoing review, and we look forward to working collaboratively again with all aspects of Manitoba Hydro to ensure that Manitobans are protected and the rates that they currently enjoy will continue to be enjoyed for generations to come.

Mr. Sala: In an internal memo for Manitoba Hydro International, staff were told for the period from September 2nd to October 7th to not aggressively

pursue new work, actively pursue bids or seek out new customers.

Could the minister please explain the rationale for that direction? What was the onset, and how was that timeline determined and why?

Mr. Wharton: Thank you, and certainly thank the member for the question. And as I alluded to in my opening comments regarding the operation of Manitoba Hydro and their subsidiaries, this, again, is a decision of Manitoba Hydro to make—to move forward with the review and ensure that, I would suspect, that as it was in my private-sector business, that we get a full, comprehensive understanding of all our subsidiaries, including Manitoba Hydro International, to ensure, you know, a number of areas. Do we need to look at how we do business differently? Do we need to evolve differently? Maybe there are some good aspects to our business that we can build on; you know, certain things that need to be addressed.

And that's exactly what Manitoba Hydro has undertaken, and, again, certainly, we would support that. I think any business owner would support that as well, and certainly, we commend the Crown corporation for taking on this initiative. It's a huge undertaking. Absolutely massive. I mean, we're looking at a corporation, you know, billion-dollar corporation plus, and with—unfortunately, saddled with billions of dollars in debt that has evolved based on decisions made by the former government.

And, you know, certainly, you know, there couldn't have been a better time for Manitoba Hydro to undertake these reviews to ensure that, you know, there's value, of course, there; there's value for money, and Manitobans are being protected.

Mr. Sala: I'm hoping the minister can provide more clarity. He's alluding to the fact that Hydro is engaged in a review of sorts. I would agree with him that it's always important for organizations to do strategic reviews, to examine their lines of business to understand where improvements should be made or where changes should be made.

However, what's particularly concerning is that in this case, this review also happens to align with a stop-work order, which is what we've just outlined here for the minister, which he didn't really provide much clarity on the reasons for. And I think the minister might agree that, while reviews might make sense, there's a lot of questions to be asked about why we would stop Manitoba Hydro International from being able to pursue any new contracts and also having a

requirement that any further business is able to be cancelled within 90 days' notice as Manitoba Hydro International was notified.

So there's a lot of important questions here about why we're crushing Manitoba Hydro International's ability to continue doing business, why we're essentially creating a scenario here where, financially speaking, they are ultimately being set up to look as though their books are a lot worse than they are.

And if he could provide any clarity on what the need for the stop-sell order was to allow a review to take place. Why was the stop-sell order needed in order for Hydro to conduct this review?

*(15:10)

Mr. Wharton: Again, the member is, you know, asking a question that essentially I answered before, in the sense that this is a Manitoba Hydro decision. This is a corporate decision based on doing a review of their operation, and far be it for Crown Services directly to be involved in that simply because we saw the meddling of the past by the former government, and, obviously, the effects on government being directly involved in the operating day-to-day of our Crown corporations. So, certainly, that's not an initiative that this government or this department would ever endeavour in doing and we, again, are in full support of the review.

As the member indicated, he agrees with that process and that's good news; we agree on one point.

Certainly, we should agree on the point that if the corporation determines they need to put certain protocols in place while undertaking a review, then that is the full opportunity for Manitoba Hydro to make that decision and it's certainly not a government decision. It is a Manitoba Hydro decision.

Mr. Sala: The minister continues to suggest that his government has had nothing to do at all with the decisions at Hydro.

So I'll play along and I'll ask him: Does he believe that Hydro should be able to divest of Manitoba Hydro International, should they see fit?

Mr. Wharton: I'm glad the member wants to play along. That's good. We can maybe get along as well and that's my intention during this process.

Certainly, again, the question that the member asked is not answer that I would give. I mean, this is going to be a Manitoba Hydro and a Manitoba Hydro board decision on how they ensure that Manitobans

are protected. This is not Crown Services' decision, this is not our government's decision. We understand the—that what Crown Services and what Crown corporations, what their duties are and they're to—report to Manitobans and they report to ensure that Manitobans are protected.

So, again, to the member's question, you know, the bottom line is, in this view is—and in our view is that's a Manitoba Hydro decision and we respect any decision that they make for the betterment of Manitobans.

Mr. Sala: Well, I really appreciate that the minister is telegraphing quite clearly the approach that they're going to be using when this—when Manitoba Hydro International is put on the open market in absolving himself and his government entirely from any decisions relating to protecting a subsidiary that makes Manitobans \$110 million last year alone. It's pretty clear that he is sort of—he's telegraphing the approach and the language that we can expect to see from them relating to MHI as we go forward.

I'm hoping the minister can explain how much work Manitoba Hydro International lost out on because of the stop-sell order that continues to be placed upon them.

Mr. Wharton: I just wanted to, if I may—the committee can just give a little latitude. I want to make sure I get all the answers that the member from St. James had asked in his original question. And I do have fiscal '16, '17, and '18, so if the member is ready to write, I can read them off to him: 2016-17, \$71 million; '17-18, \$37 million; and '18-19, \$121 million.

Mr. Sala: So I'll just repeat the question.

Can the minister explain how much work MHI lost out on as a result of the stop-sell order that had been placed upon them?

Mr. Wharton: We would have, again, no knowledge of that whatsoever. So I don't know where the member's going, but I've mentioned many times that, you know, this review and the direction that Manitoba Hydro has taken has been a direction and a decision by the board and Manitoba Hydro and we certainly respect that.

I know the member has a tough time letting Crown corporations act in their own way without them meddling in but, you know, the bottom line is—and I've made it very clear and on the record and Manitobans listening online will appreciate—that

things have changed since the last 17 years under the NDP.

Crown corporations have a mandate. They know their mandate. In particular, Manitoba Hydro they know they're there to mandate to ensure that Manitobans are protected. They have some of the most reasonable rates throughout Canada and that will continue under our watch.

Hopefully, Madam Speaker, the NDP do not have an opportunity to meddle in any Crown corporations again going forward. We see the outcome of that, Mr. Chair, and I'll leave it at that for now.

Mr. Chairperson: And if I may, honourable minister, I'd prefer to be referred to as Mr. Chair than Madam Speaker, but I think it was an honest mistake.

Mr. Sala: I don't know how to follow that.

You know, I think what's important here, and I think we've made it pretty clear with the bill that we introduced just recently, that we do absolutely feel as though we should be protecting those subsidiaries of Manitoba Hydro from sale by this government. We do believe that those subsidiaries provide an incredible amount of value for Manitobans in form of revenues that help to keep rates low. And we do believe that they need to be protected, and protected especially from governments like the one that this minister belongs to.

I'd like to shift just to ask you some questions about the number of employees at Manitoba Hydro International.

Could the minister provide the total number of employees at MHI for January 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020?

Mr. Wharton: I do apologize for the Madam Speaker.

Mr. Chair, thank you so much, and what we will do in respect to the member's question is we will, because of the time and certainly we're—we want to make sure that the member has every opportunity to voice his concerns and questions. Certainly, we're collaborating with Crown Services and this ministry, we're going to endeavour to get those answers to him during the course of this discussion. So we will work back and once I have that I will certainly give that to him.

* (15:20)

And the member's—to the member's question on the—his private member's bill, the member knows full

well that during the decade, during 2000, that there is an order actually stating that you—Manitoba Hydro or any Crown corporation would have to go to the public. Manitobans own Manitoba Hydro; we know that. We know the NDP don't know that, but that's already in existence. So Manitobans know better and, certainly, Manitobans will continue to own Manitoba Hydro. We made that clear, and we'll continue down that road.

Mr. Sala: I appreciate the minister's offer to provide those employee numbers and to provide some transparency on that front. And, again, I think the minister continues to play cute with his responses relating to Hydro, and I'll reiterate once more for the record here.

We have serious concerns about the direction that we're seeing in relation to Manitoba Hydro International. There are a number of really clear indications that it's being set up for sale. There are huge concerns by employees within that organization who are generally in a state of panic, many of whom have reached out to us out of concern for what they're seeing. And so, while the government and while the minister continues to suggest that this is not a decision that in any way falls under their purview, I'd like to remind the minister that we're referencing a Hydro subsidiary which is wholly owned by the people of Manitoba, and any suggestion that somehow he is in no way responsible for decision-making relating to that is ludicrous.

And we're talking about a subsidiary that makes millions and millions of dollars for Manitobans. We're talking about a subsidiary that provides incredibly good, well-paying jobs, tech jobs, jobs that are forward looking. They are the kind of jobs that Manitoba wants to build an economy around or we could build an economy around. And, unfortunately, we're seeing those jobs potentially being placed at risk, and if the minister doesn't believe me, he can reach out to some of the employees at Manitoba Hydro International to get more clarity on that question and their fears.

You know, going back to this question about the stop-sell order, I'm hoping that the minister can explain. There was an emergency board meeting set for October 8th, which we—as we understand it, was a date that the Hydro board was going to discuss the future of Manitoba Hydro International.

I'm wondering if the minister could please explain if the wind-down or that stop-work order has been reversed since that board meeting.

Mr. Wharton: Again, it's very typical of the member to continue down the road of fear. You know, he mentions that he has proof or documents. I'd certainly welcome him to share them with us so that we can understand maybe potentially what he is talking to—talking—who he's talking to and what he's referring to. We would certainly appreciate that.

Far from playing cute, this is a very—this—and we take our role, and I believe the member from St. James takes his role very seriously. When he puts his name on a ballot, he is there to represent the people of his constituency, and I know and I hope the member knows that that is a very, very humbling opportunity that he's been provided by the residents of St. James. So I would hope that he would not create any more fear or put any falsehoods on the record stating that this minister or any of my colleagues or any of his other colleagues would ever take that job lightly, Mr. Chair. So I want to put that on the record because certainly we take offence to that. We work hard every day for Manitobans, and I would suspect the member from St. James does as well, and we will continue to in government.

This meeting that the member refers to—again, he calls it emergency meeting—this was a strategic investment session, Mr. Chair, and basically, it was just a strategic information meeting, period. This is—meetings—look, boards have meetings all the time and when—that's their job, that's what they do. They get together, they talk about strategic information that needs to come forward, potentially to advise the corporation or, in this case—or, the corporation or, in other cases, businesses, stakeholders. That's what these type of meetings are about.

So, certainly, we would be really concerned if those meetings weren't taking place, but I am certainly proud of the board at Manitoba Hydro and all my boards that take their job very seriously. Much like being elected and having Manitobans put their confidence in their elected officials, we certainly, collectively—we should be putting confidence in those board members that work hard every single day to ensure Manitobans are looked after.

Mr. Sala: Was the stop work order reversed since that board meeting?

Mr. Wharton: Strategic information session meeting.

Mr. Sala: I don't know if the minister is speaking in codes I don't understand, but the question was pretty simple.

After the strategic meeting, or however he characterized it, did they or did they not require that a stop sell order continue for Manitoba Hydro International?

Mr. Wharton: Again, I'll go back to essentially the government's model that has been in place for generations where you have a board structure. The board is mandated to follow through with their mandates. They do meet—and I know this might be a shock to the member—but they do meet from time to time, to talk strategically and, certainly, that is their prerogative and that's their right, to ensure that Manitobans are protected.

So, again, I know the member may have an issue with independent boards having meetings and—to talk about, you know, strategic matters but, certainly, that's not something that we should take away from our boards. They're accountable. They remain accountable. They're accountable to Manitobans. They're accountable to the corporation. They're accountable to government and they're accountable to every member of the Legislature. So, certainly, we commend them.

Mr. Sala: A little rich for the minister to suggest that I'm not a fan of independent boards when his government is, in fact, eliminating the role of the Public Utilities Board as we know it.

After many MHI employees had questions and concerns that were not being addressed as a result of the chaos that's been created there, they were then verbally told that they couldn't talk to anyone outside of Manitoba Hydro International, particularly media, about the situation at MHI.

Did you or your government issue that directive to the board or management at Manitoba Hydro International?

Mr. Wharton: Thank you and, certainly, I'm glad the member did acknowledge that he does have respect for governance of boards and board models and, certainly, we do, too, and that's exactly why, again, we're undertaking a review of the PUB, which is a—which is going to save Manitobans millions of dollars, go from annual GRAs to long-term, like, five-year GRAs, so there's rate stabilities for Manitobans. Customers don't have to worry about rate shock going forward. Under the NDP, that was always the concern and, quite frankly, it continues to be simply because of the mess that they left Manitoba Hydro in.

* (15:30)

So, you know, I—again, I'm pleased that the member does acknowledge that the boards do play an active role and, certainly, we agree and we're looking forward to the outcome. Reducing red tape, again, is an initiative. Reducing red tape and reducing duplication is the way to go, and certainly know Manitobans agree with us.

Mr. Sala: Could the minister provide how much profit was earned for Manitoba Hydro through its ownership share in Teshmont over the past four years? And if that could be broken down on a year-to-year basis, that would be greatly appreciated.

Mr. Wharton: Certainly, I appreciate a question from the member on Teshmont.

We'll go back a few weeks now and, again, the member—actually, his leader—said the dark clouds have finally arrived and the sky is falling and life as we know it is going to change in Manitoba. And we all know that that simply was not true, and the allegations that Manitoba Hydro sold Teshmont to the private sector and privatized it.

Well, the member knows that Teshmont has been a corporation privately—a private corporation since 1966. Again, the member was a senior member of the Selinger government and would probably recall during those years Manitoba Hydro partnered with Teshmont for engineering expertise to be involved in the construction of Keeyask and Bipole III—*[inaudible]*—is the understanding that we have been speaking for. And that's—and then now, the company—we've simply devoid themselves of their 40 per cent stake because the company—there's no further need because Keeyask and Bipole III are done and Keeyask will be coming online soon.

So, sounds like a business decision, again, by Manitoba Hydro which certainly makes sense. I mean, if you buy into an asset and you require some services from that asset, whether it be private or public—in this case, a fully private company—so be it, in order to ensure that you're gaining the expertise and advice you need to engineer a project, absolutely a very smart move.

Where I do disagree, though, is it was probably not necessary because we know why they did it. They did it to build the biggest boondoggle in Manitoba history, and that would be Keeyask and Bipole III. That, Mr. Chair, in lies where we're really at today is the fact that, you know, that the NDP will scream, whoever will listen, privatize, privatize, privatize. Well, in essence, they partnered with private-sector

companies more than we have in the four and a half, five years in government.

They made a habit of it. And they used them and then they essentially got out of them. So that's interesting, an interesting way of doing business, but, you know, we certainly, in our business, my business, if we needed some expertise and it, you know, took a short-term partnership, then we would certainly consider that.

However, that being said, I would be concerned more about the outcome of that investment in the fact that Manitobans have been saddled now with billions of dollars in debt. And, you know, the member would be very aware, and, as we are, we're on the eve of the economic review of Keeyask and bipole report, which certainly I know the member's not anxious to see. But we are and I know Manitobans are, and I'm sure that this particular topic will be a part of that overall process considering it was a part of Keeyask and Bipole III.

So we're really excited about getting that report and sharing with Manitobans the truth behind the boondoggle, the biggest boondoggle in Manitoba history when it comes to Manitoba Hydro.

Mr. Sala: Yes. I unfortunately hate to report it, but I don't think Manitobans are as excited about this report as the minister is.

We're about to see a report from one of the biggest champions of coal in Canadian history, and Mr. Wall himself, somebody who has a long history of massive cost overruns on a number of huge public projects, so we won't be taking any lessons from him or the report. So, unfortunately, the audience for that report, I think, will be a little more limited than the minister is letting on there.

I'd like to reiterate the question, because it was never answered.

Can the minister provide profits that were made by Teshmont, that were sent to Hydro from Teshmont, for the last four fiscal years?

Mr. Wharton: So we—thank you, Mr. Chair—and we are endeavouring to acquire that information that the member from St. James is looking for. And if we don't have it by the time I'm done speaking this round, we'll endeavour to get it to him before the end of this—the Estimates meeting today.

* (15:40)

I will, however, just revert back to the comments made by the member from St. James regarding Mr. Brad Wall. You know, this member has a history, and it's actually becoming more and more regular, of insulting folks, and really it doesn't matter from really what walk of life they come from, but he's building a character of himself of somebody that really doesn't respect, I guess, in this case, somebody that's served the public for well over almost a quarter-century and continues to in another capacity today. One of the most decorated premiers in Manitoba—or in Canada, pardon me, Mr. Brad Wall has served the folks of Saskatchewan and served Saskatchewan very well and certainly over his tenure and continues to in other capacities.

So, you know, I would just—I would caution the member just to ensure that, you know, if he wants to go down the negative rabbit hole of painting very successful individuals, whether it be in politics or business or, better yet, the civil service or the public sector, that I would really caution him to be very careful to do that because that's certainly not what the constituents of St. James, I think, elected and I don't think that that's going to get him any brownie points at the local coffee shop in St. James.

Mr. Sala: I appreciate the career advice from the minister and I can assure him that my constituents are very happy to know that I'm asking important questions about what this government is doing.

Minister, I'm sure you know it's a difficult time financially for many Manitobans, especially those lower-income Manitobans who work in retail and hospitality and who continue to struggle as a result of the pandemic.

With already difficult financial circumstances, could you explain the justification of raising Hydro rates by 2.5 per cent for Manitobans?

And I'll clarify before you answer that: we know that every 1 per cent increase equates to about \$15 million. So could you help explain the rationale behind taking another \$45 million from Manitobans' wallets next year?

Mr. Wharton: Certainly, again, we certainly appreciate a question on gusting—Manitobans' money. We all know the history of the NDP, even when it comes to taxes and how they raise them and, certainly, I want to just take the committee back a little bit in time under the former NDP government when the member from St. James was a senior staffer here in the building under the Selinger government.

And I'm sure it was an interesting time when the premier at that time, Premier Selinger, vetted the idea of raising the PST from 7 to 8 per cent. Well, we certainly know that—what happened there, Mr. Chair. Bottom line is the rebel five stepped up, and I think the member, you know, without getting into too many details, can probably recall that to the letter, but Manitobans said no thanks, but he went ahead and did it anyways without a referendum. They didn't get a chance to vote on it. They just went ahead and did it.

And—but before that, you know, the member from St. James and his former government set it up; they not only raised it from 7 to 8 per cent, but before that they broadened it, Mr. Chair. They actually broadened the provincial sales tax to include haircuts and other ridiculous things, and Manitobans—and middle-income Manitobans, I might add, and low-income Manitobans require on a regular basis.

So, first of all they broadened it and then they raised it. And during an election campaign in 2011—and I recall because I ran in that campaign, Mr. Chair, ran in 2011. I ran in Gimli, and I can tell you that the time that Premier Selinger was running he had said, and I quote: Raise the PST, that's total nonsense. Manitobans know we would never do that. Six months later he did. So we know where the credibility lies with the NDP when they talk raising taxes and taking money off Manitobans table.

Two point nine per cent, again, is an interim increase that will cost Manitobans approximately \$30 per year per household. And again, here we are left with generations of debt forced on our children and our grandchildren—which I have five of, by the way—and one day I will sit down with all five of them and explain exactly what happened during the NDP's ridiculous run for 17 years, pumping tons of debt on their—as a matter of fact, their credit card, Mr. Chair, their credit card right now, it's maxed out. Their credit card is maxed out and no way of paying for it because of the high tax that the NDP left them.

That's what our government's going to do. We're committing to ensure we lower taxes to make sure generations that come have the ability to pay off that darn credit card that they maxed out. Those payments coming out, the 2.9 per cent increase, Mr. Chair, again, that goes right on debt, right on Manitoba NDP debt. That's where the 2.9 per cent will go to ensure that we continues to keep rates low.

Again, that PUB review ensuring that we reduce red tape, we save millions of dollars for Manitobans. We have long, five-year GRA commitments, stable

rates for Manitobans so those young generations, my grandkids, will know that when they start their first job and they move out and have their apartment, they're in the apartment and they're paying hydro, they know that the next three and half to four years, depending on when that five-year cycle ends, they'll have a fixed rate and they know that they'll be able to pay their hydro bill.

Mr. Sala: That was quite a soliloquy. Wow.

You know, the minister talks about, you know, the supposed lack of fair treatment from the last NDP government and our lack of concern for ensuring affordability, so let's just focus back in on what we're talking about here today in the midst of a pandemic.

We're talking about a government that is forcing thousands of Manitoba Hydro employees to take wage cuts, that is forcing thousands of Manitoba Hydro employees to have their wages frozen even though they had an unconstitutional bill which was rejected by Manitoban in courts. And now they're piling on by adding a 2.9 per cent rate increase for all Manitobans which we have no ability to assess for its legitimacy because it's not being channelled through the Public Utilities Board.

Will the minister admit that they're breaking the law right now by trying to legislate a rate increase without taking it to the Public Utilities Board, given that there's a process which still remains in place?

* (15:50)

Mr. Wharton: Again, this certainly gives me an opportunity to put some more facts on the record with respect to Manitoba Hydro and their debt. And certainly, the member will know that Manitoba Hydro's debt has been increasing rapidly and is now projected by the end of March 2021 to be 23.3 billion—that's billion—dollars, Mr. Chair.

And the member is a banker, former banker. I guess maybe one day he might go back into the banking industry, which is a good thing. My daughter is a banker. Works for a credit union, actually. I think we had this talk before.

So, credit-rating agencies, as the member knows are, you know, expressing increasing levels of concern when it comes to Manitoba Hydro's financial position. Being a banker, I know you'd understand—the member from St. James would, you know—S&P, Moody's and DBRS, you know, are concerned about the ability to generate sufficient revenues to meet the debt-service requirements. So, you know, I'd be

interested to ask the question to the member what he feels about that, being a banker.

I'm not a banker. I've certainly ran a business. I understand how that works. And I think as a business owner, you end up being kind of a jack of all trades. You end up being an accountant, lawyer, an HR rep, you name it. So—but certainly, I don't profess to be a banker. So the member would understand and certainly appreciate the ability to pay, especially when your debt-to-equity ratio is so high.

Look, we've got to be able to service debt, debt that was forced on Manitobans by the NDP. So I appreciate the question from the member, but I think he's got more to answer for on this than I do.

Mr. Sala: Can the minister explain if the rate increase was requested by the board of Hydro or by the president?

Mr. Wharton: You know, again, I mentioned this before: the amount of debt that's been saddled on the—well, Manitoba Hydro—essentially Manitobans, is substantial: 23-plus billion dollars; 2.9 per cent is essentially there to pay down that debt and ensure that the next generation don't have to face this kind of debt ever again, Mr. Chair. I mean, that's the long and the short of it. That's what the 2.9 per cent represents.

Mr. Sala: Was the rate increase requested by the board of Hydro or by the president of Hydro?

Mr. Wharton: Again, thank you, member from St. James, for the question.

And, again, during Estimates in Hydro, they—Hydro was looking at an increase of—requiring an increase of 3.5 per cent and, Mr. Chair, and as we indicated in the Throne Speech, we are in what will be remembered as one of the worst pandemics in the history of the world.

And certainly we've made reference to that and the impacts it has on Manitobans in particular—and rates and taxes and all those areas that government can control, as far as taxes go. And certainly during the Throne Speech, we had said that that rate would be 2.9 per cent. Again, in light of COVID, \$30 on the average homeowner in Manitoba and also to ensure that Manitoba Hydro is still on a position to pay down debt and operate sustainably in the short term.

* (16:00)

So certainly a measured approach; the member will appreciate that, I'm sure. Again, from his banking career, he knows that you have to make decisions

based on a measured approach, especially in financial realms, and that's exactly what we'll continue to do is make decisions for the best—betterment of Manitobans.

Mr. Sala: Bill 35 recommends tying rate-setting to a formula and specifically a formula that's focused on allowing Manitoba Hydro to achieve a debt-to-equity ratio of 25-75.

Can the minister just confirm that that's the case?

Mr. Wharton: Again, we seem to have some cut-out once in a while. Can I just get the member to please repeat the question?

Mr. Sala: Bill 35 recommends tying rate-setting to a formula, specifically a formula that's focused on allowing Hydro to achieve a debt-to-equity ratio of 25-75.

Can the minister explain—or, actually, I'll just start there: Can the minister confirm that that is in fact the case?

Mr. Wharton: The bill the member from St. James is referring to is under Finance, and as we had questions yesterday that were related to areas that would be better addressed by Central Services, I would suspect that the question the member is asking would be better addressed by the Minister of Finance (Mr. Fielding).

However, on another note, just if I may revert back for the benefit of the committee: net income for Teshmont share in the last four years was \$2.9 million. That's net income over the last four years: \$2.9 million, Teshmont.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Sala: I'll repeat the question and I hope the minister can appreciate that it's entirely reasonable for me to be asking about a bill that applies directly to departments under his purview.

Does Bill 35 intend on essentially allowing Manitoba Hydro to achieve a debt-to-equity ratio of 25-75? Is that what it seeks to do?

Mr. Wharton: Actually, I have a couple updates for the member from St. James to provide him.

First of all, on his first question on the 75-25. Again, these proposed changes will ensure oversight and public involvement, Mr. Chair, in the ongoing capital planning, which is important, of course, while ensuring that debt is paid down over a 20-year period to a more sustainable level.

And I know the member has a tough time with—well, he has an easy time creating debt, but he has a tough time paying for it. So this is a more sustainable level and—of 75-25. Again, he would understand that, being a banker, but certainly, we need to ensure that this is done in a measured way, and with a 20-year planning process, I—we believe that that'll be beneficial to Manitobans as we go through this together.

On another note, the member had a question regarding MHI FTE count under the last four years. I can share with the member, and I'm sure he's ready to write: 2016-17, 134 FTEs; 2017-18, 146 FTEs; 2018-19, 135 FTEs and 2019-20, 137 FTEs.

Mr. Sala: Thanks so much for that information. It's greatly appreciated.

I think the key concern here that I think is important to put down on the record is that the bill as structured that the minister keeps suggesting offers confidence for Manitobans and some sort of regularity in rate setting is hugely problematic. And the reason for that is that the ratio that they're tying the bill to, which is this debt-to-equity ratio, is not a reasonable measure of financial health for a public organization. When monies are stored as equity in that debt-to-equity ratio, they're actually just held in reserve. So when we talk about creating a rate-setting formula that sets rates tied to that specific ratio, the debt-to-equity ratio, what we're actually doing here is we're taking money and storing it away, socking it away in Hydro bank accounts with no actual response to any kind of fiscal or financial risk for the organization.

So the concern is that the bill is not only wrong in a hundred different ways but that, just like what this government seems to be doing, you know, jacking up rates and taking money away from Manitoba—thousands of Hydro employees, it's unnecessarily socking away dollars that belong to Manitobans and having them sit in bank accounts when those funds are in no way responding to any kind of real financial risk for a government-backed organization.

Moving on now to questions about broadband and dark fibre, I'm hoping the minister can explain the role of the fairness monitor in the broadband contract.

* (16:10)

Mr. Wharton: Again, we did talk about this yesterday with the member from St. James and, again, I'll just recap some of those discussions for him. We talked about what the role of Manitoba Hydro and, in

particular, Crown Services is with respect to the RFP. The RFP is housed over at Central Services.

What Manitoba Hydro is providing is pretty clear. It's providing the opportunity to utilize dark fibre to ensure that we—they can provide and the proponent, it's successful proponent can provide connectivity, better cell service throughout areas in rural and northern Manitoba and our First Nations. So, certainly, we support the work of my colleague in the Department of Central Services in that our RFP process and the fact that Hydro will be there with the dark fibre.

And certainly we know that COVID—and, again, I'll put on the record that COVID has really provided all of—all Manitobans the opportunity to realize in their own homes that connectivity is one of the poorest, actually, in the nation. We'd argue that it likely is.

And, again, you know, under the former government there were a number of small service providers—who do great work, by the way—have been providing bits and pieces of connectivity to—we'll call the more lucrative areas, urban areas. I mean, that's where your population is.

And, certainly, you know, we got to understand that more as we went through this process in government and understood that, you know, after the last 17, 20 years of going down this path and using this model, it wasn't working.

I mean, and COVID really showed us that. It provided us a path to try to expedite this process and that's exactly what my colleague along with the partnership with Manitoba Hydro are going to do as they go forward and ensure that full First Nations—and the federal government has already pulled out of a project in the North and that's just shameful.

And we all feel and obviously recognize that our First Nations need, especially during these tough times, connectivity, reliable connectivity. They're not having to drive to a local Internet chat site. They can actually have connectivity in their homes on First Nations in rural and remote areas and, quite frankly, all of Manitoba.

So, to the member's question, again, certainly, I'll try to put a little context around the question and I hope I've done that for him. Again, Manitoba Hydro's commitment to make available dark fibre for the opportunity for a successful proponent or proponents to go ahead and connect the very underutilized areas of our province, in particular our First Nations who

really rely, will rely, and continue to rely on good connectivity going forward.

Mr. Sala: The process of auctioning off Hydro's broadband business, when we have our own publicly owned telecom, began with an RFQ almost a year ago. Then we had an RFP in July. Yet you just recently posted an RFP for a fairness monitor after the fact.

Why did you feel the need to bring in a fairness monitor months after the RFP was posted?

Mr. Wharton: Again, I appreciate the question from the member, and I will remind the member again that the fairness monitor that he is referring to is an RFP issued by Central Services. And, certainly, I've explained to him what Crown Services and in particular Manitoba Hydro's involvement is and is—continues to be.

One thing that we don't do is, you know, we don't—like the NDP like to do, is bring their toys and steal the other one's sandbox. So we don't do that but, certainly, I have all the confidence in my colleague at Central Services, and I'm sure that if the member from St. James has a question he can follow up with him.

Mr. Sala: You know, it's really just depressing to hear the responses from the minister, who keeps sidestepping the question here and continues to suggest that all of my questions relating to his department should be directed to one of his colleagues, who is responsible for procurement.

I'd suggest the minister should pay closer attention to what's happening in his department so he can answer important questions that Manitobans reasonably have about the auctioning off of fibre that we all own and that he's currently the minister responsible for.

The key concern here is that we currently, as the owners of that fibre, are able to determine who gets access to that, which companies get access to which jobs in creating increased broadband connectivity across the North. And what we're seeing right now is a move towards handing over the keys to a major telco, probably out of province, for an indefinite period of time.

And we all know what happens when we see increasing role of the private sector in this kind of work. We can expect higher costs. We can expect reduced access. And we can expect that all of those Manitoba-based Internet service provider companies that are currently creating great jobs for Manitobans, that are ensuring that those profits that are made stay

in Manitoba, are going to be funnelled out of the province.

And we're going to see bigger, bigger profits for Bell MTS and I think that that's something that we should all be concerned about. And I think it's something that the minister should be able to answer very basic questions about.

So I'll ask his rationale: What is the reasoning behind contracting out-of-house to private providers?

* (16:20)

Mr. Wharton: Again, the member starts off with his old theme of fear, and let me put some facts on the record for him. He talks about deflecting questions to other departments. Well, in particular, he's talking about the RFP process. Well, the member would know, I would hope, but maybe not. Let me see if we can educate him a bit.

Central Services is a procurement arm on behalf of government. They procure things like RFPs, for instance, like, they actually go out to market and ask companies to quote. First of all, they ask if they're prepared to be involved in the process with an RFQ.

Second of all, they put out an RFP, which the member kindly reminded everybody online, and I will remind them, too, because we have been down this road before. So, first of all, the member knows the process, so I don't know why he thinks, you know, we're punting anything to anybody that it—any other department where he feels it should be answered by Crown Services. He should know protocol—simple governance, Mr. Chair, simple governance. He knows that, so shame on him.

So, back to the interesting comment about privatizing and moving—again, here's the fear part—and moving network to a single telco. You know, I query the member on why he is, first of all, speaking about Bell MTS when there's five proponents that have put a bid in on an RFQ. I don't know why the member continues to—maybe, I don't know, maybe he knows something that we don't—but he keeps mentioning Bell MTS, Mr. Chair.

Well, there are other active, large telco firms—and small—that are taking part in the bidding process, and currently, through the RFP process, Mr. Chair, so, you know, I would encourage the member, as this process continues to evolve for the betterment of Manitobans, that he watch and be very, very cautious of what he says.

This is public process. It will continue to be. We have five interested proponents that are bidding currently on an RFP to help Manitobans. What the heck is the problem with that, I ask that member.

Mr. Sala: The concern, of course, we have is that Manitoban wealth is being handed from public hands, where we have dark fibre that we currently are the collective owners of, and that it's being handed over to private hands, which is this government's speciality and it's their use of a concession model, which is privatization by another name, which this minister knows very well is ultimately the destination we're headed for here. And, frankly, Manitobans are concerned about that. Manitobans are concerned about this government's tendency to hand public wealth over to private hands.

So I'm going to pass the floor over to my colleague, Mr. Sandhu.

Mr. Mintu Sandhu (The Maples): How much to date has been spent on the conciliator? So we're going to MPI, so—from Manitoba Hydro.

Mr. Wharton: Certainly would like to also welcome the member from Maples. We don't have an opportunity to talk, and I appreciate the Estimates process. It gives us an opportunity to work collaboratively during this process and I appreciate his—obviously his ability to advocate for his constituents and certainly we are looking forward to a good discussion on Manitoba Public Insurance.

As the member knows, we're—they're still in conciliation and our understanding at this point—and I will get the member the number—the exact number. I just know that he probably wants to move on to another question, but I can tell you that the conciliation will be within budget.

Mr. Sandhu: How far are we into process? Like, how long is it going to take the conciliator's report to be completed?

Mr. Chairperson: The 'onastir'—let me try that again. The—it's—hasn't been a short week. Okay.

The honourable Minister of Crown Services, in response to the member for The Maples.

Mr. Wharton: Payback, eh, Mr. Chair? Payback. I get it.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I appreciate the question from the member from The Maples.

And there's no doubt we're looking forward to, you know, successful process. I know the conciliator

along with IBAM and MPI have been working well together and we certainly fully anticipate having a decision by the end of this year.

Mr. Sandhu: Thanks, minister, for the answer.

And also, minister, I think there was an extension done on-between IBM and MPI for two years. That extension is coming pretty soon this year, in 2021.

So, the report will be completed before-in this year or the next year?

Mr. Wharton: I thank again the member from The Maples for the question.

* (16:30)

And as I alluded to in my previous answer, we fully anticipate having the conciliator wrap up by the end of the year. The extension would run to March 31st, 2021, so we don't anticipate there being an issue there.

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you for the answer.

So I-from your answer, I get it that the report will be completed this year. Will this be-report will be released to the public?

Mr. Chairperson: Just as we're waiting for that, a note to all members that please make sure your phones are on silence. It recently picked up a rendition of Madonna. We're not sure if it's from a car stereo or from somebody's phone, but just make sure your phones aren't-can't be heard. Thanks.

Mr. Wharton: Certainly-and again, thank the member for The Maples (Mr. Sandhu). Certainly, when the final agreement is done and we-they move forward, the two groups, certainly the agreement will be public for sure. I mean, this has been a very collaborative process, and, certainly, we're looking forward to having the parties reach a final agreement for the betterment of Manitobans, I might add.

Mr. Sandhu: Could the minister provide some insight to what type of an agreement is sought to being reached with MPI and brokers?

Mr. Wharton: The member should know-and if he doesn't, I'll just remind him-that there's some active conciliation process being undertaken right now between the two parties, and, you know, certainly that's not something that we would speak to as Crown corporations. We expect the facilitator and the two parties are working through various topics and other areas, and we'll continue to do that with the mandate that they were provided to move forward. So,

certainly, wouldn't be our choice to be in-getting involved in anything like that at all, and we certainly wouldn't for sure.

If I could just revert back to, for the member's benefit, he had asked about the dollar amount to date for the conciliator: currently, \$200,000.

Mr. Sandhu: Is there any advice or any direction is given to MPI to seek some-what kind of services they want to be online? Is there any advice from the minister or from the Crown Services or from the government to MPI?

Mr. Wharton: Certainly, I appreciate the question from the member from The Maples, and this gives me an opportunity to again go back to some discussions with his colleague, the member from St. James, where the member from Maples will recall, too, the interference that the NDP did directly involve themselves in Crown corporations.

We went through a number of instances through Manitoba Hydro, and certainly will remind the member of the instances with MPI when the, at the time, NDP government, was using the profits of MPI for their gains politically, without any consideration to Manitobans who are the ratepayers of MPI.

So, Mr. Chair, certainly, as I said to the member from St. James, I'll say to the member from Maples, we are here in a capacity to support our Crown corporations. Crown corporations are governed within. They have a board governance. They have executive teams, and they have every opportunity and ability to ensure that they're operating to the best interest of Manitobans and that's exactly what they do at MPI every single day.

Mr. Sandhu: I will remind the minister too, on July 24th, 2019, the minister of Crown Services issued a directive to MPI to enter into conciliation with the Insurance Brokers Association of Manitoba. I think this is also a direct interference by the Crown Services minister.

So it's just common sense just to ask the question: Was there any directive, other than that, was provided to MPI?

Mr. Wharton: Certainly, I thank the member from The Maples for pointing out my colleague at the time, Minister Mayer. And again, wonderful MLA, wonderful representative of St. Vital, and we miss her, certainly, and certainly we wish her all the best.

But during her tenure here as minister, she did a fabulous job in working with our Crown corporations

and helping set the table for myself to come in and continue in her legacy. So I would like to get on record, I'd like to thank my former colleague, Minister Mayer, and MLA for St. Vital for all the work she did during her time in government.

With that being said, on July 24th, 2019, there was a directive issued. And what I will do for the member from The Maples today is, again, just give him a little bit of an education on what some of the mandates are of the Crown Services Department, and one of them is to issue a directive. And in this case, a directive was issued to get two parties, IBAM and MPI, to the table to—with a mandate—to work out, certainly, a bargain—an agreement, pardon me, to ensure that Manitobans' interests were looked after.

Henceforth, the conciliator was brought on board, and the conciliator was picked by the two parties. So this conciliator, Mr. Finkbeiner, was picked by IBAM and MPI to work through the process, to help get the two parties to the table, to come to an agreement to better all Manitobans.

So, for the member for The Maples (Mr. Sandhu), I hope that gives him some clarity on—there's a difference between political meddling, which his former government were very good at and continue to try to do that today in opposition because they still feel they own Manitoba Hydro. Hopefully they get over that one day.

* (16:40)

But, you know, certainly, the member would now realize, and I hope I've made it clear, that there's a difference between meddling and directives under legislation. So, jeez, I hope the member for The Maples understands that now. And I'm glad to be able to help him through that process.

Mr. Sandhu: Thanks, minister, for the education.

How many individuals had completed MELT training so far in 2020?

Mr. Wharton: I thank the member for that question.

Very important, of course, MELT and MELT training. Certainly it's an initiative that we support wholeheartedly. Of course, taking us back to Humboldt. And being a, you know, former owner of a national—international van line, I can appreciate the challenges that class 1 drivers face every single day when they're on the road and they need to be given and provided the tools necessary.

What I can tell the member, though, is MELT is—actually does run through two departments. It runs through MPI, yes, and it also runs through Manitoba Infrastructure. So what I'm going to do is we've just reached out and ensure that we can get the number of trained drivers to the member by 5 o'clock. We're endeavouring to do that for him and we'll certainly look forward to another question.

Mr. Sandhu: Could you tell us how long wait times are to get a class 1 knowledge test and class 1 road test?

Mr. Wharton: Just some clarity, if I may, from the member. Again, just want to be clear what he's asking for. Does he want to know how long it's taking for a class 1 driver to be totally certified? And there was another part of that question as well?

If he could just please repeat the question. I want to make sure that we provide the member all the accurate information that he deserves.

Mr. Sandhu: Just want to know, what is the wait time to get a knowledge test once you write a test? And also how long is the road test waiting times?

Mr. Wharton: Again, I would just like to apologize to the member from Maples. We're endeavouring to get the answers he's looking for. He—I—certainly with COVID, there's been a number of moving targets, very fluid issue with respect to training times and wait times with the different public health orders coming into play. And there's been a number of moving targets.

So we will endeavour to get that to him before 5 o'clock, but it's certainly—in light of the time, I would like to just have the opportunity to be able to provide that to him prior to 5 o'clock and give the member another opportunity for another question.

* (16:50)

Mr. Sandhu: I have heard so many times the minister was saying, like, he was a small-time businessman.

So my question is: When, like, he operated his small business, what—how will he feel if some big government comes in and give an advantage to someone else?

So my question is, what kind of advantage is given to Uber during this time?

Mr. Wharton: Certainly, I appreciate the fact that the member realizes that I was a business—small-business owner and in a transportation industry, so thank you for that. I really appreciate you acknowledging that.

Certainly, it was a great opportunity to grow a company from the ground up and my wife and I are very proud of that and so thank you for acknowledging that.

Back to the member's question about unfair advantage: the member will know when Bill 19 was introduced in the House—again, this was the Taxicab Board at the time, and the initiative was to ensure that oversight would be essentially handed to where it should be and that's at the municipal level, in particular, City of Winnipeg, in this case.

But expanding on that, any and all 136 other municipalities in the province would have an opportunity to essentially put their own legislation forward or resolution or a bylaw, depending on what they were looking at, to allow ride-share companies like Uber to come into their municipalities.

Exactly the same issue happened here in Winnipeg where a number of firms, as soon as the municipality, the City of Winnipeg, was the responsible entity for ride-share, the bylaws were written in collaboration with the ride-share companies, including the cab-driver organizations: Unicity and Duffy. And certainly all those aspects were balanced and moved forward in a way that it was fair and transparent.

So to the member, when he's asking about unfair advantage, I'm not sure where he's going. I know that Uber, in particular, because that's who he's referring to, initially they're—they refused to come to Manitoba because MPI was not creating an uneven playing field. They were committed to a uniform process and that's exactly what they did. And I can tell the member that that's exactly what it is like today where Uber and any other ride-share company are all subject to the same laws and bylaws and legislation through MPI as anybody else that wants to come here and work in Manitoba.

As you know, Manitoba's open for business and we welcome any ride-share company that wants to come here for the betterment of all Winnipeggers and Manitobans.

Mr. Sandhu: Let me tell the minister that any taxi industry, they weren't against Uber or any ride-sharing company. All they wanted were level playing field.

So come in—when the Uber came into the market, they said they got private insurance. Can the minister elaborate a little bit more on what kind of private insurance did they get?

Mr. Wharton: Thank the member for The Maples for that question. And again, I'll just kind of reiterate, and I know I've got a few minutes left, so I just want to make sure I get some of these other answers on the record for the member.

But Uber had, when they first came to Manitoba, have their own insurance coverage. That was not acceptable. That's not what the MPI act would allow. They needed to buy basic coverage through MPI, and that's exactly what they agreed to, and that's why they're now here in Manitoba. So I hope that answers the member's question. All ride-share companies, under the act, under the MPI act, have to have basic coverage through MPI. So that is a—that is as level playing field as you can have.

For the member, also, too, as well, there are approximately—and I just wanted to go back to his question on MELT. Approximately, there's 250 to 300 class 1 tests per month, which is very consistent with the historical averages even though we're in COVID. And August, there was 318. And in September, there was 300.

And again, I just want to make sure I get that last bit of information on for him regarding class 1. Tests are booked in advance, of course. And on average, class 1 in Winnipeg is about 33 days. Class 1 rural, in particular, Brandon, 40 days. Thompson, 1 day. And all others are averaging about 45 days for that class 1. So I hope that gives the member the information that he was looking for. Sounds like MPI's doing a wonderful job in ensuring that drivers are getting the training in a timely manner in light of the fact that they are dealing with the same thing all other Manitobans are is this COVID, of course.

And certainly with a lot of Manitobans working from home and their lives being totally disrupted in many, many areas, certainly it looks like and it sounds like MPI are continuing to provide Manitobans the service that they count on every single day to ensure that they have the opportunity to expand, you know, grow their businesses and ensure that their drivers have the tools in the toolkit to protect not only them, their families, but also other drivers on the road.

So, with that, I think I've answered his those questions, and thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: The hour being 5 o'clock, committee rise.

HEALTH, SENIORS AND ACTIVE LIVING

* (14:40)

Mr. Chairperson (Doyle Pivniuk): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This section of the Committee of Supply will now resume consideration for the Estimates for the Department of Health, Seniors, and Active Living.

At this time we invite opposition staff to enter the Chamber, and they're going to be remote, okay. And could the critic please introduce the staff? No, no—there's no need to.

As previously agreed, questioning for the department will proceed in a global manner. The floor is now open for questions.

MLA Uzoma Asagwara (Union Station): I'd like to start off where we left off yesterday and ask just a few more questions around the area of personal protective equipment.

So, I'm wondering if the minister can inform us, is it—if he receives a daily dashboard that provides key information about the availability of resources in the health system and does that dashboard include personal protective equipment?

Hon. Cameron Friesen (Minister of Health, Seniors and Active Living): I'm happy to indicate to the member today that I believe that the question is on is there robust reporting of PPE, of personal protective equipment levels. Yes, there is robust reporting.

The member asked whether I am receiving daily reports on PPE. I would say that the system generates daily and ongoing and regular reports on inventory levels in all those areas, and not exclusive of PPE. These would be the same kind of inventory controls that would exist for things like our influenza vaccine and other things, pharmaceuticals, other products and resources within the system.

* (14:50)

So, yes, PPE, at an official's level, you would have eyes on those metrics on a daily basis. I would receive regular reports in my office. We have, of course, the health incident command structure and there, in the logistics area of that response, you have those individuals who are charged with the responsibility of maintaining PPE.

I would add as well that, essentially, what we are targeting in all of that management and co-ordinated capability is to maintain over a 90-day supply in each area. I am pleased to say that we—because of hard

work, careful planning, we have actually, in some categories, over 365 days of supply. And all of these are at levels of usage as—we talked yesterday, anecdotally, about burn rates, so these are at current burn rates within the system.

I also wanted to provide an update yesterday. We spoke about the demand modelling tool that we have also implemented here in Manitoba, which I believe will serve our jurisdiction well, not just for the pandemic, but it will well into the future.

This PPE demand modelling tool is a complex-based demand projection tool that combines projected acuity levels, the 'epimodelling' data, projected availability of both the PPE supplies to create a—projected days on hand, so exactly like we talked about, a burn rate—so days on hand for each of the nine areas of key PPE supply groupings. So this includes things like gloves, procedural masks, N95 masks, gowns, et cetera.

This tool was acquired after connecting with a Vancouver coastal RHA and seeing a demo of the project that was—of the product that was developed for them there. BC was seeing COVID patients early on in wave 1 and was looking for a tool that would allow them to model demand and manage limited inventories of PPE. And I would just emphasize that, again, to the discussion yesterday, BC was indicating the same limited supplies of PPE, as the entire global supply chain was showing incredible strain.

So we worked in order to develop the initial version of this tool. The cost was approximately a quarter of a million dollars. It was funded at that time through the Transformation Management Office and it has been a big success. We know that stakeholders from key clinical areas, programs, operations and extended government procurement sector have spent hundreds of hours to make this a unique Manitoba solution.

The tool has now also been expanded to other government departments, such as Families and Justice, and government procurement staff also have access to the tool and are provided with a daily dashboard, as that member was inquiring about.

This tool provides us with a daily dashboard update in respect of inventory received, validated and in stock. And, based on projected demand, it provides us with the days on hand for each of those major categories, allowing us to pivot and to plan as required if the days on hand are starting to trend below that 90-days-on-hand benchmark as a minimum.

So I'm pleased to provide that information to all members of the Legislature and indicate how this investment has allowed us to plan more coherently, has been able to keep Manitobans safer and will continue to be a valuable tool throughout the government system, not just in this global pandemic, but in the years beyond.

MLA Asagwara: I'd like to thank the minister for that response and also thank the minister for his extended offer to provide—to share the information regarding this new PPE demand modelling tool and the data that it's generated. So thank you, Minister, for that.

In your 2020 annual report—in their 2020 annual report, rather, Vickie Kaminski said that they had developed such a system in the 2019-2020 fiscal year for both the WRHA and as well the provincial service delivery organizations designed to improve accountability.

So I'm wondering—and the minister, I think, did touch on a little bit of that, but I'm wondering in full if the minister can outline exactly what is included on that dashboard. Each item that's included on that dashboard. When did that come into use and would the minister be willing to provide access to all of the daily dashboards in this year—all of the daily dashboards this year?

You know, I agree that it would certainly improve accountability and, again, I'd like to repeat my thanks to the minister for extending that offer to share the PPE demand modelling tool and the data associated with them.

Mr. Friesen: So, again, I'm not exactly sure the question that the member is asking. If the member is asking for every single daily projection update since the pandemic began—if that's the request—I want to be sure to indicate that we are not out of the woods when it comes to our pandemic response.

And I want to take this opportunity to thank all of the people in the Department of Health and Department of Central Services, at Shared Health, at each of the regional health authorities, at public health; all of those who form part of our health incident command structure and, previous to that, formed part of our influenza response team. And I want to say that everyone is working very, very hard, going flat out right now, in respect of the increased case positivity rates, in respect of the increased hospitalizations that we have a careful eye on. They are working hard to be able to have the system ready to flex up should it be necessary to get that additional

capacity. So I want to indicate that in that scenario. It's really important to balance the workload demands against the desire for information.

* (15:00)

I will provide the following, though, and hopefully, this will be well received. The member did ask for a breakdown of each of the subcategories of what we measure in terms of projections and forecasting, and I can indicate to the member that this includes: disposable gowns, eyewear protection frames, eyewear protection lenses, face shields, gloves in pairs, hand sanitizer by the millilitre, masks—non-N95, N95 masks—standard format, N95 masks—small format, reusable gowns, and also half masks and half-mask filters for N95s.

I would like to also provide additional information on the same subject about what we're doing to create this Manitoba Emergency Response Warehouse. This was a subject of interest yesterday, and I can provide this update today and indicate that the procurement and supply chain is co-ordinating the development of this Manitoba Emergency Response Warehouse to create for Manitoba a first sustainable approach to stockpiling as part of our emergency preparedness.

So COVID-19 highlighted the fact that there was, in this province before this point, no ability to stockpile for large-scale emergencies and public health crises. In other words, even after the 2003 SARS event, even after the 2009 H1N1 outbreak, even then, the former NDP government did not see fit to pass in policy the need to create a framework to store supplies that could be cycled through inventory, used and replenished at source, to essentially prepare for worst-case scenarios and impacts on the system that were other than conventional.

I am pleased to tell all my colleagues that we've authorized up to \$400 million in pandemic supplies and equipment—\$400 million. To date, \$331.4 million has been committed. Materials Distribution Agency, otherwise known as MDA, is managing this inventory across multiple warehouses, including one warehouse configured to hold approximately 300,000 square feet of inventory—that's like six Costcos strung together—at least until 2023. And based on our calculations, as I said, we have almost a third of a year of N95 masks, disposable, in place; another 120 days on order.

And I would suggest to all members that the establishment of Manitoba's Emergency Response

Warehouse and the very significant work that has been done to improve in this province the ability to get the supplies, maintain supply levels and distribute appropriately so that our front-line workers and patients in hospitals and acute-care settings have the necessary protection to keep themselves safe is one of the great hallmarks of this government's significant response to the COVID-19 epidemic. We're very proud, and a huge shout-out to all of those involved to get us to this elevated case of safety.

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable minister's time is up.

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

I can certainly appreciate how hard folks are working—essential workers, department staff, staff across the board—during this pandemic to make sure that information is being generated and provided. I certainly have a deep appreciation for that.

So I would ask that, if a—daily updates are not available for the year, then perhaps a sampling of per week update. So, like I said, I understand that folks are working, you know, as hard as they possibly can throughout this pandemic for Manitobans. And so, if daily isn't available, a sample per week would be great.

So I would ask the minister if they can endeavour to provide that. That would be appreciated.

So I'd like to ask about the update that we received recently in regards to the incident command structure. So it was my understanding—it's my understanding that the health incident command structure was deactivated—it was turned off this summer, in June, and it's now been reactivated.

So I'm wondering if the minister can please outline what function does the health incident command structure play or, rather, that it did play. So, what function did the health incident command structure play when it was previously deactivated, and what were the triggers, what was the catalyst, to put it back into action now?

Mr. Friesen: I'm happy to provide some information about the health incident command structure framework.

It's important to know that Manitoba moved early and appropriately to establish a health incident command structure in this province to be able to address the pandemic in a coherent and co-ordinated way. As a matter of fact, we were much earlier in this

province at being able to generate those significant structures than other provinces were, relatively to when the virus began to come into the—into jurisdiction.

* (15:10)

As a matter of fact, I was recently reviewing the information that showed that we were well in advance of the first case reported in Manitoba when we were actually doing things like daily updates and situation reports and understanding our PPE needs. So it really speaks to the administrative and leadership capabilities that we have demonstrated in this.

That said, let's remember what a health incident command structure is for. So, in the past in Manitoba, you would've seen a health incident command structure marshalled to be able to coalesce the right leadership around a challenge like the 1997 flood, the significant forest fire events that happened in some years in the 2000s. You might have even seen the use of a health incident command structure for a significant shift in the health-care system, like the opening of a new hospital. That could've seen a health incident command structure.

What a health incident command structure is not intended to do is to run flat out for a year or two years or three years. That's not what it is designed to do, because what we have to understand is that the same people that have standing at that—in that framework would then be redeployed from other areas of responsibility. So the longer you go along in a HICS, as we call it, a health incident command structure framework, the more you are pushing other priorities to the side.

That said, to the member's question, it was with this in mind that we accepted the advice of the Chief Provincial Public Health Officer, and of the chief integration officer at Shared Health earlier this year after that first wave of the pandemic when we began to see very low case numbers on a daily basis, very low hospitalization numbers, no ICU numbers, that it was time to be able to ramp down the health incident command structure. What we replaced it with is a respiratory virus steering committee.

So it would be much the same as the framework built every single year to handle something like the influenza season, which is still very significant. Do not forget that last year alone in Manitoba, influenza saw 400 hospitalizations. Last year in Manitoba, influenza saw 40 ICU cases in this province. So it's still a very significant structure that guides our

understanding of how to manoeuvre in the health-care system. And remember as well that even just like in an influenza season, even in influenza, things like our ICU capacity can come under strain, and then decisions are made about how to flex that capacity to be able to suspend or slow or draw back other activities, and that allows us to build the capacity we need.

So, with that said, it was at the advice of the chief and of system leaders that we pivoted to the respiratory virus steering committee. It was at the advice, now more recently, of the same individuals that we have reconstituted the health incident command structure. As I spoke about yesterday, that command structure includes the broad categories of planning, logistics, operations and finance, and then within that structure, many people have influence and many people have additional standing. There is Indigenous leadership included. There is a good linkage to FNIHB, the First Nations Indigenous health branch; there are good relationships throughout the regional health authorities. And so we have been well-served.

But remember, I would also welcome the opportunity to say that it was through the respiratory virus steering committee that we did our low-acuity sites, that we launched our RFP for the Red Cross, that we launched the RFP for surgeries, that we continued the work on the one-site, one-worker personal-care-home initiative and that we brought this Manitoba emergency pandemic warehouse. All those things were success stories from the respiratory virus steering committee.

So, thank you to all the people who continue to serve this province in leadership on COVID-19.

MLA Asagwara: I just wanted to clarify, and I asked this previously, but I just wanted to make sure that I was clear. If the minister could provide—would be willing to provide, rather—access to, if not the daily dashboards for this year, then weekly dashboards for this year. And can the minister clarify, in terms of the health incident command structure, especially given the fact that we've seen a surge of issues, a surge of cases in the last weeks.

Why is it that the health incident command structure is only being reactivated now? I understand the minister saying the respiratory virus steering committee was generated in the gap period of time, but I'm wondering, you know, what was the catalyst? What were the triggers for the health incident

command structure to be reactivated at this point now? *[interjection]*

Mr. Chairperson: Sorry, minister. I'll just have to indicate that you're speaking now.

Mr. Friesen: To the member's last point, we will endeavour to provide information in some format that would assist the member. I would ask for the member's recognition and acknowledgement, as well, that we are in the middle of pandemic, and that we have the people involved in this area going flat out to provide good service to Manitobans.

So we will endeavour to provide information that would depict for the member the improvement that we've seen in these areas, and provide them with some data that will help them in the performance of their duties, and we hope that will suffice, understanding how busy people are providing real service and real time to Manitobans on a daily basis.

I want to say the following: the member asks why at this time was the decision made to flex back up to health incident command structure. Because we accept the advice of the—those who are leading this pandemic, and it was their advice on the basis of continual receipt of information, the situation in Winnipeg, the increased daily count rate, the hospitalization rate, the ICU rate, the need to understand what we may be facing in respect of a second wave. The fact that we are entering into the influenza season and needing to understand that there will be impact, as well. Seeing as we have seen that all these things matter, it was a decision of the public health chief and of the chief integration officer that we should now, at this point in time, move to HICS, or health incident command structure.

I will restate, health incident command structure is not a structure that is designed to be operational for years at a time or a year at a time. It takes a toll and it takes a toll on leadership too, who have other assigned duties. So keep in mind, part of that advice to return to a respiratory virus steering committee framework to buy—to provide guidance for those interim months between was based on the understanding that we wanted to all, as well, be able to plan for the reintroduction of other health-care services.

Remember, we, as well as all provinces and territories, had to profoundly suspend health-care activities in order to focus on COVID-19, and so our intent to restart doctors visits and surgeries and procedures and diagnostics and other laboratory work, and oncology treatments. All of this hinged on our

ability to be able to release system leaders to the work to guide that.

So I would also say, reflect on the fact that when it came to the Prairie Mountain Health, significant increase in counts and that very first move that we made to elevate their risk level to orange and to respond—or equivalent of orange—and then to respond, we did that when we weren't in health incident command structure. We did that through a respiratory virus steering committee. We did not need to go into HICS to solve the Prairie Mountain Health situation, and there isn't someone who would suggest that we weren't able to solve that through very hard work, through significant measures and all of that.

* (15:20)

I indicate this in order to express that one of the rationales that was provided to me as the minister is that we needed to maintain and retain capability in our system for when that capability would be most needed. And so now, as we look into the fall and winter, as we look into the commencement of the influenza season, as we look into an escalating number of cases on the daily counts—we are pleased to see lower counts today; we will continue to watch morbidity, mortality and hospital capacity issues—but as we did that, what we did, we did to retain capacity, to retain resilience, to ensure resilience and to allow us to shift our focus to the significant surgical procedures, clinical procedures and the resumption of doctors' visits.

We are so pleased to see that our virtual visits, these virtual tariffs that we have brought in Manitoba, have been effective. I was just reviewing data with my senior officials, including my deputy minister, Karen Herd, today, and we are very impressed with the buy-in, with the degree to which doctors are now using virtual tariffs to bring their patients back into clinical settings and provide the care that they need. And so kudos to all those doctors doing so.

Mr. Chairperson: Before we continue, I just want to let the minister if he just turns on the mic, then we can hear that you want to speak, and then I can call on you. As soon as you put your mic on, I can hear it. So I'll just call you once that happens, okay?

So we'll continue, and the honourable member for Union Station.

MLA Asagwara: It was reported in the Free Press recently that projections from the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation suggested that 2,600 Manitobans will die

of COVID-19 by January. That is an incredibly sobering number. Certainly, I know that Manitobans, across the board, are doing everything that they can to mitigate that becoming a reality, but it is a projection based on modelling and metrics, and I'm wondering if the minister can shed some light on whether or not his government, the Pallister government's modelling, is consistent with this.

Mr. Friesen: Mr. Chair?

Mr. Chairperson: I can hear you.

Mr. Friesen: I'm just going to ask the member to repeat the question. We want to be clear that we are answering the right question. What is the question pertaining to the modelling that is being seen globally? I need some further clarification on the question.

MLA Asagwara: Sure. Projections from the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation suggest that 2,600 Manitobans will die of COVID-19 by January. Is your government, is the Pallister government's modelling, the modelling that the government is doing, is that modelling consistent with those projections?

Mr. Friesen: I will endeavor to answer the member's question.

I wanted to pause and provide just a note on a previous set of questions yesterday. There seemed to be the implication by the member that the global severity of PPE disruption of supply was somehow insupportable.

I'm quoting from a news release March the 3rd by the World Health Organization that is entitled Shortage of personal protective equipment endangers health workers worldwide. And the first sentence says: The World Health Organization has warned that severe and mounting disruption to the global supply of PPE caused by rising demand, panic buying, hoarding and misuse is putting lives at risk from the new coronavirus and other infectious diseases. I wanted to make sure that I had put that on the record.

Pleased to speak about modelling. And in this province, the modelling effort is led by individuals, some of whom are in my own department—CFO, and Assistant Deputy Minister Dan Skwarchuk, a team of other individuals in the incident command structure—who worked very tirelessly in the early months of the pandemic, liaised with their counterparts in other jurisdictions, liaised with the federal government but, in the end, built a model that is made in Manitoba.

* (15:30)

This is an agent-based modelling system that is highly sophisticated and has the capability to run thousands of simulations that would measure inputs and then combine those inputs and—to produce various scenarios that would show impact in jurisdiction.

Impacts in things like travel spread, community spread, new cases, impact on health system, impact on resources, impact on hospitalizations, impact on ICU beds, impact on ventilator demand. We used—we compared Manitoba's spread to a spread in international jurisdictions. I can recall getting some of this first modelling out the door, basically benchmarking Manitoba's data against Dubai's spread, against the north Italy spreads, Spanish spread, New York spread, showing what that modelling was depicting.

I believe that this modelling has helped us to make impacts in the system, make investments and to prepare ourselves to be able to keep COVID out. I know that in the early days of Manitoba and COVID-19, understanding what we learned from the importation of the virus due to travel, we were able to significantly close our borders, which we believe kept people alive.

A few more things I would say about the modelling. Like I said, a trajectory of COVID-19 here, modelled against other Canadian jurisdictions, modelled against international jurisdictions, that modelling helping us to form the capacity to meet the demand. I would also note about modelling, we use data from other jurisdictions and from across Canada to develop our own, like I said, Manitoba epidemiological COVID-19 model.

It's important to note that modelling always presents an abstraction. The further out you model, the less reliable those results become. Projections in modelling of a new viral disease are even more inaccurate, and that is why we continue to model, and as we get new information we continue to refine our projections, models and advice to the government as a result of that.

I would also indicate the public's behaviour is key in the effectiveness and predictability of the model. And that is why it is so incredibly important right now, as the Chief Provincial Public Health Officer has said, as the Premier (Mr. Pallister) as—of Manitoba has said, as all of us continue to say. It is crucial right now that Manitobans heed the warnings, recognize the level of threat, read and acquaint themselves with the new

levels of risk management and conduct themselves accordingly.

MLA Asagwara: Can the minister tell us if the government's current modelling that's being used is consistent with the projections from the University of Washington Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation that suggests that 2,600 Manitobans will die of COVID-19 by January?

Is the minister's government—is the Pallister government's, rather, modelling consistent with this projection, and what is the current modelling telling us? What is the current modelling telling the Pallister government?

Thank you.

Mr. Friesen: The member should be clear that they are asking about different models.

As I indicated, Manitoba's model is an agent-based model. Our assumption here at this table is that the model being referred to by the member is a statistical-base model. This is a bit like asking if a dog is like a cat. In some respects it is, and in some respects it is very different. And so I would indicate to the member that the answer to their question would be, in this case, no.

MLA Asagwara: What is the current modelling telling the government?

Mr. Friesen: About what?

MLA Asagwara: If the minister could provide as much information as possible in terms of the data that is being projected as a result of the modelling currently being used—so, specifically, what categories of focus there are and what is being generated as a result and how that is informing the Pallister government.

Mr. Friesen: The member asks what the modelling is telling the government. That's a fair question. Allow me to answer.

So what the modelling is intended to do is to provide a level of predictability in our jurisdiction to understand in these pandemic conditions how to plan. So the purpose of modelling is for planning and execution of that plan in order to do what? To allow the health system to continue to function to maximum efficiency. And when we say efficiency, we mean getting patients into their surgeries. We mean getting people to their appointments. We mean getting patients to their diagnostic tests.

But it also helps us to plan for our public health interventions. So the purpose of that modelling is to help us to understand where do we need to have screening sites and how soon do we need them, and what is the laboratory capacity that we will ideally need, and what is that laboratory capacity we will need if the numbers go to X or Y or Z.

* (15:40)

So it doesn't just model out one scenario. Rather, it models a myriad of scenarios that are constantly then rechecked, and then that advice is presented to decision makers at the health incident command structure and elsewhere to help them make intelligent and evidence-based decisions about how to conduct the health-care system.

Now I want to stop here for a second to test the member's preference for a Washington-State-generated statistical model. Now I don't know on what basis the member has selected this one modelling platform at the expense of the hundreds of other models that are out there, but I would want to challenge the member to say, you know, the applicability of that model to Manitoba; I would question this. This is not a model uniquely designed to be able to understand the uniqueness of Manitoba's demographics. I imagine this is a broad approach that allows them to input certain population levels and then spit out data according to different—in different jurisdictions. So I would say that it's a different type of modelling. Ours is agent based; this is statistical based.

But I don't have to go back many months to recall that I was presented with models that showed impact in places like Ontario and Quebec, impact in Canada, and these models, presented only months ago, statistical, have now been demonstrated to have been wildly inaccurate. Now that's not because someone wasn't doing their job. It was because we understand more now about COVID-19 than we did in March or June or even September, I would submit.

So I would caution the member that they should, if they're going to explore the area of modelling, that needs to be a broad and significant exploration of modelling: its use, the differences in methodology, the level of sophistication in the models. And, as I said, certainly here, our modelling does not support the—what the member has suggested.

In answer to the member's question, though, so the evidence we are gathering from our modelling is helping us to make decisions about the R_0 of the virus.

It's helping us to make decisions about the spread in communities. It's helping us, of course, to make decisions about how we plan our hospitals.

And this is a good chance for me to say that those who recently wrote to us and expressed concern as doctors—look, we appreciate that doctors are concerned; we appreciate that. There are many points of agreement in the letter. As a matter of fact, we're—there's a response to those doctors going out as soon as we possibly can provide it to indicate that on a broad variety of the things raised, we completely agree.

But the one area, of course, we need to be careful of is we could have more ICU capacity today. We could do it. We could have 25 per cent more ICU capacity in the next 48 hours than we have right now. But what are the things we would say no to as a result? Surgeries, procedures, diagnostics, other activities in our health-care system. The fact is, we have capacity right now. We need to plan to be able to retain that capacity in future. And that's the work that modelling helps us with.

MLA Asagwara: It's unfortunate that the minister won't provide greater clarity surrounding the data that is extracted from the chosen model. And I can certainly appreciate the expertise within the department that would see them utilize one model versus another in order to get the appropriate information and capture the data that is necessary to make informed decisions during this pandemic.

I would suggest that being clear and transparent about what data is being extracted and how that data is informing decision making and strategic planning during this pandemic is an opportunity to alleviate the anxieties of Manitobans, to alleviate the anxieties of medical professionals who are weighing in on what's going on during this pandemic, and to better inform people on why the government is making the decisions it's making and taking the approaches that it is. So I'm disappointed that, you know, we're not able to get more clarity from the minister on that, but seeing as how the minister did touch on ICU capacity, I might as well move in that direction.

So last week, Lanette Siragusa confirmed that at a time—at the time, Winnipeg—Winnipeg region, rather, had less intensive-care capacity than it did in 2017. So as of last week, Lanette Siragusa confirmed that we have less intensive-care capacity than we did in 2017. And as the minister just stated, additional beds can definitely be added in a crisis, but, you know, unfortunately, that would mean cancelling surgeries

and using those beds, and that's not anything more than an immediate crisis strategy, and it's not one that can be maintained over the winter months. We know that.

And so I'd like to highlight what Dr. Daniel Roberts put forward, and Dr. Daniel Roberts is an ICU doctor. He actually wrote the minister in October of 2019, and stated he was deeply concerned by the double-digit intensive-care-bed contraction that occurred in 2019.

Then, this year, during the COVID crisis, Dr. Roberts wrote the minister again—twice, actually, in the last month—asking for more aggressive mitigation efforts to be made. However, Dr. Roberts, unfortunately, has yet to receive a response from the minister.

So, can the minister please tell us how many dedicated ICU beds there are in the Winnipeg area and how many of those beds are currently available to be put to use?

Mr. Friesen: I want to make it clear to the critic for Health that I welcome a broad and continued examination of the—how our modelling is informing our evidence-based decisions that is helping to keep Manitobans safe during a global pandemic. I reject any assertion by the member that somehow this is not a conversation that I want to have, but most of all, I reject the member's statement that, somehow, I should be more concerned with alleviating the anxiety of Manitobans.

I assure that member, and all members, that we are very concerned with alleviating the anxiety of Manitobans, and that is exactly why we are taking action on COVID-19. It is why we are communicating with Manitobans well and often through a three-times-per-week briefing in room 68 with the Chief Provincial Public Health Officer and the Chief Integration Officer leading this COVID response. It is why we are choosing to educate Manitobans on a consistent basis about the pandemic response system set of levels and how those levels can—will protect them. It is why we continue to remind Manitobans of the investments that this government is bringing—financial, health, human resource, opening screening sites, adding capacity to keep people safe.

But I would ask the member to look in the mirror and truly ask themselves whether they believe they are doing all they can to alleviate the anxiety of Manitobans, when the member chose from a Google search a statistical model out of the US and just

predicted that 2,600 people were going to die by January in Manitoba, a statistical model that has no sophisticated application to Manitoba, and yet that is what the member chooses to put on the record for the purposes of this Committee of Supply today, with no evidence, with no basis, with no foresight and supposedly without any significant exploration of how that information should be received.

So I want to restate that there is no modelling that we have conducted that would support this claim of the member. I would also say to the member that they are equally not helping to alleviate the anxiety of Manitobans when they continue to state that cohorting wasn't done at Parkview Place, it was; when they continue to state that residents at Parkview Place were not contacted by the facility, they were; when they continued to say that PPE wasn't available in long-term care homes, and it was; when they continue to say that the WRHA was not responding, and they were; when they continue to say that doctors were not at the facility, and they were; and the member knows the list goes on.

There is a legitimate role that the opposition parties of Manitoba need to occupy during a global pandemic. And I'm not saying that that is a role that doesn't include criticism. Of course, that includes criticism. But there's a role that the opposition can support in the interest of the public, of Manitobans, who, right now, are really scared. There are some Manitobans who are really scared.

And I have to wonder about the motivation of those doctors who signed that letter, and I know many of them and I will talk to many of them. And I get it; they're scared and they want the best for their patients, and I absolutely agree.

But I wonder at the motivation to produce that letter, to produce—to generate it at a time when they knew it would have maximum effect in causing chaos in the system, when Manitobans need most to understand that the people in charge have got this.

And my message to Manitobans is: Those people that we put in charge, they've got this. It doesn't mean there aren't concerns. It doesn't mean there won't be challenges, but the models and the system planning is very significant.

If we need greater interactions with doctors, I—absolutely, let's do it. I instructed Shared Health yesterday to share often and well information about these plans that are going on, to make sure that those doctors raising concerns know what's going on.

Tonight at 7 p.m., I'll be on the call, talking to doctors about the changes we're making in the system to keep their patients safe.

But by all means, if this member wants to talk about alleviating the anxiety of Manitobans, they should start by looking in the mirror.

MLA Asagwara: Thank the minister for clarifying that the modelling the government is doing does not reflect what was published in the Free Press. And I think it's an example for the minister of how that simple answer to that question would alleviate the anxieties of so many Manitobans who also saw that publication and who would appreciate that feedback from their government regarding what their modelling is providing in terms of information and data and any projections. So I actually thank the minister for clarifying that, and I know that Manitobans will appreciate that clarification.

I didn't get any clear indication, though, unfortunately, in terms of how many ICU beds there are in the Winnipeg area and how many of them are currently available to be put to use, if the minister could provide an answer on that.

Mr. Friesen: I'm happy to speak to ICU capacity in Manitoba at this current time and provide an update. But I did want to speak just for a moment about—the member alluded to Dr. Dan Roberts, and I didn't want to let the opportunity go by to speak to that. Dr. Dan Roberts did write to me last fall, and I would want to be clear here that Dr. Dan Roberts was, of course, the leader of critical care in the WRHA, going back a number of years now. I would remind the member that Dr. Dan Roberts was an individual who at the time of their leadership position actually advocated long and hard for the consolidation of critical-care capacity in the WRHA.

I will say that again. Dr. Dan Roberts advocated long and hard for the consolidation of critical-care capacity in the WRHA. That work that he spoke of at that time, that work that many system leaders at the time spoke of, was supported, of course, during that Peachey report written by Dr. David Peachey. It was supported when Dr. David Peachey returned to the province to do a follow-up report. It has been confirmed through our healing our health care changes, those wave one of the wave two changes in Winnipeg, and I would indicate to all members that we believe that that consolidation that took place to really identify those community hospital sites as being able to provide excellent services for a lesser level of acuity than an intensive-care unit has been a

significant benefit to the system. We believe that our influenza season last year was assisted by the fact that we had that significant response in place and the ability to have that consolidated capability on two sites and not greater than two sites.

I would also indicate to the member that when it comes to Dr. Dan Roberts, we responded last fall promptly to the concerns that Dr. Dan Roberts was raising. We met with Doctors Manitoba, system leaders engaged with the critical-care doctors. As a consequence of those discussions, there was actually capability built into the system that was in, I would say, in the spirit of our planned changes, but did actually represent an augmentation of our original design. So there was that good working relationship that produced the—some of the enhancements that Dr. Dan Roberts and others were looking for, and I believe—and I would want to say today, we continue to believe in the planned changes of the health-care system designed to get better health care sooner, to provide co-ordinated care. I read through detailed analysis that has been gleaned from Concordia Hospital, Seven Oaks hospital and Victoria hospital, three community hospitals that provide exceptional service in respect of their clinics now that they provide—not intensive care units but—they're not walk-in clinics but they're—excuse me for a just a moment—the word is escaping me. I'll come up with that terminology in just a minute, but it's that step down from ICU, that ability for people to come from community and receive that appropriate care.

* (16:00)

And here's what the data tells us: that the volumes presenting at those three hospitals is up significantly but that, at the same time, the wait times are down significantly. And, at the same time, at all three sites, patient satisfaction is up significantly. And at the same time, we have seen the evidence of those critical care units being able to, in a more cohorted, co-ordinated way, to provide the care that Manitobans need.

So I thank the member for allowing me to give that response, and I will endeavour to give the next response that I have available to them when my time has been renewed. And I believe that is on the subject of Manitoba's ICU capacity—where it stands today.

MLA Asagwara: I very much look forward to hearing about that capacity and if the minister, while also providing clarification around the ICU beds that are available in the Winnipeg area—in terms of how many of them are currently available to be put to use. If the minister could also indicate for the rest of the

province how many dedicated ICU beds are there and how many are available to be put to use.

Mr. Friesen: I thank the member for repeating the question. Here is the answer to that question.

So, first of all, I—I'm assuming that the member understands that there are only two cities in which we have true ICU capability in this province, and those are Winnipeg and Brandon.

As I'm saying this, I'm sorry to defer here for a second but, Mr. Chair, I have to solicit now from my staff to come and bring my charger because such are the limitations logistically in this office, that I just saw a note pop up that said my computer is about to die. And so I'm afraid that our modelling capability was not able to indicate with more advanced notice that I'm about to run out of charge, and I'm sorry to cause you to indicate that I'm very, very displeased with the fact that Apple has changed the method of their charging devices so that the charger provided to me is not actually working to charge my device.

One moment, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: We'll give him—[interjection] Are you ready?

Mr. Friesen: ICU capacity—as of 9:30 today, census is that ICU capacity is indicating we have a 9 per cent at current capacity in the system. We have 73 ICU beds in Winnipeg—actually, I believe it might be 74 beds. And I believe that indicates an increase of 3 beds from just this same time last year to—so, kudos to all the system leaders who are once again demonstrating their commitment to be able to make the system flex up to be able to provide the capacity we need.

In addition to that, of course, we have six beds that are now fully utilizable in the city of Brandon and we know that, at this point in time, out of all of those ICU beds, 20 of those are occupied currently by COVID-19 patients. Twelve COVID-19 patients in the ICU on ventilators. As I said, today's ICU count is inclusive of Brandon Regional Health Centre, the St. Boniface Hospital and Health Sciences Centre.

I fly to you just now that three additional ICU beds were added to Winnipeg's ICU capacity over the weekend. It's increase—that increase is, of course, part of our efforts to flex up the health-care system capacity in preparation for a patient surge that would be demanded in future conditions, should they be warranted.

The number of people in our ICUs is a snapshot in time. It changes by the day. I would submit it can even change by the hour. Patients are transferred in and out regularly, and that is why these numbers change.

Oh, by the way, I should mention, as well, when I was saying ICU, HSC and St. Boniface, I don't want to fail to also disclose that, sorry, Grace Hospital, of course we've got ICU beds at Grace Hospital as well, and that is such an important hospital in which we continue to invest. I had recently the opportunity—not in COVID-19, but previous, to tour the new emergency department that is helping so many patients—new, modern, spacious, state of the art, the staff so appreciative of the new space in which they practise and move about and serve patients.

And I want to say, as well, what matters greatly in this conversation is the conversation that has been missing from the opposition's narrative about how the health-care system is run, and I want to say this: Last year, I reflected on the fact that we had 400 hospitalizations as a result of influenza. Last year we had 40 individuals who needed an ICU bed due to influenza and, when that occurred, there were decisions that had to be made because those influenza patients were not the only ones in ICU beds. There were people there from acute injury, trauma, recovery from surgery, heart attack. Other individuals for different reasons were occupying ICU beds and, because of that, decisions were made in influenza to be able to pause, decant patients to other areas in order to create the capacity we need.

And that is what is being done now by system leaders. We could add 40 per cent more beds in a matter of days to ICU, but members must understand that system leaders would not do that.

Why not? Because it would mean the cessation of other activities—life-giving, life-saving activities like surgeries and procedures that are going on now, and that is why we choose to travel in our system at 95, 92 per cent continuous capacity. There are levels and thresholds established for where we want to see the system run. You want the system to run lean so that it can attend to all the other challenges and activities that the health-care system needs to attend to.

And I hope that brings clarification as to how we will continue to plan the system so that it's there for COVID-19 and it's there for Manitobans.

MLA Asagwara: Can the minister differentiate between the additional dedicated ICU beds and surgical beds, which will be taken out of use to meet this crisis, and can the minister—given the projections, can the minister anticipate, or, rather, when does the minister anticipate that Winnipeg and Manitoba will run out of ICU beds?

* (16:10)

Mr. Friesen: To the member's question, I'm going to come around to indicate to the member that they are asking the wrong question, but I'm going to say that with respect, and I'm going to give the answer and the rationale as to why I believe the member is asking the wrong question when the member asks: What day are you going to run out of ICU beds?

So, let me start by saying this. There is the health incident command structure that we spoke of earlier this afternoon. That health incident command structure includes a planning table. That planning table is charged with the responsibility of ensuring that the question that the member asked doesn't need to be answered.

And I can tell you that some of the early work of that planning table led by Dr. Perry Gray, who is both the chief medical officer for Shared Health and the planning chief at that table, in conjunction with that team that he co-ordinates, the early works included the buying of additional equipment, and Manitobans will know we bought and brought into location 419 ventilators into Manitoba—actually that might be the total number of ventilators that we now have, but it includes hundreds of additional ventilators brought into Manitoba as a result of that planning; other equipment and resources brought into the jurisdiction for planning; the decanting of hospital activities out of certain wards at HSC to be able to put up what in their words were pristine COVID-19 beds. All of this is part of the advance planning that this group did.

And so, what I would want to say to the member is the reason that the member's question is the wrong question is that the work we are doing is to ensure that capacity exists both now in the system and in future to respond to what both the modelling and the real-world daily conditions tell us about the need to treat patients in hospitals.

Dr. Brent Roussin has always made clear that while Manitobans interest themselves, sometimes primarily or predominantly, in the daily case count, the daily case count actually, for system leaders, has

less importance—not less caring—less importance than the metrics of hospitalizations, ICU capacity, ventilator capacity. Morbidity, mortality, capacity in the system. Because that is what guides us to be able to create the conditions to make sure that we are giving hospital care in the most appropriate way.

The member asked a question about how many ICU beds do you have. We have 33 ICU beds at Health Sciences Centre. We have 13 at St. Boniface Hospital. We have Grace Hospital with another 10 beds. We have Health Sciences Centre cardiac unit—cardiac-care-unit beds as well, three of those. St. Boniface Hospital has 22 cardiac-care-unit beds. Health Sciences Centre has, in addition, 12 high-observation-unit beds. St. Boniface Hospital has another intermediate-care unit of nine beds. When you constitute all of this together, it creates some significant capacity of 109 beds.

Now, somebody might say, well, look, minister, you can't say that all of those beds would be immediately able to be deployed for critical care in respect of COVID-19. And you would be right to say that. But we do know, then, we have as well under way, very significant efforts to be able to stand up additional capacity as it would be necessary to. This is why we have solicited from doctors a commitment to be redeployed in our system. This is why we have in our system the ability to take acute-care beds now and to turn them into de facto intensive-care units if we would get to the point in a series of staged and planned levels in a, what we might call a break-glass scenario where we would be able to move additional resources into there, pull up medicine beds to fill that gap, redeploy nurse resource and other to help along the way.

So, and I just want to say in the time remaining, the chief nursing officer, Lanette Siragusa, did an excellent job of providing a sort of technical briefing only last Friday to Manitobans so they would understand more how this works to provide the context and the capability that we need for COVID-19.

MLA Asagwara: Can the minister provide some clarity around what the nurse-to-patient ratios for critical care are, so, ICUs, specifically. What was the nurse—critical-nurse-to-patient ratio before the pandemic, and what is the most recent nurse-to-patient ratios at this time for critical-care nurses providing care to patients in ICU?

Mr. Friesen: So in the health-care system, of course, we have a broad variety, a broad array of clinical

settings in hospitals in acute-care settings and, you know, ICU beds, different levels of ICU beds. We have medicine beds. We have post-surgery beds. We have recovery beds. We have, you know, post-procedure beds. We have more longer term care beds.

And to the member's question, that level of ratio as it exists at the highest level of the system, that most intense care per patient per nurse, is a ratio of one to one.

* (16:20)

MLA Asagwara: Can the minister provide some clarity surrounding what those ratios he's talked about—expanded capacity for ICU—can the minister clarify what the nurse—the critical nurse-to-patient ratio would be in ICU beds that have been expanded for capacity?

So, specifically, the minister mentioned that there are additional beds that could be accessed beyond the beds at the strictly—specifically ICU beds at HSC, St. B, Grace Hospital, Brandon. I'm wondering if the minister can clarify what the critical nurse-to-patient ratio would be for ICU patients that would be at the expanded bed capacity.

Mr. Friesen: Happy to provide an answer. It has to be a qualified answer of course, now, because this work is still in process to understand how we take the necessary supplies, the equipment, the beds, the health, human resource and to be able to reconstitute our health-care system to appropriately then respond to the level of COVID-19 threat that we have.

So that is—that's a complicated game of chess; that's not checkers.

And I want to refer to the notes that Lanette Siragusa offered to Manitobans, the address that she gave on Friday as part of that Friday briefing with the Chief Provincial Public Health Officer and herself. And at that time, our chief integration officer, Lanette Siragusa, offered an explanation of a multiphase approach to expand capacity into the system, and I thought it was very well done, so I congratulate Ms. Siragusa for that.

But essentially, if I sum up what she said, it would include the following: that, you know, in phase 1 of an expansion of our system, that would be our most 'rapt'—rapid form of surge capacity. We could do it quickly, we could do it likely within a week. Ready the spaces, move the patients, get the staff redeployed.

And what it involved, essentially, is taking our medicine and critical care capacity right now, just as I

referred to in my previous answer, and expanding their footprint, building that bed base within their existing areas and facilities. So that physical space is appropriate, the equipment is there, staffing is primarily there. We just reassign certain providers, we maximize everybody's scope of practice and then that plan would include overflow beds and it would include redeploying existing staff who are trained to work in those areas but might be working elsewhere in our system.

And then it involves, as we've spoken about, the decreasing of the non-urgent elective surgeries and procedures. And that frees up beds. Because if you go into a hospital for an orthopedic surgery on your shoulder and now you're recuperating, you may have to be in that bed. Well now, if we're not doing that surgery, that bed becomes available to us. And it's a bed that can come available to us quite quickly.

We have access to just under 2,000 employees who work in the Winnipeg metropolitan area—health-care professionals with experience, with competency, who are experienced in managing high acute patients—physicians, nurses, respiratory therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists. And so, if we stop doing services somewhere in the system, we can start doing it there.

Phase 2 is different. That's a planned expansion of our system. Phase 2, the bed map changes get accomplished over a period of two to three weeks, they are activated according to needs. And, in this case, we have 'physical' spaces that might need some modification or changes, we might need some staff models that are not as conventional as the ones we used in phase 1, and those discussions continue.

So to the member's question, those discussions are exactly in continuation right now. We know that everyone wants to help. We know that health-care professionals get into this work because they want to help. They are courageous; they're on the job every day. Salutations here and our thanks from all of us—I know I say that on behalf of all members of the Legislature—to all members of the health-care profession who serve us so well every single day right now.

But those—that work continues with those representative groups because we have to know how we can shift resources, we have to know who can use to do what. For example, when we change that ability to have a nasopharyngeal swab administered by a broader group of professionals—and I would invite questions about that—that was because our professions

came together and said yes, we can go for this, we understand that other people can do this work.

And then, of course, phase 3 is that off-site expansion. Phase 3 is even an elevated level of risk, it's that break-glass scenario in which we say we need our hospitals right now for the most important things, for the most important addressing of the surge in patient numbers. And then therefore, in that topic—that's why we did the RFP—we would then have expanded beds for hospital and for COVID, and we would have lower acuity patients somewhere into an overflow site.

So all of these things require planning, equipment, beds, supply and health human resource.

MLA Asagwara: It's unfortunate the minister couldn't provide specific detail around that health human resource aspect of what was my question.

I think it's an important question to have answers to and clarity around. We know how vital critical-care nurses are and the expertise that they bring to our health-care systems, certainly during this pandemic when we see ICU beds being utilized the way that they are for COVID patients, and we're heading into the convergence of COVID and flu season and the realities that are attached to that.

And so I would imagine that, in terms of planning and the realities of what could be an extended and expanded health-care system and the generation of beds that would require ICU-type patients, that we would have clarity around what that nurse-to-patient ratio would be.

But since the minister is clearly not interested in answering that very important question, I'm going to hand it over to my colleague, the member for Point Douglas (Mrs. Smith), and for her line of questioning.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairperson: I just wanted to make sure that the minister wants to respond to the comment of the member from Union Station.

Mr. Friesen: Thank you. I do.

Mr. Chairperson: Go ahead.

Mr. Friesen: Yes, I would like to respond to that because, while I did not hear a question there, the member asserted that I had no interest in answering questions about staff in the health-care system as it would continue to respond to COVID-19, and that is false.

So I'm happy to put on the record additional information about how important staff in our system is during a global pandemic. As all members of the Legislature know, that the greatest vulnerability we probably have, all of us together—Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, British Columbia, Nebraska, you know, the Netherlands, all of us—it's health-care staffing.

We know that we can have the most pristine wards ready. We know we can have ventilators at the ready. We know that we can have pharmaceuticals at the ready. But if we don't have health-care workers during a global pandemic, we're in trouble. And that is why our first priority has been the protection of our workforce so that they can care for the needs of our population.

* (16:30)

I remind all members of the Legislature, in the early days of the pandemic we worked that hard to get PPE available. We also worked that hard to make sure that we gave priority to health-care workers so that in daycare settings they would be able to have first dibs so they could get back to work.

We were able to—in more recent days, we've already started using pilot projects on rapid testing to be able to give differential priority to health-care workers to be able to test and, if negative, to return to the workforce. I want to tell the member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara) and my colleagues who join us on this—in these proceedings this afternoon, that I spoke to the federal minister, Patty Hajdu, on Sunday. The deputy minister and I had a—this 'effor'—opportunity to update our counterparts on the continued initiatives and actions under way in Manitoba. And I made very, very evident to the federal minister that Manitoba needs differential and priority access to rapid test devices here.

Yes, we know that those rapid testing devices have begun to trickle into our jurisdiction. I'm only hearing of a handful thousand of devices that have come here—a handful thousand of test capabilities that have come here through those devices. We need hundreds of thousands of those tests, not just three or four thousand. I know that even this afternoon, the Minister for Central Services services is connecting with his federal counterpart to reinforce and redouble the efforts that we have undertaken to further explore that—the willingness or the ability of the federal government to meet this requirement.

And so we thank the federal government for hearing us out on Sunday, and our hope is that those rapid tests will be deployed here, and those rapid tests will go to keeping our workforce safe. The staff are—continue to have access to PPE and wearing and using it. Staff who are exposed are self-isolating. Like I said, staff with mild symptoms are being offered these pilot testing in some sites. And if negative, they're cleared to go back to work wearing full PPE.

But in addition to that, we've recruited and continue to recruit new casual and term employees. We're receiving 50 applications a day, and I'm just so pleased to hear that we have employees continuing to demonstrate that they want to come back to work. We moved early to be able to create the conditions for former nurses to come back to work. We waived certain expenses that they would incur in order to do so. We worked collaboratively with the college of nurses in Manitoba to be able to receive licensing and be expedited into roles. And nurses who have been off work for longer than five years can still return to work in other capacities. And we continue to, you know, use our staffing strategy, a team-based model, to be able to provide care and to offset potential staff shortages in key areas.

So all of this, this involves great care, great planning, great co-ordination, great partnership with representative organizations. And I can speak with confidence when I say those conditions are in place. None of us have all the answers, but all of the people in charge of this effort are working very, very carefully and diligently to ensure that as conditions continue we have a gaze fixed on capacity and fixed on our operational plans to be able to get more capacity as we go around—along.

I would ask the member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara) if they continue to have other questions in respect of planning, I'm happy to answer them. I am simply unable to answer this—the single question they've asked today—pardon me—because we simply, at this point in time, remain in those conversations to determine, not just at phase 1, but phase 2 and phase 3, of what would be required in terms of redeployment of workforce.

Mrs. Bernadette Smith (Point Douglas): I want to thank my colleague from Union Station for sharing their expertise. I know they've been on the ground, on the front lines for a lot of years and have a lot of knowledge around, you know, dealing with critical patients and dealing with Manitobans and hearing out their voices and bringing their voices forward and

trying to get answers, you know, from this government, especially in a global pandemic that we find ourselves in.

So I have a few questions, and I'm hoping the minister will take as little time as possible to answer them, and be as focused and specific to answering the question as he can.

So my first question is that we know that there's an agreement with Canada for mental health and addictions support that's 100 per cent federal dollars. We know that in the first year of the agreement, 2018-2019, the Province underspent by \$5 million.

How much was allocated to the Province in these two areas in fiscal year 2019-2020? How much was spent and how much has the province requested to carry forward?

Mr. Friesen: So we were pleased to sign the bilateral agreement with the federal government, the Canada-Manitoba shared health priorities bilateral agreement, in respect of home care, in respect of mental health and addictions. And we all know how important it is to be investing in mental health and addictions, and that is why our government has been pleased to do so.

I would say to the member that the way that the agreement was reached in respect of the fiscal year 2018-2019 and the fiscal year 2019-2020, that it was hardwired into the agreement with the federal government to be able to, essentially, expend amounts and then to be able to allocate forward the unexpended amounts so that it would not lapse and could be considered for expenditure and investment in a successive year.

The reason this was done is as a smoothing mechanism to make sure that provinces and territories in receipt of funds would have the ability to build the programs, would have the ability to build the initiatives, would have the ability to plan in a co-ordinated and coherent way the investments on the basis of evidence to have maximum impact in their jurisdiction.

So first of all, I would say this is not new. This is not a surprise. This is not a revelation. This was hardwired, baked into the agreement with the federal government.

* (16:40)

I can indicate to all members that we have made significant, incredible investments here in the province of Manitoba. I would clarify for the member,

we are very much investing the money of Manitobans when it comes to the significant investments we've made to get better results in mental health and addictions. For years and years in Manitoba, under the previous government, as the VIRGO report, as our tri-government task force into mental health and addictions that was conducted last year with the City of Winnipeg and the federal government was able to make clear, and as other reports like the community safety and public—Community Wellness and Public Safety Alliance report in this province, that for years and years in this province there were opportunities forgone to create a more coherent, a more co-ordinated, less siloed mental health and addictions framework of programs that would get better results for Manitobans.

The criticism of the VIRGO report in respect of the former NDP system was too siloed, duplicative, funding for inputs but not for results, no clear understanding of measurement or evaluation of program success, duplication waste and the lack of the demonstration of partnership, not enough focus on adolescent mental health, not enough focus on early interventions, not enough uptake of things like digitally based modes of treatment and support and health and counselling. And I am pleased to indicate that this is exactly the analysis we've undertaken. We have worked hard to understand where the VIRGO report and other reports were pointing this province. And we have made demonstrable product—we've made demonstrable process advances in all of these areas.

So let me speak just briefly about a few of them. We just opened our most recent RAAM clinic in Manitoba. It becomes our sixth RAAM clinic. We also opened a RAAM hub. We have recently announced a \$3.5-million investment at HSC Winnipeg in the emergency department to add trained addictions and mental-health-care workers in the emergency department; on-site addictions physicians or psychiatrists on weekends and evenings, not just daytime—an investment that the NDP ignored for years and years; a new expanded eating disorder program. And I would love to speak in my next answer about additional investments in mental health and addictions.

Mrs. Smith: Again, I'll ask the minister three simple questions. He didn't answer one of them.

So the first was, how much has been allocated from the federal government for the fiscal year 2019-2020? How much has been spent to date? And

how much has the Province requested to carry over? The minister spoke about—that it's—the money wouldn't lapse, that it can be carried over for consecutive years. So speak to how much they received, how much they've spent and how much they're carrying over.

Mr. Friesen: I'm happy to continue to provide a response here.

So, as I indicated, you know, the amounts that are agreed to under the federal-provincial bilateral agreement on home care and mental health and addictions, is—it's publicly reported, like, it's not a secret. So I would just direct the member to the Health Canada website where all the bilateral agreements are indicated, the specifics of those agreements, the amounts that are agreed to under the five-year funding framework, the ability to push forward amounts under—that are intended to be expended in future years. There are significant reporting requirements. We are in the—just the process of dotting the i's and crossing the t's in respect of our annual process to report back. And so that's being finalized, and that is why we can't provide real numbers today, but that work continues, and it is exactly as I indicated.

Oh, I should indicate as well that when it comes to those reporting conditions and those reporting requirements, those are very significant, and so we report and indicate according to the federal framework where the amounts are being expended, what type of a program this is, if it's valid and meets certain conditions under the funding requirements, and we are confident in all of these cases that these new initiatives are doing that. Our Manitoba team negotiated well to make sure that we would have the necessary manoeuvrability in respect of this agreement.

I can recall now, and this takes me back to my early days as a minister, but I can recall how in those early days we needed to get more portability in respect of this arrangement to be able to know that the investments would go where they needed to go in Manitoba. And it was due to the successful interactions between federal and provincial officials that we were able to get that accommodation to allow us to make the investments where they're having the most impact.

And, yes, to the member's question, it is exactly this federal funding that we are leveraging to make these important investments. This same member asked a question last week in the House about

naloxone kits, so I would reflect for the member from Point Douglas that it is exactly this category under which we were able to fund an additional \$200,000 to double the access of Manitobans to naloxone kits. And I remind the member that, in the first three months of 2020, we had distributed more than 1,300 kits to distribution sites because of this increase.

We expanded in June a support to—for community-based trauma services for newcomers and refugees suffering from the post-traumatic stress disorder, over \$2 million for those investments.

We were pleased in mid-June to add 70 supportive recovery housing units in Winnipeg that are targeted for Siloam Mission, Riverwood Community Church Incorporated and Tamarack Recovery Inc., which is located just down the street here on West Broadway. I had the opportunity to tour at Tamarack a number of months ago, and I believe I say with confidence that those rooms are already up and coming, and the board and executive of Tamarack was just over the moon that they were considered for this funding that is helping them to meet expanded programming, provide housing, to provide that necessary place for someone to go when they come out of treatment and then have a bed and an environment and a community that cares and accountability around them that gets them out of their addiction and into a better place in their life.

* (16:50)

I met with one of the clients at Tamarack that day, and I won't use names because they wouldn't appreciate that, but what a powerful encounter to meet with an individual where the programming of an agency like this has made such a difference in their lives.

Mr. Chair, \$3.5 million to Bruce Oake Recovery Centre under this same category. We are so pleased to be able to provide 50 additional residential addiction treatment beds. Peer support and family support services: \$1.5 million just recently to the Manitoba Schizophrenia Society. We launched a—\$25 million in mental health and addictions in just the past number of months, and I only regret that, again, my time is going to run out before I'm able to give a full accounting to that member and all members of the Legislature of the important areas in which our government is making these necessary and timely investments in mental health and addictions.

Mrs. Smith: I'm not sure why the minister is trying to mislead the House. The financial statements went into

the federal government October 1st, so that minister knows full well how much money is being carried over from this agreement.

So, again, I'll ask this minister: How much money is being carried over from this agreement?

Mr. Friesen: Well, I'm not sure if the minister just doesn't understand the process of how a significant engagement under a five-year bilateral agreement has conditions, including significant reporting requirements.

If the member needs the assurances that officials at the highest level are working to provide that detail to the federal government in that formalization process, I will give her those assurances. That is exactly the work that senior officials are doing, interacting with their federal counterparts to provide that accounting of what amounts are expended.

Understand, I've just read out hundreds of millions of dollars of investments in Manitoba for people that are creating greater access to mental health and addictions services here, shortening wait times, providing a broad array of services, emergency interventions at hospitals, treatment capacity, addictions treatment beds, longer term supportive housing impacts and arrangements, access to pharmaceuticals and other solutions, including, but not limited to, naloxone. This is exactly what the blueprint was as spelled out in the VIRGO report. It said, you have a highly siloed system that has been unattended to for years and years—incidentally, under the former NDP government—and they said, you must create a continuity, a continuum of services that will not allow people to fall through the gaps.

I am pleased to say that working with, you know, people who are advocates, for instance, in mental health and addictions and things like eating disorders that, you know, with the support of advocates in that space, like Elaine Stevenson, who has advocated for years and years in Manitoba for greater resources to be made available so that when you have a young girl or a young boy who is struggling with an eating disorder, that instead of telling them to get on a long wait time and get sicker, we now have impact; we have capacity that did not exist just six months ago in this province. And for years when I was the critic I asked three separate NDP Health ministers to get up and make that investment, and none of them did; not one of them did it.

And I can't tell you how heartbreaking it is to hear from someone like Elaine Stevenson who has lived

experiences. She and her daughter, who used to do national media to draw the attention of mature governments to the need to make these investments, I can't tell you how overwhelming it was to be there with Rick and Elaine at that day at Health Sciences Centre and make that announcement and to know now that if there is a young girl or boy or adolescent or young woman, young man, who—or adult who is raising their hand and saying: I know that I've got an issue here, I know it needs addressing, I'm willing to seek treatments; that we're not putting them on a long wait-list. We're sending them to treatment in a greater capacity than we did just months ago in this province.

So there's no obfuscation. There's no obscurity here. There is a process here by which officials are engaging to formalize and finalize the arrangements in respect of the elapsed fiscal year, to be able to push forward and do the carry forward into the next planned—next year. And I look forward to providing even more evidence of the investments that we've made because there are so many that I was only able to read what we've been able to do since January the 1st of 2020.

But I assure that member we have been working on these planned investments for a much longer time, including, I failed to state, that when it came to naloxone distribution, naloxone kits distributed for free now through the Manitoba's take-home naloxone program, the THNP.

I should reflect here that the Department of Health, Seniors and Active Living really loves its acronyms and so they never fail to put acronyms in here. But that's a really incredible program that has, just in the last three years, sent home more than 7,000 take-home naloxone kits to people at risk of opiate overdose. And this and other investments continues to show how focused we are on making these investments.

Mrs. Smith: Miiigwech, Mr. Speaker. You know, I'm not sure why this minister does not want to tell the

House how much money went unspent in the agreement with Canada around mental health and addictions but what the government's doing is not working.

So I'm wondering if the minister can tell us exactly how many people are suspected of dying of an overdose during this pandemic. And I've asked this question several times in the House. I've got several emails from different addiction providers throughout the province. They have a real concern. There's real concern across—not just here in Winnipeg but in Brandon. We heard almost a 400 per cent increase in needle distribution.

So can the minister tell us how many people are suspected of a drug overdose during the pandemic?

Mr. Friesen: I thank the member for the question. We know that COVID-19 has been hard on Manitobans. There isn't a single Manitoban who has not been severely or negatively impacted because of COVID-19, this global pandemic, whether it has been in the form of a job, a disruption to their workplace, if it's been a sickness and illness sustained by them or a family member, whether it's been other disruptions in their life and we know that similarly, COVID-19 has not been kind for Manitobans living with dependencies and addictions.

And so we know that, anecdotally, you know, we continue to follow. As the member says, they also are following the indications—

Mr. Chairperson: The hour being 5 p.m., the committee rise.

Call in the Speaker.

IN SESSION

Madam Speaker: The hour being 5 p.m., this House is adjourned and stands adjourned until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Tuesday, November 3, 2020

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