



**Third Session – Forty-Third Legislature**

**of the**

**Legislative Assembly of Manitoba**

**DEBATES  
and  
PROCEEDINGS**

**Official Report  
(Hansard)**

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**MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
**Forty-Third Legislature**

<b>Member</b>	<b>Constituency</b>	<b>Political Affiliation</b>
ASAGWARA, Uzoma, Hon.	Union Station	NDP
BALCAEN, Wayne	Brandon West	PC
BEREZA, Jeff	Portage la Prairie	PC
BLASHKO, Tyler	Lagimodière	NDP
BRAR, Diljeet	Burrows	NDP
BUSHIE, Ian, Hon.	Keewatinook	NDP
BYRAM, Jodie	Agassiz	PC
CABLE, Renée, Hon.	Southdale	NDP
CHEN, Jennifer	Fort Richmond	NDP
COMPTON, Carla	Tuxedo	NDP
COOK, Kathleen	Roblin	PC
CORBETT, Shannon	Transcona	NDP
CROSS, Billie	Seine River	NDP
DELA CRUZ, Jelynn	Radisson	NDP
DEVGAN, JD	McPhillips	NDP
EWASKO, Wayne	Lac du Bonnet	PC
FONTAINE, Nahanni, Hon.	St. Johns	NDP
GOERTZEN, Kelvin	Steinbach	PC
GUENTER, Josh	Borderland	PC
HIEBERT, Carrie	Morden-Winkler	PC
JOHNSON, Derek	Interlake-Gimli	PC
KENNEDY, Nellie, Hon.	Assiniboia	NDP
KHAN, Obby	Fort Whyte	PC
KINEW, Wab, Hon.	Fort Rouge	NDP
KING, Trevor	Lakeside	PC
KOSTYSHYN, Ron, Hon.	Dauphin	NDP
LAGASSÉ, Bob	Dawson Trail	Ind.
LAMOUREUX, Cindy	Tyndall Park	Lib.
LINDSEY, Tom, Hon.	Flin Flon	NDP
LOISELLE, Robert	St. Boniface	NDP
MALOWAY, Jim	Elmwood	NDP
MARCELINO, Malaya, Hon.	Notre Dame	NDP
MOROZ, Mike, Hon.	River Heights	NDP
MOSES, Jamie, Hon.	St. Vital	NDP
MOYES, Mike, Hon.	Riel	NDP
NARTH, Konrad	La Vérendrye	PC
NAYLOR, Lisa, Hon.	Wolseley	NDP
NESBITT, Greg	Riding Mountain	PC
OXENHAM, Logan	Kirkfield Park	NDP
PANKRATZ, David	Waverley	NDP
PERCHOTTE, Richard	Selkirk	PC
PIWNIUK, Doyle	Turtle Mountain	PC
REDHEAD, Eric	Thompson	NDP
ROBBINS, Colleen	Spruce Woods	PC
SALA, Adrien, Hon.	St. James	NDP
SANDHU, Mintu, Hon.	The Maples	NDP
SCHMIDT, Tracy, Hon.	Rossmere	NDP
SCHOTT, Rachelle	Kildonan-River East	NDP
SCHULER, Ron	Springfield-Ritchot	PC
SIMARD, Glen, Hon.	Brandon East	NDP
SMITH, Bernadette, Hon.	Point Douglas	NDP
STONE, Lauren	Midland	PC
WASYLIW, Mark	Fort Garry	Ind.
WHARTON, Jeff	Red River North	PC
WIEBE, Matt, Hon.	Concordia	NDP
WOWCHUK, Rick	Swan River	PC
<i>Vacant</i>	The Pas-Kameesak	

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Friday, May 8, 2026

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

**The Chairperson (Rachelle Schott):** Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This section of the Committee of Supply will now consider the Estimates of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

**Hon. Tracy Schmidt (Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning):** Yes, I do. Thank you very much to the committee. I look very much forward to today's conversation and getting into the Supplement to the Estimates of Expenditure for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning.

Before we begin, I would start by thanking the staff that are present today. So from my political staff, we have Rylan Ramnarace, who is my director of ministerial affairs. We have been working together in this portfolio since the first day that I started and I feel very, very grateful to get to work with him. I'm—yes—he does incredibly strong work in the department for our government and for me. So thank you very much, Rylan.

And from the department, we have Mona Pandey, our deputy minister. We're also joined by our executive financial officer of Finance and Administrative Services, Andrew Henry. We're also joined by our assistant deputy minister of System Performance and Accountability, Jeff Kehler; as well as Sarah Whiteford, our assistant deputy minister of Early Learning and Child Care.

And also one of our newest members to the department—not new to the public service, has done

lots of good work on behalf of government for quite some time, but new to our department—Paulette Monita, executive director of school space—the school space planning branch.

So, to all of them, to Mona and to all of the ADMs, I'm so very grateful for their work. I'm so very humbled and honoured to work for them. And the work that we get to do for Manitobans, it's just—it's really—it's the greatest privilege of my life to get to serve Manitobans and to serve with such a strong team and to have their support. I obviously, quite literally, couldn't do it without them and I'm very, very grateful to have them here today.

All the work that they did in preparing our budget, which is a tough task—you know, we are a government who is strongly committed to investing in education, but we're also a government that is strongly committed to balancing the budget. Very proud of our Minister of Finance (MLA Sala) who has just released our Budget 2026 with the lowest deficit projection in all of Canada.

And so that takes really tough work, especially when you need to balance that fiscal responsibility with the need to play catch-up after years of a government—the previous government, a PC government, that starved our education system for many years. The—it was not a good news story, education here in Manitoba. It was fights with teachers; it was fights with school divisions; it was cuts to budgets.

So we have a lot of ground to make up, but we are grateful for that mandate. We are so grateful to the people of Manitoba to get to do that work. Again, like I said, it is my humblest privilege to be able to serve in this role, to serve Manitoba families, to serve students, teachers, educators, school staff, ECEs, CCAs, all the families that rely so heavily on child care.

It's a particular passion of mine as a—as minister but also as a mom who has struggled, again, under the previous government. You know, I had three kids in child care. It was very common vernacular amongst Manitoba families was that you couldn't find child care in Manitoba, and even if you could find it, you couldn't pay for it.

But thanks to our NDP government, we're making great progress in expanding access to child care right

across our province. And also, once families find that child care, they can afford it because it was our government that brought in true \$10-a-day daycare, making sure that families not only have access to child care but that they can afford that child care once they find it and also, very importantly, that they can rely on high-quality professionals to deliver that child care.

So there is a lot of great work in our budget this year when it comes to expanding child care. We've committed in 2026 alone to opening more than 2,000 seats across Manitoba, which is going to serve families, again, right across this province.

Again, a lot of ground to make up, a lot more work to do; don't get me wrong. As I've said many times, I will not rest until every single family in Manitoba that wants access to child care has access to child care. So there's a lot of work to do. But, again, I'm so grateful to work with the department on behalf of Manitobans to make sure that they have that access.

And, like I said, we're going to make sure that once you have access to that child care that there are high-quality professionals. That's why we have increased wages again this year in our budget. Last year, ECEs in Manitoba saw the single largest wage increase in the history of Manitoba, a \$5-an-hour average wage increase last year in Budget 2025.

We're continuing on that good work in Budget 2026 with another roughly \$2-an-hour increase, meaning that since we've been elected, front-line ECE workers, most of whom are women, many of whom—I think the majority of whom—are BIPOC women, many of whom are newcomers to this country who not only, you know, rely on access to child care but are also looking for employment and wages that can support their families.

So after years of those workers failing to be invested in, their work failing to be recognized, failing to be compensated in a way that it should be, I'm so very proud to serve in a government that has increased the wages of front-line ECE workers by more than \$7 an hour in our time in government alone. This is not a 15-cent-an-hour increase; this is not a—this is \$7 an hour. It is a life-changing increase for some of these ECEs.

So we are so grateful to all of our ECEs and CCAs across the province, and we are so proud to finally, you know, show up with some real dollars to compensate them for the very incredible work that they're doing.

So that's some of the work that we're doing on child care.

When it comes to investing in education, very proud, again, for the third year in a row, three budgets in a row, with increases to school funding; a nearly \$80-million lift this year, which is about a 3.5 per cent increase, which has now—what that translates into is a record amount of investment here in Manitoba when it comes to education, nearly \$2 billion going straight into the classroom. And why do we do that? We do that because we're committed to investing in families and investing in students.

\*(10:10)

So, on top of the increase to the operational funding, we're also going to make sure that kids have the space that they need to learn. So Budget 2026 gives a great progress update on the four schools that we'll be opening in 2027. Those are Devonshire Park, Prairie Pointe, Meadowlands and a Brandon southwest school. These projects are on track, and they are not only going to create space for students, but they're also creating jobs for Manitobans and for Manitoba workers.

Thanks to the Manitoba jobs agreement, these schools are not only going to be built on time, but they're also going to be built on budget in service of Manitobans and so that we can make sure that we are getting the best value for every single one of those tax dollars that are contributing to these investments in Manitoba education.

And in those schools, kids are going to continue to be able to show up to school. No child is going to have to learn on an empty stomach because, again, thanks to the leadership of Nello Altomare and thanks to Nello's Law, we have now in Manitoba a universal school nutrition program. So another \$30 million this year invested into our universal school nutrition program to make sure that no child has to learn on an empty stomach.

But also importantly—and I've said this recently—about helping kids get to school. You know, we want to improve attendance here in Manitoba. We want to call kids in. We want to make sure that they have not only the spaces and the teachers at school to rely on, but also if their family is struggling, that they're going to be able to show up to school and have a warm breakfast, a snack, a lunch because every single child matters.

And we know that this investment is the single largest step that any government has ever taken to

improve attendance here in Manitoba. But it's just one step; it's not a silver bullet. We know that there are many reasons that kids are absent from school. So Budget 2026 makes other investments to help ensure that kids can get to school.

One of those investments that we're making this year is a \$10-million investment for free transit to make sure that every single child can get to school. We know that it was this year that the City of Winnipeg started fare enforcement on Winnipeg Transit, and we heard immediately from school divisions, from our metro divisions, that this was having an immediate and real impact on their attendance issues in their school.

So this is what our government does; we are a listening government, we're a responsive government and we act immediately. So, superintendents, teachers came to us and they said, our kids can't get to school because they can't afford bus fare. Your government is listening: \$10 million on free transit, \$30 million on school nutrition, four new schools.

I look forward to sharing more good news about this budget.

**The Chairperson:** We thank the minister for those comments.

Does the critic from the official opposition have an opening statement?

**Mr. Wayne Ewasko (Lac du Bonnet):** Yes, I do. Thank you, Madam Chair. So—

**The Chairperson:** Actually, everyone is to be referred to as honourable Chairperson or honourable minister.

So, the member for Lac du Bonnet.

**Mr. Ewasko:** Thank you, honourable Chairperson. It's been quite the start already to this year's Estimates process, talking about the supplement and the Estimates of Expenditure, Budget '26-27.

And the minister has already started talking about some of the good things that she has continued to do that—carrying over from the previous PC government. I look forward to getting into some of the conversations about expenditures and some of the promises that this government has made, and I feel that is falling a little bit short of—but also, again, commending the minister for carrying on a lot of the good work that our PC government was doing. They inherited a nice relationship with the federal government and—as the minister had said multiple times but, of course, wasn't giving any credit for where credit is due.

Definitely we'll get into some of those finer details in regards to schools, child-care centres, definitely the wage increases, as well, and also locations of various different schools and the expenditures. And the minister mentioned Transit, which isn't necessarily in Education, but to help students and youth get to where they need to get to within the city of Winnipeg, I think is great.

And I don't know if the minister had heard, since she seems to be promoting transit this morning—I don't know if she listened this morning where there—you know, I don't know if she's advocating for transit to get expanded outside the Perimeter, which is still within the City of Winnipeg jurisdiction. She might have some thoughts on that later on.

But I'm going to focus on Education and making sure that the dark days of the Selinger government, the 17 and a half years, we try not to go back there. It looks like we're sliding a little bit. But, hopefully, if the current Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning (MLA Schmidt) will just stay on the path of the—of the good path that we set up in the PC government, we'll, you know, make sure that the students in Manitoba are excelling once again and not sitting 10th and further behind ninth as they did under the Selinger NDP.

So, with that, I would like to take the opportunity to welcome my staff that is joining me here today: Levi Cottingham; he's one of our policy analysts with the PC caucus. He's joining me here today.

I want to say thank you and welcome to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning—the deputy minister and the assistant deputies and the financial officers, and also the minister's political staff who's joined us here today.

So let's get going on the discussion. It's going to be an interesting couple months.

**The Chairperson:** We thank the member.

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 16.1(a) contained in resolution 16.1.

At this time we invite the minister's staff to join us at the table.

Had a little technical difficulty there.

According to our rule 77(15), during the consideration of departmental Estimates, questioning for

each department shall proceed in a global manner with questions put separately on all resolutions once the official opposition critic indicates that questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

**Mr. Ewasko:** We are going to go in a global manner.

And so I'd like to start off again the way I sort of finished my opening statement, welcoming the department here, of course, and I know that it takes a lot of work to do the Estimates process and also the budgetary dance, I guess, which, really, in the big picture right now, we're in Estimates for '26-27 and within the next month or so you're already getting ready for Estimates of '27-28.

So I would like to ask the minister if she can share if there has been any other additions to her staff and also political staff.

**MLA Schmidt:** Just a point of clarification. So political staff I understand, but when you say staff, can you limit that? Like, do you mean within the whole department? Do you mean within the senior executive team—

**The Chairperson:** Order, order.

Just a reminder to all folks, the questions just—and answers need to be put through the Chair.

**MLA Schmidt:** If—I'm just seeking clarity from the opposition critic from the question that they posed, through the Chair.

So if I could just seek some clarity, through the Chair, about just again, just refining the question. I think I understand what he means by political staff. I would just like him to refine what he means by staff, what breadth he would like me to cover.

\* (10:20)

**Mr. Ewasko:** To the minister, through the Chair, the honourable Chair, I'm talking about executive staff. I'm not asking for the whole department. But since she brought it up, I can also ask: What is the vacancy within the department as well? So, primarily, executive staff, if there's been any changes, any additions, and then political staff—all political staff that is working with the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning (MLA Schmidt).

**MLA Schmidt:** So the vacancy rate of the department currently, based on the numbers that I have in front of me, is at roughly 9.2 per cent.

As far as the senior, sort of, executive staff within the department, as I mentioned in my opening statement, we have recently welcomed our executive director. So not an ADM, but an executive director of school space planning branch, Paulette Monita, is a new addition. But other than that, I would—I think it's fair to say that, no, there's been no other changes to our senior executive team within the department.

And then, for my political staff, so, Rylan Ramnarace is my director of Ministerial Affairs, who joins us here today. Not with us here today, but also who works as political staff in my office, is Danielle Monroe, who is a special adviser. And I also have an executive assistant by the name of Nicole Dvorak.

And just to also mention—so I—we did introduce some of the ADMs that were able to be here today. There are three of our assistant deputy ministers that were not able to join us here today, that I would like mention: Jackie Connell, our assistant deputy minister of Indigenous Excellence in Education; Janet Tomy, our assistant deputy minister of Student Achievement & Inclusion; and René Déquier, our assistant deputy minister—thank goodness, Manitoba finally has, again, an assistant deputy minister for the Bureau de l'éducation française, because our government believes very strongly in French language education and in making Manitoba a truly bilingual province.

And I mention all three of them—they're not able to be here today, and that's because they are right now doing a tour of some of our northern Manitoba school divisions. So yesterday our—these members of our senior executive team met with the school division at Mystery Lake.

Right now, as we speak, they are meeting with the Kelsey School Division, and later this afternoon, I understand they'll be travelling to the Flin Flon School Division to meet with those amazing school divisions with their leadership teams and to work on the important issues that we're addressing as government. Things like our universal nutrition program; things about improving attendance; things about universal screening and improving literacy outcomes here in Manitoba; about their budgets and the funding increases that they've been seeing; about opportunities to increase child care in their communities, because we know that school divisions are such excellent partners in our work as government to expand access to child care.

So I just wanted to mention all three of them. I know that they would love to be here today. They worked also so very hard on this budget. They worked

so very hard on behalf of Manitobans and Manitoba students. And they are doing that great work today up in some of our northern school division partners.

So thank you very much.

**Mr. Ewasko:** Thank you to the minister for those answers.

I'd like to ask, of her political staff, what are their salaries?

**MLA Schmidt:** Those are publicly available—those are publicly recorded documents and are available to the member from Lac du Bonnet.

**Mr. Ewasko:** Thank you to the minister, and I'm asking the minister if she can state on the record what their salaries are.

\* (10:30)

**MLA Schmidt:** Thank you to the committee for your time.

Again, we have been—we weren't anticipating this question. I'm somewhat curious about this line of questioning, why the member opposite is—wants to put on the record—again, this is publicly available information that all Manitobans can access. This is a completely transparent government, and you can go online. So, again, apologies to the committee but my staff were not anticipating this question.

I find it again curious and somewhat suspicious that the member wants us to put this on the record. The fact of the matter is when you're running the most popular government in Canada, you have some of the best staff across Canada, and we are so proud of our staff, and we're also happy to pay them fairly like we—our government is committed to paying all workers fairly, fair wages, to support the great work that they do.

So before I read onto the public record the exact salaries of my staff, which is, again, very strange and curious—we're here to talk about the budget Estimates; we're here to talk about education; we're here to talk about kids; we're here to talk about families, child care, schools, but the member opposite would like to instead have me read onto the record the salary amounts of my staff who, again, are well paid, fairly paid, not exorbitantly paid. They make less than the member opposite.

So, for the record, I'll let Manitobans know that the member from Lac du Bonnet makes \$122,000 for—\$122,042.91. That's what his salary is every year, for Manitobans to know. Again, that's something that you

can look up. That's how much he makes to sit here and waste Manitobans' time. That is how much money he makes to come into question period every day and insult me and insult the Premier (Mr. Kinew), attack our character while our government is focused on Manitobans, focused on improving education, focused on restoring Manitoba's health-care system after years of cuts. That's what the member opposite makes.

So my executive assistant makes \$64,021 a year. That is based on the information that we could find online. My special adviser makes \$118,339 a year. My director of ministerial affairs makes the same amount.

Thank you.

**Mr. Ewasko:** I'd like to thank the minister for putting some words on the record.

Again, Manitobans, today you're seeing again examples of—I don't know—I don't know what we're seeing today. The minister is trying to get, again, personal. Just asking questions in regards to finances within the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning. I think it's very important that Manitobans are holding this government and this minister to account with some transparency.

It's unfortunate that the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning (MLA Schmidt)—I'm not sure if she's giving me the extra \$10,000 out of her budget, but I'm pretty sure—I mean, I look across the way at some of the members, my colleagues, other MLAs that are sitting here; they looked a little shocked at the amount that the minister had put on the record that I'm making. Unless we got about a \$10,000 raise, I'm not sure what happened there because I was pretty sure that I was making about \$112,000 a year, but the minister's now given me a raise.

I'm not sure if the rest of the colleagues are aware of that. I'm not sure if that's coming out of the minister's department or where that money is coming from, but it's good to hear, and I'll pass that along to my members. I'll pass that along to the shocked members of the government side, as well, that apparently we're all getting a \$10,000 bump from the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning.

We are paid fairly. We do a lot of hard work on behalf of the constituents that have elected us, and that's why we're here. And so when the minister puts on the record that all her staff are paid less than what I am, that's absolutely incorrect. So I'm hoping that's not a path that this minister is going for the rest of the Estimates process for the next couple of months that we're going to be sitting here. But it's not a great start;

it's not a great look on the minister to put not factual numbers on the record.

So, okay. So we'll move on. So we found out that two out of her three political staff are getting paid more than me, and I had to put that on the record. I don't know why it took so long—if this is publicly available numbers, why it took so long for the minister to put that on the record. But, again, it's very important for Manitobans to know where their tax dollars are going because the minister—and as we all do as MLAs and civil servants and even political staff are getting paid by taxpayer dollars, and it's very important for Manitobans to know where those dollars are going. So I appreciate the minister for putting some of the words on the record. Not all accurate, obviously, as I pointed out, but we'll continue moving on.

So the minister wants to talk about budgets, and I would like to ask the minister if she has been in contact with Manitoba Teachers' Society lately. I had asked questions yesterday in question period and still waiting for an answer from the minister. So I'm hoping today the minister can answer a couple of the questions.

So, as I mentioned yesterday, so taxpayers, Manitoba School Boards Association, association for Manitoba municipalities are all feeling the pressures by this minister's reduced funding to school divisions this year again. That's putting a whole lot of pressure on school divisions to then increase taxes by double digits. I'm wondering if the minister can explain why and when is a new funding model coming out for this—the various school divisions in our great province of ours.

\* (10:40)

**MLA Schmidt:** In reference to, you know, the Manitoba Teachers' Society—who is one of our sector partners, which we value so greatly. We value our partnership, our relationship with the Manitoba Teachers' Society.

I've been in touch with them very recently, this week in fact, last week, throughout the month of April. We're also very grateful for all of our sector partners including the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents, the representatives at MASBO, the representative at MASS, the school superintendents, the Manitoba school—I believe I already said that—Manitoba School Boards Association. We're very grateful for all of our partners in education because, again, it's not just only up to the department; we rely very heavily on our sector partners.

And we're building great relationships, rebuilding trust between government and our education sector partners, and wow, does it take time, you know? After seven and a half years of a government that not only failed to fund education, but actively picked fights with teachers, with trustees, with school administrators. It takes time to rebuild that trust, but we're rebuilding that trust. How do you rebuild that trust? You show up with stable and predictable funding, and that's something that we have done every single year, including this year.

As I said in my opening statement, you know, education funding is at a historic level here in Manitoba, nearly \$2 billion; it's never been that high. Why do we make those investments? It's for kids. It's for families. It's because we know that a good education is the key to a successful future. We know that a good education is key to long-term health outcomes. We know that a good education is key to long-term public safety in our communities. And, for all those reasons, we are proud to have increased education funding in this province every single year that we've been elected and that every single school division has received an increase.

So we do that proudly, and we do that while we're also balancing one of the other mandates that Manitobans gave us, which is to balance the budget. And so we're doing both of those things. We can do hard things; this NDP government can do hard things. The opposition will sit here and tell you that we can't, that we have to cut education funding. That's what they did. They won't only tell you that, that's their record, honourable Chairperson.

So, again, \$80-million increase this year. The member opposite is putting inaccurate information on the record. School divisions know that every single school division in Manitoba, every single year since the NDP government has been elected, has seen an increase—a 3.5 per cent increase this year, honourable Chairperson. That is above the rate of inflation. And again, there's not one single school division in this province that has seen a reduction in their budget since we've been elected; \$2 billion—that's what we're investing into Manitoba kids.

And when it comes to our partners like the Manitoba School Boards Association, what do they have to say about our record? What do they have to say about the 'previents' government's record?

So, recently, the president of the Manitoba School Board Association said that they are—there were outright provincial funding cuts under the previous NDP—or, of the PC government. My apologies. Outright

provincial funding cuts under the previous PC government; that's what the Manitoba School Boards Association president said.

When the member for Lac du Bonnet (Mr. Ewasko) was minister, he cut school divisions' budgets, and he bragged about it: The Province will also continue to ensure all school divisions receive no less than 98 per cent of the operating they—operating funding they received the year earlier. Those are his words in January of 2020.

Bragging about a 98 per cent funding, which is a cut—that's a cut. That's their record, so we're digging ourselves out of a hole that we were left from the previous government. They left us in a hole with our budget, with the deficit, with the debt that we are going to—thank goodness, we have the best Finance Minister in the country, maybe in history, we heard yesterday; I would second that.

So we're going to climb out of the debt that they left us. We're going to have, we will have, we do have the lowest deficit projection in the country, and we're going to do that while we invest in our kids.

**The Chairperson:** Before acknowledging the next speaker, I just want to ask everyone in the committee room to refrain from conversations, interjections, laughter. If you have anything to discuss, you—feel free to step outside the room or indicate that you'd like to say something on the record by raising your hand.

The member for Lac du Bonnet.

**Mr. Ewasko:** I haven't raised my hand yet.

**The Chairperson:** The member for Lac du Bonnet.

**Mr. Ewasko:** Honourable Chairperson, I'd like to thank the minister for putting more words on the record because it's always great to be to then go back into Hansard and see how she exactly has portrayed some of the things and some of the rewriting the history here in Manitoba.

So, since she's quoting from just recently—and just for the honourable Chairperson before they ask me the question, this is a public document by Manitoba Teachers' Society: Education funding announcement fails students again. That's from one of those education partners. The minister doesn't call the Manitoba Teachers' Society one of the education partners; she calls them a stakeholder. I'll have to look back into Hansard exactly what they spoke about.

But we're all working here, in this great province of ours, to build a strong education system. And thanks

to our government, the Progressive Conservative government, we actually had amalgamated the early childhood education with the K-to-12 sector, which I think was a great move.

And I have to give credit to our Premier Heather Stefanson for having that vision and to do that. I know that also the—not only the department, but the sector—our child-care education partners felt that that was a very important long-time-overdue move as well. Because, as we know, early childhood educators—and it says right in their title, they're educators, they're teachers. And, you know, trying to make sure that there's a seamless transition from child-care centres to the K-to-12 system, I think is very important.

So, as the minister had mentioned, you know, I'm looking at the operating costs from budget '25-26 to '26-27, and we see a reduction of \$3.1 million. So in '25-26, there was \$53.1 million invested into operating costs for school divisions, and this year, they're seeing a \$51-million reduction. School divisions are now—you know, as the minister quoted Mr. Alan Campbell from the Manitoba School Boards Association, they're having to go to their members and they are seeing double-digit increases from school divisions, school boards, putting it on the backs of taxpayers yet again.

\* (10:50)

I want to remind the minister: There is only one taxpayer, no matter if they're, you know, municipal school division or provincial or even federal. And so, due to the shortfalls by this government funding education, school boards are having to go and do double-digit increases, and they've had to do that to 'exorbitant' amounts over the last couple years since this minister has definitely taken over the Education and Early Childhood Learning Department

So I would like the minister to explain why there's been a \$3.1-million reduction.

**MLA Schmidt:** Again, the truth of the matter is Manitobans know who they can trust in education. Manitobans see in the classroom every day what they get from an NDP government, and that's more teachers, more educational assistants, more clinicians, more new schools, more food, more free transit. That is what the reality of schools, classrooms today, is under this NDP government. Again, much accomplished, much more work to do.

We were left in a huge hole—a sinkhole, you could call it—not just in education; health care, justice, we can go down the list of the services that were cut and

the services that our government is so grateful, thanks to Manitobans that gave us this mandate, to restore. Manitobans understand the value of investing education; that's why they elected an NDP government and that's exactly what we've done every single year. That's the truth. This year, 3.5 per cent increase above the rate of inflation. Last year, 3 per cent increase above the rate of inflation. This is the truth—this is the truth.

It's also true that, under the previous government, school division budgets were cut. School divisions, you're right, they are—we're playing catch-up. School divisions need to hire teachers, they need to build schools, they need to hire EAs after seven and a half years of teachers and EAs leaving the profession, losing their jobs because of budget cuts, leaving the profession because they did not get respected. And it's our government that was elected by teachers, by families, for teachers and for families. So we are going to continue making those investments and we're going to continue cleaning up the mess that the previous government left us in.

So let's talk a little bit about the truth. The truth of the matter is that, while every single school division, every single school division across Manitoba, every single year since the NDP has elected, has an increased budget, every single one. There's not one school division that's received a cut.

What is their record? Let's look at 2020 and 2021. That was under the PC government. Border Land School Division, 2 per cent cut; Evergreen School Division, 2 per cent cut; Fort La Bosse, 2 per cent cut; Interlake, 2 per cent cut; Lakeshore, 2 per cent cut; Park West, 2 per cent cut; Pine Creek, 2 per cent cut; Portage la Prairie, 3.5 per cent cut—in a region of our province that is growing, a 3.5 per cent cut.

Prairie Spirit, 2 per cent cut; Red River Valley, 2 per cent cut; Rolling River School Division, 2 per cent cut; Southwest Horizon, 2 per cent cut; St. James-Assiniboia, 2.2 per cent cut; Swan Valley, 2 per cent cut; Turtle Mountain, 2 per cent cut; Turtle River, 3.3 per cent cut.

That's just 2020 and—that's not even the whole list. I could go on, honourable Chair. That's just 2020-2021. Those are the school divisions.

And what are the impact of those cuts? There are real impacts to those cuts. We saw schools having to cut teacher positions. We saw schools like the Winnipeg School Division; the Winnipeg School Division is on the record—on the public record—saying

that because of the cuts under the previous failed PC government, they had to cut their school resource officer program, a program that was designed to keep students safe. Winnipeg School Division, on the record, they had to cut that program because of the Tories' budget cuts. These are—there are real impacts; there are real impacts because of these cuts. These impact teachers; these impact students; these impact families.

So that was 2021. It was no different in 2019 and 2020. What did they do that school year? Border Land School Division, 2 per cent cut; Fort La Bosse, 2 per cent cut. These are in the members' own constituencies, cuts. Kelsey School Division, 2.9. Where our team is today: repairing the damage of these 2.9 per cent cuts.

Mystery Lake in Thompson, where we see students struggling: 3.2 per cent cut. Shameful. Again, Swan Valley—yet another year. The member for Swan Valley should ask the member that he sits beside. He was in charge at the time. They both sat at the Cabinet table. They're both responsible. They—I hope their constituents ask them.

Very shortly we're going to be—this House is going to rise—well, we'll see. We'll see if the members—what they want to do, if they're going to support our budget, if they're going to support cheap groceries for Manitobans. But if they do and we can pass the budget, we're going to be out on the doorsteps soon, and they're going to have to answer to their constituents about these cuts.

We're here working for Manitobans, and we're going to continue to do that.

**The Chairperson:** Before recognizing the next member, just a general reminder that we can't comment on someone's presence or absence, and all comments and questions should be through—put through the Chair, please.

**Mr. Ewasko:** I appreciate the advice by the honourable Chairperson directed in a global manner, but we know who it's basically being directed to.

So the Education and Early Childhood Learning Minister unfortunately is not really wanting to answer the questions. The Education Minister wants to talk about other portfolios, of course, trying to distract from some of the things that I'd like to talk about as the advocate for Education and Early Childhood Learning on behalf of not only my constituents but of Manitobans.

The minister decided to talk about various different school divisions back to 2019, 2021. I mean, if we really wanted to play the history game—I mean, I'm a teacher by profession. You know, if she wants to go back to the days of—*[interjection]*

So the MLA for Keewatinook, it sounds like he has some things he'd like to put on the record, honourable Chairperson. So—*[interjection]*

**The Chairperson:** Order.

There—we got a little out of hand here. We don't need interjections from anyone that has not been recognized as the current speaker, and we don't need any commentary between other members in the room.

So the member for Lac du Bonnet has the floor.

\* (11:00)

**Mr. Ewasko:** So my question was—so operating grants to school divisions went from \$53.1 million last year to \$51 million this year. And so we're looking at a—you know, a reduction. And so the good thing is whilst the Education Minister is talking about every other department except for her own, I had recalled the question that I asked two questions previous and didn't get an answer.

So knowing that school divisions are having to go to double-digit property tax increases not only last year but this year, because of the funding reductions by this Education Minister, by the Kinew government, I'm asking the minister—or I had asked the minister, and she dodged the question.

When is she coming forward with a fair funding model for all school divisions across this great province of ours, north, east, south and west? Can the minister please answer that question?

**MLA Schmidt:** So the member from Lac du Bonnet is incorrect. Our education funding is increasing. The Manitoba Teachers' Society knows this. The Manitoba School Boards Association knows this. The Manitoba Association of School Superintendents knows this. Children in classrooms today know this. Families know this.

So the member should check his math. We are building on increased investments, while year after year they cut, and then in their last year, in a desperate attempt to try to trick Manitobans into thinking they actually do care about education, the last year before they lost the vote, they tried to send a few dollars into the classrooms.

Manitobans are smarter than that. Manitobans saw right through that. Manitobans know that year after year after year they cut. Not only did they cut, they threatened the whole education system. Teachers didn't know if they had jobs to come back to. School trustees didn't know if they were going to exist anymore. It was going to be a power grab.

The member opposite, in a previous question, used the word amalgamation. I'm surprised that he would dare to say that word on the record. I guess maybe he wants to revive bill 64. Manitobans should remember bill 64, the worst bill in the history of Manitoba, I like to call it. That's what Manitobans called it. They had a majority government. They couldn't even pass it. That's how bad the bill was.

Manitobans understand that they cannot trust the previous government when it comes to education. They cannot trust the member from Lac du Bonnet to put factual information on the record here today.

Manitobans know that we have increased funding. Manitobans know that we're going to continue to do that. And our funding model is called increased; that's our new funding model. That's new from the previous government. Our funding model is called increased budgets. It's called more money for teachers. More than 800 teachers have been hired into schools since we've been elected.

Where's the evidence of the budget cuts? Thirty million dollars a year on school nutrition. Every single child has access to food in a school. Show me the cuts. Show me the cuts.

The member opposite wants to come here and distract. He wants to—he wants Manitobans to forget their record. Manitobans know who they can trust on education, and it's the NDP. We are going to continue to show up with stable and predictable funding; that's our funding model.

And make no mistake; the funding model needs work. We have done—we have done work on the funding model. So far we have introduced incremental changes, something the member, in his time as Education minister, failed to do. He stands here today like they do on many issues. They come into this room and they talk about the economy or they talk about health care, they talk about education, as if they weren't voted out of office because they failed so resoundingly on all of those files.

So our funding model is stable, predictable funding. We're going to continue to work with our school division partners to adjust our funding model. We know

for certain that when we're talking about supporting students with additional needs, that is something that needs to be talked about; that's something we're talking about in the department every single day; that's something we're talking about with teachers. We hear the Manitoba Teachers' Society when they talk about the complexity of classrooms. We know that the funding model that the previous government used that they failed to change no longer adequately—is not designed—it's not designed to support the level of need that we're seeing in school today.

So we are going to continue to work with the Manitoba Teachers' Society. We're going to continue to work with MASBO, MASS and the School Boards Association. We're going to continue to work with families. We're going to continue to work with folks like Autism Manitoba, the Kids Brain Health Network and Elders and Knowledge Keepers. And we're going to make sure that our funding model adequately supports every single student in this province because every child matters, and I take that task extremely seriously. I don't take this role lightly; I take it very seriously, which is why—and so does our government. Our whole team and our Premier (Mr. Kinew) takes nothing more seriously than kids.

The first thing we did when we got elected was reinstate the Healthy Child Committee of Cabinet, something the previous government annihilated. They repealed legislation and dismantled something called the Healthy Child Committee of Cabinet. I hope Manitobans think about that; I hope they remember that.

We remembered it; we remembered it so much that it was one of the first things we did. And what that committee of Cabinet does is, we work across government. It's not just up to the Minister of Education; it's not just up to the Minister of Families (MLA Fontaine) or the Minister of Health.

We have a lot of work to do across government to make sure that more kids see their 18th birthday, to make sure that more kids graduate grade 12 so that they can have the bright successful future that we know a Manitoba education provides. Again, we have a hole that we are digging ourselves out of—a hole that the member opposite left us in. We're honored to do this work on behalf of Manitobans and we're going to continue doing it every single day.

**Mr. Ewasko:** So the minister continues to put not-so-factual information on the record. Those were her words—I asked for some clarification. Apparently, we can say that, so we'll continue on a line of questioning.

My question was when she was going—when is she going—or in the department—going to come forward with the fair funding model? Does she have any kind of inkling into a timeline?

The model and the conversations we were having with education partners across the sector—I think that the new funding model—fair funding model—for all school divisions, whether they were urban or rural or northern rural, northern urban, was probably going to be in place for the '24-25 school year, maybe at worst '25-26 school year. And we've heard nothing but crickets and half—you know, and not-so-factual information by this minister put on the record again today. So I'm asking, when is her, you know, potential timeline for that fair funding model?

The minister also talks about various different education partners, and so have I. This minister will, you know, go down in history as the minister to lose one of those education partners, and that's the Manitoba parent advisory council association here in Manitoba. And, unfortunately, under her watch, that organization has folded—or, I don't know; maybe the Education Minister can comment and on how and when that association is going to get back up and running.

But just to also add to the record, since 2023, the current Finance Minister, who is celebrating—and this Education Minister continues to celebrate the fact that they have—running yet another deficit in the country of Canada, even though has received the second most transfer funds from the federal government. You would think that this NDP government—the Kinew government—would be flush with cash and would be rolling in on a positive balance sheet, much like the one that we had left them with \$375 million to the good when they took over.

So I'm just reading in the last few years, Louis Riel School Division had to increase their taxes by 43 per cent; Pembina Trails, 37 per cent; River East Transcona, 36 per cent; and Seine River, 24 per cent; 37.7 per cent in Seven Oaks; 26 per cent in St. James-Assiniboia; and 29 per cent in Winnipeg School Division.

So I'm not going to take any lessons from the current Education Minister. I just wish that the Education Minister would answer some of the questions, stop talking about other departments. Let's focus on Education and Early Childhood Learning and let's get back on track on some of this. *[interjection]*

\* (11:10)

The Education Minister continues to heckle me from her seat. She's—she runs the clock all the time anyways.

So I just want to put those—some of those facts on the record and also that if she is so proud of her record, then why is Louis Riel School Division talking about, since this budget had come out, that their financial position has eroded, end quote, under this Kinew government, under this Education Minister?

**MLA Schmidt:** There was a lot of stuff in there, so lots of stuff to unpack. But, again, I'm just so grateful to have the opportunity to serve in this role, to serve Manitobans and to share some of the great news that's in our budget with Manitobans related to the meandering question that we just got from the member opposite.

So there was some reference at the beginning; he started talking about the parent advisory councils. So I just want to say shame on—he put the blame at my feet, that the parent—the Manitoba parent advisory council committee has dissolved. They haven't dissolved, actually; they just don't have enough volunteers.

As we know, parent advisory committees are volunteer-based organizations. These are unpaid positions. These are often parents and caregivers in the community that volunteer their time in their local school and their local school community to serve their local school. If they have more time on their hands from doing that, they then, if they are so willing to become elected to what is, in legislation, a sort of, you know, advisory council to represent parent advisory committees.

So, unfortunately, we don't have any volunteers, but I would never—you know, I want to thank—what I would do instead of, you know, sort of blaming parent volunteers for not having the time to step up, what I would do is thank every single parent and caregiver out there. It's not just parents; we know there's all sorts of people that serve on PACs. I want to thank every single one of them for the great work that they do, for supporting their schools, supporting their school communities and supporting their students. And one of the things that we have in Budget 2026 to directly support our parent advisory committees is our Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities play structure fund.

So under the previous government, when a school—when a new school was built, guess what would happen? Playground empty. Dust, dirt. That was the regime under the previous government. They might build you a school, maybe, if they could; they might

build you a school. Probably wouldn't be on time. It was definitely way over budget.

I don't know if Manitobans know this, but the cost per student of building new schools under the previous PC government skyrocketed to the highest in the country; that's a fact. That's one of the reasons our Minister of Public Service Delivery (MLA Sandhu) has brought back in the design and delivery of capital programs into government, so that we can deliver schools built by Manitobans for Manitobans, on time and on budget.

But in the past—so, again, a new school was built. Previous government, they leave you without a play structure or, in some of our schools—I have some of these in my own community—the play structure gets old, needs to be replaced. Who does that fundraising? What does that major capital project—who does that land to? Parent advisory committees.

And maybe, in one time, maybe that might have been appropriate. Maybe when you just had to buy a swing set and a slide, a few hundred dollars, maybe the community could come together and find that money. But that's not the reality we're living in today. Play structures, for some good reasons and maybe some that aren't, play structures are incredibly expensive. Many of the play structure projects that I see come in at around the half-million-dollar mark; \$500,000, some of these.

This is a major capital project that not only requires major investment, half a million dollars, that is intended—so this is left to parents, volunteers to hold doughnut fundraisers and hot dog lunches to try to raise half a million dollars? This is a burden that has been left on parent advisory committees for too long, and so what our government is doing, alongside our partners in municipal governments, alongside our school division partners and with the support of our government, with a \$3-million Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities play structure fund, we are supporting those projects to ease the burden off of parent advisory committees.

So those applications are open right now, and we very much look forward to receiving those applications and helping those parent advisory committees so that they can do the good work of, you know, getting books into the libraries and supporting field trips and the other great work that they do, but they should not be in charge of funding \$500,000 projects.

The member brought up Louis Riel School Division. Man, I wish I had some more time to talk about

the great work. He mentioned many school divisions, but he did start off with Louis Riel School Division. They are doing some incredible work with the increased investments that they're getting from the Province and with the great work of their board of trustees. I really hope that I have some more time today to highlight some of the great work that's happening in Louis Riel School Division.

**Mr. Ewasko:** So, as the minister tried to put on the record yet again, spinning some kind of words, basically I'm totally putting the full blame on the collapse of the Manitoba parent councils totally on her. It was a 70-year organization, absolutely supported by great volunteers, parents, guardians, and, as the minister mentioned, didn't necessarily have to be a parent or guardian, just a hard-working volunteer, all across this great province of ours. And it is under her watch that that parent council has now pulled the plug after 70 years.

Couple other things I wanted to quickly mention. Again, the minister's dodging the question on the fairer funding model, the timeline on that. Maybe I should just keep it there and then allow her to answer, because then she just goes off on a bit of a diatribe all over the place.

I think I'd like to ask her, I guess, school divisions had found out what their budget is this year. School divisions are having to do double-digit property tax increases this year. The City of Winnipeg has just rolled out their property tax bills with a supplement within their tax bills explaining that the school divisions are having to increase property owners' taxes by considerable amounts due to the funding cuts by this Education Minister. And so the minister patted herself on the back for last year's funding announcement and this year's.

I'd like to ask the minister, are school divisions going to receive another Christmas present like they received this year, a lump of coal, just before Christmas, of a clawback of \$10 million? So that would actually take last year's funding down by a whole \$10 million, and that went out to school divisions shortly before Christmas. So I'm asking the minister, should school divisions prepare for another clawback for this coming December?

**MLA Schmidt:** Since the member from Lac du Bonnet again referenced the Manitoba Association of Parent Councils, and has blamed me for its—the fact that volunteers didn't step up, I think he should actually—I'd like to remind him of the impact of his government.

He sat at the Cabinet table in 2019 when the PCs repealed the requirement that the minister meet annually with the Manitoba Association of Parent Councils. That was repealed back in 2019.

So maybe when he was minister, if he had spent his time meeting with the council, encouraging them, organizing with them, showing them some appreciation like we're trying to do here today on the record, thanking them, making them feel valued, making them know that they have a voice at the table, making them know that they have a minister's office that they can knock on, maybe we wouldn't be in this position today.

So I thank my political staff for reminding me of this important fact. It's something that I think we'll reflect on after today when we go back over our lunch, I think maybe we're going to think about—because by the way, I just want to assure Manitobans that the statutory authority for the Manitoba association for parent councils still exists. We have not repealed it. We would be happy to have a Manitoba Association of Parent Councils again.

\* (11:20)

So if I can speak to parents: If you have the time, I know that life is busy, but I'd be more than happy to get some emails, some phone calls. And I would be happy to meet with the Manitoba Association of Parent Councils annually, quarterly, monthly. So I just wanted to put that on the record as a reminder.

And then, again, the member from Lac du Bonnet was the minister of Education, so he's trying to confuse Manitobans here today, unfortunately.

This is what you got from the previous PCs: secrecy, deflection; you cannot trust a word that they say. He knows very well that this \$10 million that he speaks of is a standard annual reallocation. There was never a clawback; not one dollar was ever paid back from any school division in this province to the Province of Manitoba. There has not been a clawback under this government, so that is false information. He's misleading Manitobans. Again, Manitobans—I mean, geez, I hope that they're watching. This is what they got from the member opposite.

He spoke about taxes, so I will remind him, you know, I'm a—provincially, I represent the community of Rossmere, but federally, I live in the constituency of Elmwood-Transcona and, unfortunately, for the time being, I'm represented by a Conservative member.

The Member for Parliament in Elmwood-Transcona represents the Conservative Party of Canada, colleagues to the member from Lac du Bonnet, and he recently sent out a tax guide that I got in the mail exalting the new Homeowners Affordability Tax Credit for the 25, 20—for the 2025 tax year; the old Education Property Tax Credit has been replaced.

Now, if you own a principal residence, you can now get a credit of up to \$1,500 to offset your school taxes. That was, again, for the '25—the 2025 tax year; we know that, thanks to our Minister of Finance (MLA Sala), we've increased that to \$1,600 for 2026, and now \$1,700 for 2027.

We know that Manitobans, the majority of Manitobans, are better off under the Homeowners Affordability Tax Credit. We designed it that way. That's what you get from the Manitoba NDP. We were elected by Manitobans to put help to Manitobans that need it most. Under the PCs' tax credit, guess who got one of the biggest tax credits in the province? Brian Pallister.

That's who benefits when the PCs are in power. Brian Pallister, the Filmsons, that's who benefits when the PCs—they are elected for their friends. We're elected for Manitobans, by Manitobans. We reflect what Manitobans value. That's our record, honourable Speaker.

So I urge the member from Lac du Bonnet to give a call to the Member of Parliament for Elmwood-Transcona; they can talk—he can maybe educate the member for Lac du Bonnet (Mr. Ewasko) about the value of the Homeowners Affordability Tax Credit that he is sharing so widely across our province. He—that's not the only tax benefit, by the way, that Colin Reynolds mentions. The—not the only Manitoba tax benefit that he mentions. There's many others, but I know the member from Lac du Bonnet wants us to stay focused on education, so we'll do that.

But, again, I hope Manitobans are watching when he talks about—he's trying to—what the PCs want to talk about with education is property taxes. What the Manitoba NDP are talking about is investing in kids and families.

**Mr. Ewasko:** So, once again, Manitobans, you're seeing this loud and clear here today. The minister, instead of answering questions that pertain specifically to education, your tax dollars and benefiting Manitoba students in our school system, she continues to do personal attacks. And where she goes low, we'll go high, and we'll continue to ask questions on behalf of

Manitobans as the advocate for Education and Early Childhood Learning.

So we know that, in the last few years, truancy at schools has gone—is going in the wrong direction. Despite the food and nutrition addition to schools, which is a great initiative, and I'm glad that the minister—her predecessor technically, not this minister—had been able to carry on the good work of our PC government and that great relationship we had with the federal government to bring forward a food and nutrition program for the province.

It just so happened that my friend Nello was able to announce it when he became Education minister—

**An Honourable Member:** That is really disgusting and shameful that you're taking credit. Like, I can't sit here and let you do that. That's gross.

I'm sorry, Chair. You can call me to order, but it is disgusting that you would take credit for Nello's work—disgusting.

**Mr. Ewasko:** So I was actually applauding, despite of what the Education Minister is now—

**The Chairperson:** Order.

We touched a sensitive topic there, but I will just respectfully ask all members to only speak when it's your turn for the floor. And a caution to the member for Lac du Bonnet to—perhaps not—member for Lac du Bonnet has the floor.

**Mr. Ewasko:** Thank you, honourable Chairperson, for that advice yet again, but I was commending my friend and my predecessor—or, my successor, I guess, as Education and Early Childhood Learning minister on bringing forward the food and nutrition amounts of money to school divisions within the province of Manitoba.

But as we see that absenteeism has increased under this Education Minister, and I'm just asking—I mean, we had launched a student absenteeism program which was titled: School. Keep Going. And we were giving some money to school divisions to align their policies in regards to trying to encourage students to come, make sure that they're coming back to school. It seems like the NDP Kinew government has dropped the ball on that, and truancy continues to increase, unfortunately.

I think the addition for the free public transit, you know, time's going to tell whether that helps with this or not. I can definitely see it helping somewhat. I'm not sure what advocates are saying in regards to,

you know, whether that's going to make a huge difference or not. I know that we worked quite closely with Kent Dueck, Sel Burrows, on trying to curb that absenteeism.

Also trying to make sure that working across government—the Education Minister mentioned earlier about certain Cabinet committees. I had the pleasure of co-chairing the Poverty Reduction Committee of Cabinet with my good friend and colleague Rochelle Squires, and we had done a lot of work on poverty reduction and trying to get students back to school who were maybe slipping through the cracks, working with stakeholders and friends within the communities—as I said, Kent Dueck and Sel Burrows and many, many others. So I commend everyone for working on that.

I'd just like to know why the minister felt that it was time to then re-announce another program and why she didn't just continue on with the School. Keep Going campaign and program that we had launched.

**MLA Schmidt:** To, I guess, directly respond to the question posed at the end by the member, certainly our department, our government, there has been no pause of any sort of, you know, initiatives that have been going on to help address improving attendance here in Manitoba.

But I will say that billboards—no one went to school because a billboard went up, with all due respect. You know, School. Keep Going billboards—that was the previous government's absenteeism plan as far as I can tell. It was billboards that said, School. Keep Going.

Again, I don't know—I'm not sure how that spoke to kids, you know. I don't think it did. I don't think it was effective. So that's not how we're going to choose to spend our dollars, is putting up billboards. How we choose to spend our dollars is by instituting a universal school nutrition program.

\* (11:30)

I had the great honour and privilege of speaking just two weeks ago, I think about, at the Winnipeg School Division's absenteeism summit. And it was a wonderful day with all sorts of excellent advocates there—community groups, educators, school leaders—that are working so hard on the issue of getting kids into school.

And if I had one criticism of the day—and something that I'll offer to the committee here—is, you know—and the member, at the beginning of his question, used the word truancy. I don't like that word. That harkens

back to, I think, the wrong approach. You know, what the Manitoba NDP are not going to do is send truancy officers to your door to arrest you or arrest your family. That's not our plan. So I don't want to talk about truancy.

I also don't really want to talk about absenteeism. I think words matter. I'm someone who really believes words matter. And so what you're going to hear me talk about as a minister is attendance; I want to improve attendance. I want to bring kids in; I want kids to come to school; I want them to attend.

So it doesn't surprise me—and, again, we can use the word absenteeism, I'm not saying that it's a bad word; it's not a dirty word. It certainly describes an issue. But something I believe is that words matter, and I want to talk about improving attendance. So that's what you're going to hear me talking about.

So at that—at the absenteeism summit—which was, again, appropriately named—I would have liked to hear it be called the improving attendance summit, but I'll talk to Superintendent Matt Henderson about that next time. But, again, there were excellent advocates there, including Sel Burrows, who I've had the benefit of meeting with—my department meets with quite regularly.

I also just—I believe it was last week—met with Kent Dueck from Inner City Youth Alive. We are very grateful to Kent for the incredible work that him and his organization at Inner City Youth Alive are doing, to do real community outreach. These are the kind of things—that's what gets kids to school: community outreach, supporting families, feeding kids.

I said at the absenteeism summit—I said thank you to everyone there for the work that they're doing, and I wanted to remind them that if there was ever a time to improve attendance in Manitoba, it's now. We know that people in the education sector, people in community have been working on this issue for decades—for decades.

In fact, my mom just told me a story—both my parents are educators—my mom just told me a story the other day about what she believes to be the very first breakfast program at any school ever; was at John M. King in 1972, I think she said. Gosh, I wish she had—I've asked my mom to write this story down; I'm going to share this with the House at some point and talk about the leaders there.

But, again, it was under the leadership of Nello Altomare that the universal nutrition program was brought into—here to Manitoba. And what I said at the

absenteeism summit—and I'll—I said it twice, and I'll say it here again today, and I'm going to say it forever: there's no government ever that has taken a bigger step towards improving attendance in Manitoba than the universal nutrition program under the leadership of the late Nello Altomare.

So I reminded the folks at the absenteeism summit who have been doing this work for years in community—these are the real heroes and champions—the Province is not going to fix this. The government's not going to fix this. We have to work together. But people in community have to know that if we're ever going to address this problem, it's now. You have a government that has shown up with a \$30-million-a-year annual investment in school nutrition, \$3 million a year on small class sizes.

What did the member opposite do during his time? Repealed small class time legislation. Made class sizes balloon in Manitoba. How are kids going to come to school when they don't get one-on-one time with their teachers, when they don't get one-on-one time with their EAs? That's their record.

This year, on top of our \$30-million universal nutrition investment, \$10 million free transit for youth, so that not only can kids get fed when they're get to school, but they—

**The Chairperson:** Member's time is expired.

**An Honourable Member:** I can talk absenteeism all day. Bring it on.

**Mr. Ewasko:** The Education Minister said that she can talk about absenteeism all day. You probably heard that on the mics, but that's okay. And that's good. That's good. We have many topics to talk about.

I set the stage to talk about the program that we had set up, School. Keep Going. Was there billboards involved? Absolutely. Sure there was, to try to promote—and working with not only school divisions, but association for Manitoba parent councils, as well, which I had met with multiple times, even though her, you know, political staff can actually speak to the department and talk about that if they want, as it's something that the minister put on the record a little bit earlier.

We know that that the food and nutrition—universal food and nutrition program—the Kinew government spent over \$94,000 promoting the food and nutrition program, which is more money than a lot of school divisions received.

So, at this time, honourable Chairperson, I am conceding the floor for—we'll reconvene at half an hour, but I'm conceding the floor to questions to the independent member from Fort Garry, who has some questions, and since the minister wants to talk about absenteeism and attendance—improving attendance—I think she's going to get that opportunity.

So, thank you, honourable Chairperson. I look forward to the minister explaining why, in my question, over \$94,000 was spent to promote the universal child nutrition program, which is more money than some school divisions actually received in the program. And then we'll turn it over to the member for Fort Garry (Mr. Wasyliw) for half an hour.

**The Chairperson:** So, since we've already established that questions and answers proceed in a global manner, when the minister is ready the minister will have the opportunity to respond to the member for Lac du Bonnet.

**MLA Schmidt:** I'm grateful to have an opportunity again to speak to the universal nutrition program, which, again, I will say with my full chest, is the single largest thing any government in the history of Manitoba has ever done to improve attendance here in Manitoba. It's not a silver bullet; it's not a panacea.

There are many, many other programs and initiatives that need to come from government, that need to come from community, that need to come from school divisions, that need to come from families, like I said, something we talked about at the absenteeism summit at the Winnipeg School Division. And by the way, thank you to the superintendent and all of the leadership and the board and all the educators at the Winnipeg School Division for holding that summit. Fantastic. We're so grateful.

Again, this is not an issue that our government is shying away from. I know that the member thinks he's pulling some sort of fast one on me here, ceding the floor—it's not conceding; he'll be ceding the floor to the member for Fort Garry. He thinks this is some sort of gotcha moment. I'm more than happy to talk about attendance because I think it's something that's super important. This is why I was elected: to leave Manitoba in a better place than when we inherited it. And we're doing that work. A lot more work to do, but we are doing that work.

So I'm super excited to talk about absenteeism, but what we talked about at the absenteeism summit, that this is—there is no silver bullet.

And it's not just a school problem. Absenteeism is not just an education problem. We are doing work across government. It's not just the universal school nutrition program and it's not just free transit. It's the work of the Minister of Families, Minister Nahanni Fontaine, who's decolonizing our child-welfare system—oh, I apologize.

**The Chairperson:** Order.

Just a general reminder that we need to refer to everyone by their ministerial title or their constituency name.

**MLA Schmidt:** My apologies. Thank you for that guidance, honourable Chair.

Yes, this is work that's happening across government. It's work that's happening in the Minister of Families' (MLA Fontaine) department, in the work—the incredible, historic work—that she is doing leading the decolonization of our child-welfare system, promoting kinship care. These are things—this is how we keep families together. This is the work of the honourable Minister of Housing, Addictions and Homelessness (Ms. Smith).

After the previous government sold off social and affordable housing, after the previous government just literally threw people experiencing homelessness out to the wolves, to use a crass term—no plan, no compassion—our Minister of Housing, Addictions and Homelessness is housing hundreds of people experiencing homelessness and investing in social and deeply affordable housing across our province so that, again, families have a place to live and some stability.

These are the kinds of things that help kids get to school. There are a myriad of reasons—there's a hundred, maybe a million, reasons. Every kid is different; every community's different; every school division's different. There are different reasons driving issues in attendance in every community. So, again, there's not one silver bullet, but this is work we're doing across government.

Poverty reduction, it's another—I spoke earlier about how we reinstated the Healthy Child Committee of Cabinet; something else we did, right after we got elected: the Poverty Reduction Committee of Cabinet. And we do work across government to make sure that we are addressing the root causes of poverty, something that we have in Budget 2026.

\* (11:40)

Something that the member has failed to ask about is our plan on child care. A fantastic poverty reduction

measure that we have in Budget 2026 is free child care for the families that need it the most. This helps families get to work. This helps provide some stability in the home. These are the kind of things you need to do to support families, to support communities, to support students and to improve attendance in our province.

And before I go on to it further, I wanted to talk about the nutrition program. I want to apologize to the committee—I've already apologized to the honourable Chair, who wisely corrected me. I had a bit of an outburst earlier when the member from Lac du Bonnet tried to—he started by complimenting the late Nello Altomare, but then he took credit and said that Nello implemented what was his work. That's not the case, and I want to make sure that the record is corrected.

These are the words of the PC caucus when the NDP was in opposition and was trying to promote a universal school nutrition program—[interjection]

**The Chairperson:** Order.

Just a reminder to all committee members that when it is not your turn to speak, there are to be no interjections, heckling or remarks in the background. If anyone has conversations or things to say, you're welcome to step outside the committee room. The honourable minister has the floor.

**MLA Schmidt:** James Teitsma, who sat at the Cabinet table with the member from Lac du Bonnet, said, on February of 2020: This is a bad idea. They need to eat breakfast in their own home.

Brian Pallister, in March of 2020, about the universal nutrition program proposed by Nello Altomare, the opposition critic at the time, said: Simply running around saying meal programs, free meals for everybody at school is somehow a solution, is actually going to encourage an unintended consequence.

Manitobans are still scratching their head about what the heck Brian Pallister meant when he said that a school nutrition program could have unintended consequences. The consequences of a universal school nutrition program are kids getting fed, kids coming to school, outcomes improving here in Manitoba. That's what we were elected to do, that's what we're going to continue doing.

**Mr. Mark Wasyliv (Fort Garry):** At one time the Province of Manitoba 'contriued' about 80 per cent of the funding for schools, and education property taxes was about 20 per cent.

And over the last 20 years—and I want to be fair to the minister; this is—she never created this problem, but it's certainly on her doorstep—there has been underfunding, chronic underfunding, by three, four provincial governments, both PC and NDP, that the funding didn't keep up with the rate of inflation, with education. And education, 80 per cent of the costs are employees, salaries, and everybody in that setting is unionized and they get a cost-of-living increase. And it's usually been, over the past 20 years, about 2 per cent a year.

So that's the baseline; then the other expenses for school boards is on top of that. And the Province—both governments—have been increasing funding for education at the consumer price index, which is often half what the actual inflationary cost for—to run a school division is.

And you do that over 20 years, and you shift that ratio. And now, Pembina Trails, property taxes pays 65 per cent for schools and the province of Manitoba contributes 35 per cent. That's the lowest ratio in the province, and many other divisions now pay more for property taxes than the Province contributes to schools. There's many, like St. James; there's others that are over 50 per cent now. So the Province is actually getting out of the business of paying for education, and it's being put on and transferred to property taxes, and that's a problem for a couple reasons.

Income tax, which is the provincial share, is progressive; that the more money you make, the more you're going to pay. Property tax is flat, and it doesn't take into account your ability to pay. This hurts working families; this hurts seniors, and it is getting worse every—every—year. There are six school divisions in the city of Winnipeg, and depending on the region of the city that you live in, you will pay a very, very different amount for your schools.

So dealing with southwest Winnipeg, which I represent, why do the people there pay a larger share for their schools, based on education property tax, than any other region in Manitoba? And does the minister think that's fair?

And the final question on this topic that I'll leave to her: Will the minister commit today to returning the province back to an 80-20 split, meaning the Province will pay for schools 80 per cent out of general revenue and only 20 per cent will come from education property tax? And if the minister isn't prepared to make that commitment, please tell us why.

**MLA Schmidt:** Thank you for the question. I'd like to, I think, maybe just start my time by thanking the member for Fort Garry (Mr. Wasyliv) for his time. I don't know if all members are aware but, you know, the member for Fort Garry served for many years as a school trustee and that's really important work, it's tough work. And so I just wanted to commend him for his time as a school trustee, with the Winnipeg School Division I believe.

And to all the trustees that are out there, we know that that's incredibly tough work. Our government believes in your work, we support your work, we believe in local voice, we believe in local autonomy, we believe in local priorities—which is why we stood beside families in Fort Garry and families right across Manitoba in opposition to bill 64, which sought to, basically, more or less eliminate the role of local trustees, stranglehold them, and really limit that sort of local voice and local autonomy that we believe is so important when you're delivering education.

So, like the member for Fort Garry, I, too, am concerned about affordability for my constituents and for all Manitobans. And that's why our Minister of Finance (MLA Sala) introduced, in 2025, the Homeowners Affordability Tax Credit, which is not taken into account in some of the numbers that we're hearing reflected here today when people are talking about tax increases. Something that I believe is being left out of those—that data is the impact of our Homeowners Affordability Tax Credit, which is a progressive tax credit which is designed to help the Manitobans that need it the most.

\* (11:50)

Under the previous government—and the member for Fort Garry, you know, took exception to the way that the previous government doled out their property tax credits. It was not a progressive form of tax credit, and under the previous government we saw people like Brian Pallister, who lived in a multimillion-dollar home, receiving thousands—I believe it was somewhere in and around the tune of six or seven thousand dollars a year, in a tax credit, a cheque mailed to the house, the multimillion-dollar house on Wellington Crescent, of Brian Pallister. We saw a nearly \$1-million cheque go to a—you know, a property owner in Winnipeg, a numbered company that doesn't even exist in Manitoba.

This is the type of tax credits that you got under the previous PC government. And I know that the member Fort Garry did not appreciate those measures. And so it's our government, the NDP government, that

brought in a homeowners ability—Homeowners Affordability Tax Credit that's designed to help Manitobans that need it the most.

And where Manitobans, those Manitobans who have been so lucky, who have been so fortunate, who have worked so hard to get themselves into a little bit better position in life, that those people can understand the value of investing education, and the Manitobans that I speak to understand this. We were elected on the Homeowners Affordability Tax Credit. Manitobans understand the value of investing education.

We also inherited a situation in which—and the member from Fort Garry knows this—the previous government completely annihilated school divisions' ability to raise local taxation when they were in government. They put a limit on the amount of taxes that could be raised, and so school divisions weren't able to invest in their local priorities, their local programs.

And so, after being starved for seven and a half years, school divisions were not—they had—they were just at the behest of the government. And I'm not sure if this is what the member from Fort Garry is advocating for. I'm not sure if that's what he would like us to do. I'm not sure if the member from Fort Garry, since he's left our caucus and now sits over on the other side of the aisle, perhaps he's become disillusioned and believes in capping the amount of taxes that local school divisions can raise.

Again, I'm deeply concerned about affordability, absolutely. But, again, I'm not exactly sure where the member for Fort Garry's (Mr. Wasyliv) going. We believe in local choice, we believe in local autonomy and we believe investing in education.

So after years of being starved and being unable to raise local revenues to support kids and families in their education, I've often referred—I've talked to school boards about this many times: it's like if you've been starved, without food for too long, you feel like you need to eat a lot. School divisions are playing catch-up, just like our government is. After years of cuts, cuts to education under the previous government, we're going to work with school divisions to make sure they're properly funded and providing services that kids need.

**Mr. Wasyliv:** I certainly agree with the minister that capping school division's the wrong way to go. And, again, in fairness to her, she didn't create this problem, but it now is her problem by virtue of her position.

What has happened during her tenure, which is of concern—and, again, not her problem—is the amalgamation

of labour contracts in the education field. When you merge, you merge upward; you don't merge downward. That has caused a huge jump in expenses for all school boards, and because the Province hasn't provided that funding and have underfunded the school boards, they've had no choice but to backfill that funding by raising taxes. And that's why we've seen a spike in the last three years in education property taxes.

I mean, we know why it's happened. And the minister can fix this. The minister could have prevented all this by actually providing more funding to the school boards so they didn't have to raise taxes. And, in fact, in—even with them raising taxes, when we have Pembina Trails coming out and said they've had to raise class size numbers. So this is a government says that they're committed to small class sizes but then puts in policies that force school boards to raise class sizes.

Pembina Trails has also said that they've had to cut programs and services because they don't have the funds to do it, something that I know this minister would strongly oppose, but they've been given no options from this government.

So I'd be very interested to hear what the minister's plan is and how she plans to address this. Again, my solution is return to an 80-20 split where the Province pays 80 per cent of schools for every single school division, and school board taxes are only 20 per cent.

But changing tract here, on July 22, 2025, I requested a breakdown of chronic absentee numbers by school division from 2023 onward.

On September 11, I received a reply from this department, and I quote: Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning does not collect chronic absentee data. And so my request for those records was denied.

On September 26, I requested all ministerial briefings in relation to chronic absenteeism and data collection from October 2, 2023, to the present. On November 10, the ministry asked for a 15-day extension, which I gladly agreed to. I didn't hear anything from the ministry until February 3, 2026, another four months later; that obviously contravened the FIPPA act. And then I received an updated ministerial briefing that was not in proper format, that was undated, and it absolutely didn't address anything that was in my request. And of course, we—turned out all this was not true.

I was able to obtain a briefing note to the minister dating July 26, 2024, in the proper format, properly dated, and it did reveal chronic absentee numbers which the Province did clearly have in its possession, which sent—and the concern here—is a fraudulent response to me saying that that data didn't exist.

Not only did the data exist, not only did a ministerial note exist, the ministry sent fraudulent responses on two occasions: one saying they didn't have the data and one basically burying and not providing the ministerial briefing that actually did have this.

These are major, serious violations of Manitoba law. Somebody has broken the law here. There has been no response from the government. There has been no accountability. Nobody has been fired over this. I'm very interested in the minister explaining whether she condones this activity from her ministry.

Who is responsible for actually sending out fraudulent responses to MLAs and burying these reports, and what is being done investigation-wise and consequence-wise to root out the people who basically deliberately and fraudulently broke Manitoba law?

\* (12:00)

**MLA Schmidt:** I appreciate the Fort—the member for Fort Garry (Mr. Wasyliw) acknowledging at the outset of his question that he, too, agrees that the reason that school divisions are needing to—or, have raised property taxes in the last couple of years is because they are backfilling the underfunding that was caused by the previous government. The words used were that it was the backfilling causing the spike, so I'm glad that we agree on that.

And the solution, which sounds easy, is just give school divisions more money. And I would submit to the member that that's exactly what we're doing. Again, we cannot fix this problem overnight. You know, we were left in a hole, and so Manitobans elected us on a mandate to reinvest in education after years of cuts, after bill 64, after the budget cuts, loss of teachers, loss of programs and services—Manitobans elected us on a mandate to restore funding. We've done that every single year to every single school division, but we also have a responsibility to balance the budget and to make sure that we're being fiscally responsible. So we can't fix these problems overnight.

But what Manitobans can expect, what the member for Fort Garry can expect is that, year after year, our government is going to show up with stable and

predictable funding, and it's important that it be stable and predictable.

Again, we cannot fix this overnight. We cannot put the rest of our health-care agenda, our justice agenda, public safety, all of the many other things that Manitobans have elected us to do here, we can't put those things at risk.

By dumping the hundreds of millions of dollars that would probably be needed to reverse the damage caused by seven and a half years of budget cuts—we can't come up with that money overnight, but we're going to continue working with our school divisions.

We've met with the Manitoba School Boards Association very recently on this very issue and I know that they have a lot of creative solutions. We know that teachers, school superintendents, school budgetary officers all have great ideas in this regard, so we're going to continue working with them on the issue of school funding.

On the issue raised by the member regarding his FIPPA request for absenteeism data, I guess I would share that, as minister, that's—this is not a process that I'm involved in. I would submit to the member, as I said earlier in a previous question—a previous answer to a question posed by the member for Lac du Bonnet (Mr. Ewasko), I believe that words matter. I know that he knows this.

Something we share in common is that we're both lawyers; we're the two lawyers in this Legislative Assembly. He obviously practised much longer than me; I would be happy to concede that. But, at the end of the day, lawyers come up with legal opinions. And that's what they are; these are opinions.

So I appreciate that the member feels, in his interpretation, that something was amiss here. He used the word fraud; I take great exception to that, especially when it's levelled at the department.

Again, this is not something that I was involved in, these FIPPA requests. It's not something that hits the minister's desk. But I have full faith and trust in my department, in my both political staff and my department. I find it offensive and unparliamentary that the word fraud would be used in this Chamber to talk about someone in the public service. I think it's reprehensible. I won't stand for it.

And, again, words matter. So I think that if the member wants to accuse the department of fraud, perhaps he should go back to his FIPPA requests and read them carefully and think about the language that

he used and the potential errors he may have made in those FIPPA requests. Because words very much do matter. And so, while the member might try to put on the record here some sort of erroneous interpretation of the FIPPA law that has been defrauded, he couldn't be more incorrect in his interpretation. Again, words matter. He should think about his part in this process and the errors and failures he may have made in submitting his responses—I'm sorry, his requests.

I will absolutely not be launching an investigation into my department. Again, I—there are no more reputable people in this province than the people that work in the Department of Education. They do their work diligently and carefully. I have—I do not direct them in how they respond to FIPPAs. They are doing their work professionally and according to the law, as they understand it and interpret it.

So to answer the question directly: No, I will not be investigating or asking anyone to investigate the department. The member would know—and just to be transparent with all Manitobans because, again, we have absolutely nothing to hide—and the member ought to already be aware of this, but in case he is not, I will remind him that he's certainly welcome to complain to the Ombudsman and they can investigate.

**Mr. Wasyliw:** The minister's response is troubling for a couple of reasons. First, on the taxation issue. Basically, the response is steady as she goes, and that—not really concerned about a cost-of-living crisis, that the No. 1 expense for Manitoba families—and working families—is a spike in education property taxes. And whatever relief the government is giving families is swamped by these massive increases to families. And this government is basically satisfied with their approach and think nothing has to change and that they're going to continue to do these sort of incremental hundred-dollar coupons a year, which are being outpaced by far higher tax increases.

So, basically, no help's on the way, Manitoba, for working families and for people who need relief. And it's not going to be fair. The people of southwest Winnipeg are going to pay more for their schools than any other region in Manitoba, and this minister thinks that's okay. This minister thinks that certain regions of Manitoba have to pay more and that they don't have a role in making sure our tax system is fair. So that's troubling.

What's equally troubling is that a minister is unconcerned that a ministerial state-briefing, which was directly asked for, which was directly on point for the request, was buried by her department and

somebody refused to disclose it. And in that report was the numbers that the department said they didn't have. And the minister says there will be no investigation, nobody did anything wrong.

I mean, that's—how do you respond to that? That's so otherworldly and out of touch. And this response isn't for me, this is for Manitobans. So the minister isn't being disrespectful to me, she's being disrespectful to the people of Fort Garry and to Manitobans in general.

This isn't the minister's information; this isn't the minister's data. It's the people of Manitoba's information, and they have a right to know. And they have a right to trust that their government will be open and transparent and honest with them, and when a request is made to release government data, that they don't bury the report, that they don't lie about saying that they don't have it and that they obstruct the process to prevent Manitobans from actually seeing the data.

And what was particularly concerning is when—in the media, we know from this material that there are 2025 data that this government is in possession of. And this minister has said that she is refusing to disclose the 2025 data on chronic absenteeism. It's even more ridiculous when the minister stands up in the Chamber and says, well, you know what, we brought in a nutrition program and that's going to help bring down chronic absenteeism. Fairly, she says it's not a silver bullet; it isn't. And it will have some benefit, I assume.

But prove it; you have the data that proves what you're saying and you won't release it to Manitobans. And that's a concern—through the Chair.

\* (12:10)

So the minister has the 2025 data that can prove that the nutrition program—

**The Chairperson:** Order.

Yes, we just need to avoid the word you; we need to make sure all comments and questions are going through the Chair. We had a little bit of leniency, but we need to redirect here.

**Mr. Wasyliw:** Thank you to the Chair. And, yes, I did catch myself. So I apologize.

So the minister has this data. This minister claims that the nutrition program is going to help with the absentee problem. So why not release it? Why not release the data and show that the minister was right and the department was right and the education

nutrition program is making real gains and we can actually make those links?

But when the minister refuses to release that data—again, being disrespectful to Manitoba parents. It's not the minister's schools, it's theirs. They have a right to know what's going on there. They have a right to know how well or not well the school is doing, and this is a metric that very clearly indicates that our schools are struggling. There's absolutely no logical explanation why this minister won't release the data unless, of course, the data doesn't help the minister's argument and it is embarrassing to the government, and that's why they continue to stonewall and prevent Manitobans from seeing this information.

So will the minister release the 2025 chronic absentee data, and if not, why not?

**MLA Schmidt:** Like I said at the outset, I mean, I could talk about improving attendance in Manitoba all day. Like, I welcome these questions.

You know, the member asks me why I won't release the data; I would ask the member why he needs the data. Like, he talks about, you know, that I should stand up and brag about it. We are—why does he want the data? To embarrass the government? To embarrass school divisions? To embarrass schools?

We believe that data is important. That's why we're collecting it. We know that data is very important in decision making, unlike the previous government, who closed emergency rooms, who did all this on ideology. Bill 64—ideology. There's no report ever that said bill 64 was going to be good. There's no report that said, you know, that closing the emergency rooms was going to have no immediate consequences. Data is important in decision making, and so our department is going to continue collecting that data.

Our department has nothing—our government has nothing to be embarrassed about. I'll be the first person to put my hands up and say that some Manitoba students are struggling. That's nothing new here in Manitoba.

But I also believe that our government has a plan. It's not just up to the department of 'edlecatation'. We're working across departments, across portfolios, to make the lives of Manitobans better, to make them—lives of Manitoba families better and to make the lives of Manitoba kids better. That's what we're doing. So there's nothing to hide.

You know, the member shows his cards here. The reason why the member wants the data is not to

support kids in schools. You know, the member talks about this absenteeism data. He's obsessed with the Premier (Mr. Kinew) and trying to embarrass our government; that's what he's trying to do, using words—fraud. I'm the first person—the Premier is the first person to stand up and say we have work to do to improve the education system. We inherited a mess. We inherited a mess. But I'm not scared of the data. We're happy to collect the data; we're making our decisions driven by data.

But the member opposite—if he is so intent on improving attendance here in Manitoba, I have had no meeting requests from the member. If he wants to get together with his experience that I thanked him for as a school trustee in Winnipeg School Division, let's get together and talk about what that data talks about, and let's talk about what programs and policies will make that better. Let's do it.

That's not what the member is here to do. This member, as we all know—the member from Lac du Bonnet knows. That's why the member from Lac du Bonnet—if I were a member of opposition—government opposition, I'd be using every single minute of my time to try to hold the government to account, just like they do in question period; they run out of steam. They're not here to serve Manitobans; they're here to play politics. That's what the member from Fort Garry is trying to do here today. He wants to try to suggest that we're not being transparent.

Here's the minister speaking to Manitobans, saying we need to improve attendance in Manitoba. We absolutely do. The data reveals that there are big disparities between, for example, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Manitoba. That's unacceptable. Our government acknowledges that. We will say it to Manitobans, and we're working to do better. That's why we've invested \$30 million in a school nutrition program.

Not only is it not a silver bullet, but to the member's point, it's also not going to, you know, fix things overnight. A universal nutrition program is foundational and fundamental and transformative, but it is not a silver bullet. It is one measure, and it's a new measure. We're still rolling it out. And we know that it's having amazing impacts. The data bears that out; the anecdotes bear that out.

So, for Manitobans, let's talk about the impacts, the anecdotal impacts that we're hearing. Unless the member doesn't want to hear from school superintendents and teachers on their opinions about the universal nutrition program.

And don't take my word for it. The Brandon superintendent, Mathew Gustafson, said—Brandon School Division Superintendent Mathew Gustafson has said the program—the universal nutrition program—has a positive impact on students' health, well-being, attendance and achievement. The division receives regular positive feedback from students, parents and staff for the nutrition program. A teacher noted that one student's progress has benefited from eating on a regular basis. And that's from a public document that was reported on December 3rd of 2025.

That is just one small example of the impact that our universal school nutrition program is having in Brandon School Division.

Again, we know there is much more work to do. I'm happy to do it with Members of the Legislative Assembly, including the member for Fort Garry (Mr. Wasyliv), building on his years of experience as a school trustee. Let's work together and fix this problem for kids and for families.

**The Chairperson:** Before recognizing the next speaker, we're on the home stretch here, folks. Let's just keep our remarks only on the record so when it's not your turn and you don't have the floor, we don't need any interjections, commentary in the background. We can do with all—without all of that.

Now, we go back after the 30 minutes is up, and the member for Lac du Bonnet has the floor.

**Mr. Ewasko:** And I do believe that 30 minutes has been up for a little bit, but that being said, because it's sounding like the minister is not really wanting to fully answer the member from Fort Garry, I will cede the floor for the remainder of today. I have many questions. We've got many days and weeks ahead of ourselves to talk about Estimates, as we will.

And as a colleague in this Manitoba Legislature, I am, again, ceding the floor to the independent member for Fort Garry 'til the end of today, and then I will pick up again in Estimates our next time, when the minister feels that she'll like to attempt to answer some questions.

So thanks for that, honourable Chairperson.

**Mr. Wasyliv:** Honourable Chair, I just want to get back to some of the word salad of the minister's last response: 15,000 chronically absent students a day in Manitoba is embarrassing. And that is a crisis, and the government needs to treat it as a crisis and needs to get serious with it with real money, with real policies.

If the minister is sincere—and I think she is, that she actually is open-minded and wants to work with everybody in the Chamber about it—I will make a request and we can sit down. And this is obviously dear to my heart, and I'd like to see action on it. I know you're sincere about that.

Now, the problem I have is the minister says she has nothing to hide but now is going to hide the data. I mean, those two statements are contradictory. You can't say: why would you need the data?

Well, the obvious reason is it's, again, not the minister's data. It's the people of Manitoba's data, and it's about accountability and transparency. It is a metric that Manitoba parents can see how well or not well the government of the day is addressing an issue that has long-standing policy issues.

We know that children who are chronically absent are more often involved in the criminal justice system. We know the PISA scores for chronically absent students are lower and that they have less likely ability to actually complete school and get a good full-time job and will have higher rates of use of the CFS and health-care system. If we solve this issue, we actually go many ways to solving a lot of problems in Manitoba.

\* (12:20)

Nello Altomare would always say that public schools are the last common institution where we as a community meet together. And we're excluding 15,000 students from that common institution every day. And that should be alarming to this government. It should be alarming to the minister. And the minister says that, well, they have a plan, but they've never announced the plan. What is the plan? Why hasn't the minister come out with any sort of policy or plans in relation to this?

And, again, you know, I will assist, and I will humbly and—do what I can to help this government achieve this goal. I'm rooting for this government to get this right. I'm rooting for this minister to get this right, because if the minister succeeds, we all do. And I think it should transcend partisanship and personalities, and it needs to get done. And I hope this minister will make this her No. 1 priority, but—you know, time will tell.

So one of the issues here is obviously youth crime and chronic absenteeism. The last stats from the Winnipeg Police Service show that with youth crime, shoplifting and break and enters—through the roof. Double-digit increases in one year—27 per cent. These are crimes that occur during the day. These are crimes

that, if a young person is in a structured school setting, they're not in the neighbourhood breaking into homes.

The government recognizes this as a valid issue because in the public safety strategy, they make it very specific and very clear that the Minister of Justice is supposed to work with the Minister of Education to address chronic absenteeism in the process of public safety.

Now, in the House a couple weeks ago, I filed a FIPPA showing that the Minister of Education has never met with the Minister of Justice (Mr. Wiebe) to discuss chronic absenteeism, despite this being a directive in the public safety strategy.

And if this government has a plan, if this government believes that this is a priority, why hasn't the minister met with the Justice Minister? Why hasn't there been any meetings when it comes to chronic absenteeism? And I wonder what plan there is.

**MLA Schmidt:** Thank you to the member for Fort Garry (Mr. Wasyliv) for those words. I really do take you at your word, as well, and I agree with you wholeheartedly that, you know, if we can address this issue of chronic and severe absenteeism in schools, we have addressed many of the issues that plague our government, right, as you've mentioned: certainly public safety being one of them, health care being another really important one.

Our government absolutely believes and understands that—and I've said it on the record many times—a good education plan is a health-care plan; a good education plan is an economic plan; a good education plan is a public safety plan. So I think we agree a hundred per cent on that.

And that's why—and I mentioned this before and I mention it again because I think it is important—the Healthy Child Committee of Cabinet and the Poverty Reduction Committee of Cabinet, two Cabinet committees that were struck immediately after we formed government so that we can do that important work that you're talking about—that the member talks about to address these sort of issues, right?

It's—we can't do this work in silos, we can't do this work—it's not up to one party, it's not up to even one Legislative Assembly. This is an issue that all of society is going to have to tackle, and we all have to come together and work together. And it's a worthy endeavour, because what could be a better investment, what could be better to work towards than supporting our kids? So we agree on that a hundred per cent.

And, you know, when the member from Fort Garry did—he posed this question about the formal meetings between the Minister of Justice and I, recognizing that as he said, improving that—when kids aren't in school, it's a lot more likely that they're out in the community causing trouble, sometimes even, unfortunately, committing some property crimes, so we acknowledge that.

And, you know, while the FIPPA result may have come back with no, sort of, formal meetings between the Minister of Justice and I, I can tell you that, certainly, in our work through the Healthy Child Committee of Cabinet, through the Poverty Reduction Committee of Cabinet and just through—the day that the member asked the question, the minister and I sort of jokingly gave each other a high-five and said we don't need to have meetings, we're best friends.

And while I admit that perhaps that was maybe a—sort of a flippant response at the time—question period can be, you know, a bit dramatic and flippant; that's maybe the kindest way to describe question period—but it really was sort of sincere, you know what I mean? We do really sincerely mean the member—the Minister of Justice happens to also be the member for Concordia.

We are neighbour constituents. We are almost lifelong friends. And so, you know, Manitobans can rest assured that the Minister of Justice and myself work together very closely, as I do with all—as we do with all members of our caucus, work very well together.

One of the things that the Minister of Justice and I worked on to—that really speaks to what the member for Fort Garry is talking about is the youth summit which we had, I believe, in February—the very first of its kind—youth summit here in Manitoba. And it was co-delivered by the Department of Justice and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning, hosted by our MLA for Radisson who, herself, is a young person—or relatively speaking, anyways.

And that summit, all jokes aside, was an incredible opportunity to bring Manitobans together to talk about what youth are thinking about. And so a big part of that youth summit was to talk about public safety, to talk about how kids are feeling safe: What do you see in your community that makes you feel safe? What do you see in your community that makes you feel unsafe? And how can we, as government, do better to create feelings of safety within young people?

And so we had so much great feedback that day. Certainly, you know, education was a big part of the conversation. And we heard a lot of great things that day; one thing that I reflect about a lot that we heard at the youth summit that day is some of the investments that our Justice Minister is making in increasing not just supports for municipalities, for local police services, but also the legislative and regulatory work that we've done to create not only First Nations safety officers but also community safety officers.

And so I know that some of that legislative and regulatory work and also some of that increase in funding has led to the City of Winnipeg creating community safety officers that now work on Winnipeg Transit. And we heard from students that day—

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

### ROOM 255

#### HEALTH, SENIORS AND LONG-TERM CARE

\* (10:00)

**The Chairperson (Diljeet Brar):** Will the Committee of Supply please come to order.

This section of the Committee of Supply will now consider the Estimates of the Department of Health, Seniors and Long-Term Care.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

**Hon. Uzoma Asagwara (Minister of Health, Seniors and Long-Term Care):** No.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

Does the critic from the official opposition have an opening statement?

**An Honourable Member:** A short one.

**The Chairperson:** The member for Roblin.

**Mrs. Kathleen Cook (Roblin):** I just wanted to note that, you know, we're here, considering the Estimates of the largest department in government, with a budget this year of over \$10 billion.

So I think the discussion we have here today is really important. The questions we ask here on behalf of Manitobans, to ensure that they are getting the care that they need and value for that level of investment are important; that, you know, we address some of the issues that have been brought forward by health-care workers in our system and how this budget proposes to address some of those issues.

And I just also wanted to quickly thank the staff in the department, some of whom I'm sure are here and who work every day on behalf of Manitobans. Thank you to them.

And with that, I look forward to getting into some questions.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member.

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 21.1(a) contained in the resolution 21.1.

At this time, we invite the minister's staff to join us at the table and we ask that the minister introduce the staff in attendance.

**MLA Asagwara:** With me today I am joined by the best departmental staff in the entirety of government. These folks are absolutely superstars, great people who care deeply about Manitobans and do a phenomenal job every single day managing our health-care system in their role of public service.

So we've got to my left here, Deputy Minister of Health, Sil; we've got to his left, ADM Sandra; we've got down the line here against the wall, two more ADMs, Suzanne and JP; we've got Raina, who is my special advisor; and we've got Tino, who is my special assistant.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

According to our rule 77(15), during the consideration of departmental Estimates, questioning for each department shall proceed in a global manner, with questions put separately on all resolutions once the official opposition critic indicates that questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

**Mrs. Cook:** I'm going to start—I'll refer to page 33 of the supplement, which lays out some of the key initiatives the department is pursuing with respect to emergency rooms.

And we know that emergency room wait times are at troubling highs right now. It's certainly something I hear about from constituents on a regular basis. We know that the median emergency room wait time in Winnipeg has doubled under the current government. And I just want to ask a couple of questions about initiatives that are outlined on this page of the supplement.

Under the heading, advance the lowering emergency room wait times initiatives, the supplement states: The piloted changes launched in April 2025 with implementation in June 2025. These efforts continue through 20–2026-27.

And there's not a lot of detail there, so I'm just wondering if the minister could elaborate on exactly what those piloted changes were and what the impact has been, because I think emergency room wait times have actually only increased since that—those changes, whatever they were, were made.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member.

\* (10:10)

**MLA Asagwara:** I appreciate that, Chair. Is it honourable Chair? Is that your—yes, honourable Chair?

So I think it's important for us to talk about how we got to where we are in health care, specifically our emergency department wait times. That context is really relevant because the context actually does help inform the work that needs to be done.

So I'll just give a little example here: the fact that we lost three of our largest emergency departments informs the reasons why we are ensuring that no emergency departments are closed under our government, like the 23 under the previous government; that informs the fact that we are reopening the Victoria emergency department; it informs the fact that we are opening the Eriksdale ED; it informs the approach that needs to be taken to address the massive pressures on our health-care system that are a direct result of the closure of those emergency departments.

You know, the reality around ED wait times is that they are a consequence of us losing a tremendous amount of capacity when those ERs and others were closed. What we've come to learn, in I would say the last year and recent months after some analysis, and there's more analysis that will be done, is that actually—you know, we knew this, it wasn't just the emergency departments being closed that was an issue. It was actually the fact that there was a lot of staffing and health-care infrastructure that was also shuttered at those sites.

So we're talking about adjoining and related intensive care units; we're talking about specialty care access; we're talking about a workforce that is specialized and takes years to train and prepare to deliver those services.

One site in particular, I'll just, you know, highlight to maybe—in northwest Winnipeg, lost about 25 per cent of their staffing infrastructure as a result of those ERs being closed by the previous government, the PCs. And so, unfortunately, the reality is that the pressures we're seeing in terms of emergency department wait times are correlated to that. They're a direct result of that, and require a tremendous amount of capacity being built back up in the system to address those pressures that are caused by those closures and cuts.

The other thing I think it's important for us to reflect on and to understand is that those closures and cuts were made during a time where our population was rapidly aging, where the complexity of illness was increasing. Comorbidities and the realities of that here in Manitoba take a real toll on our health-care system.

And so during a time where we should have been adding more capacity to a city that is growing rapidly—we're now at about one and a half million people in this province. You've got communities that are growing very, very quickly, that themselves would be the size of small cities in no time. At a time where we should have seen more capacity, more ERs probably set up, more beds added to the health-care system, more health-care workers trained and hired, we saw capacity cut and diminished, which resulted in chaos in our health-care system.

And so our government came in, was able to finally have a look behind the curtain in terms of what was going on in health care. I was stunned to learn about additional cuts and decisions that hadn't even really become public-facing, but the effects they were having on the health-care system.

And we knew right away that there was a few key things we needed to do, and one of them is staffing, and that continues to be a top priority. We knew that in order to make sure that we could even stabilize the health-care system, never mind change the trajectory to a better one, we had to stabilize, like essentially triage—we knew the health-care system was hemorrhaging; we needed to stop the bleeding, stabilize things; staffing was the No. 1 priority in order to do that. And so we have been able to thankfully recruit a net number of over 4,000 health-care workers in our health-care system.

Many of those folks are working in existing—the remaining emergency departments that weren't closed by the previous government, working in urgent cares and other places, and I would say that staffing

continues to be a top priority. It has to be, because like I said, you know, one site alone where an emergency department was closed lost 25 per cent of their staff.

And so this isn't just about reopening the emergency departments that were closed so that people have more options, so that we can distribute the complexity of illness to more appropriate places to expedite the care that folks are receiving and make sure it's more timely. We actually need the people on the front lines to deliver this care, and we didn't have planning around that; we actually saw the opposite for many years. And I'll continue my answer next.

Thank you.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** You know, I asked a really specific question about an item that's listed in the minister's own supplement and I think it would have been fairly simple for the minister to give a direct answer. And I have a lot of questions about this, and I guess the longer it takes to get the answers, the longer we will be here.

You know, and the minister spent five minutes blaming the previous PC government for problems that are occurring under their government. And nothing the minister is saying explains why median ER wait times hovered just over two hours for the entirety of the previous government. But since taking office—since the NDP took office, those wait times have now risen to 4.3 hours—they've doubled.

And this has had real and devastating impacts on Manitobans. We've seen, tragically, people have died waiting for care in ERs. Chad Giffen, Genevieve Price, Judy Burns, Stacey Ross, Luca Tang—all of these Manitobans with a family, with loved ones, that died seeking care in emergency rooms. And I think they deserve more than a glib partisan answer from the minister.

The minister talked about population growth. Certainly that's a factor, but I think it would be a stretch to say that population growth has exploded so much within the last two and a half years alone that it explains the doubling of ER wait times under the NDP.

The minister also talks about staffing. Certainly—incredibly important priority, but the minister and the Premier (Mr. Kinew) routinely go out and say that they've hired a, you know, X number of health-care workers, but nobody knows where they are. And front-line health-care workers have asked that question publicly. The head of the Manitoba Nurses Union has

said that she has members coming to her and asking, where are they, because we're not seeing a difference on the front lines.

And health-care workers are unfortunately voting with their feet; they're leaving. They're greylisting hospitals in unprecedented ways; I think we're up to three, with a fourth on the horizon, and that's something that this minister has pooh-poohed in the past as just a union tactic that's deployed when the NDP are in power, which is really dismissive of the concerns put forward by front-line workers. And I think if the minister took those concerns a little more seriously, maybe some of those retention issues would be addressed.

We also learned recently that, you know, Shared Health has no staffing plan, and while we're here to consider the Estimates of the department, not of Shared Health, the department is the biggest funder of Shared Health and the department has oversight over Shared Health. And I think the fact that Shared Health doesn't know where staff are needed, how many, when, doesn't have an eye on upcoming retirements and what staffing needs are going to be going forward is deeply concerning for all Manitobans.

I'm going to ask about the reducing access block at triage program, which I would have assumed is one of the lowering emergency room wait times initiatives that the minister would want to talk about, as per page 33 of the supplement. And the reason I'm asking about this program is because I have been speaking with front-line health-care workers at major hospitals in Winnipeg who have concerns about this program and how it was rolled out.

So I would like to ask the minister, what is the status of this program? How does it work, where has it been implemented and what have been the impacts of that?

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin. (Mrs. Cook)

\* (10:20)

**MLA Asagwara:** So, as I was saying, our government has hired over 4,000 net-new health-care workers and we recognize that, you know, for years prior, there should have been the work done and the planning in place to identify, you know, as the critic just said, actually, how many health-care workers do we need to make sure that we're doing everything we can to support Manitobans in having access to timely care. In our—whether it's our EDs, you know, anywhere, quite frankly, in terms of our acute-care system, and

certainly in community as well. And that work wasn't done.

And so, as we're doing the work of recruiting and training more health-care workers than we ever have before—because that's a really important part of this conversation—you know, we work across government. Health care is our top priority. And so, we've been working—our department's been working very closely with the Department advanced—of Advanced Education and Training.

The Minister of Advanced Education and Training (MLA Cable) is a phenomenal minister who's done a great job of making sure that we are on the right path of training the number of health-care workers that we need for the immediate and, certainly, for the future of this province. Recognizing, again, that we're dealing with a system that was almost driven to the point of collapse.

I heard that time and time and time again. I hear it now from health-care workers who were watching services be cut and closed and were saying that it was pretty clear to them the agenda—which we are seeing roll out in other conservative jurisdictions in Canada—the agenda was probably to privatize—increasingly so, rapidly so—health care. And so this idea that you—you know, you destroy public health care and then you turn to private health care as the solve, which we know isn't a solve that benefits people; it creates a two-tier system, unfortunately.

So we've done the work of focusing on making sure that we're building up a public health-care system. We're training more health-care workers than we ever have before. We're retaining more health-care workers, thankfully. We know there's a lot more work to do. We know that you can't replace over 500 beds that were cut overnight. We're working hard at it. We've got almost 400 net-new beds online, fully staffed beds.

But we also know that we need more than that; we need much more than that. The 500 that were cut years prior to us, you know—we know that beds should have been added, like the critical care beds that we've added in pediatric care and in adult care; that's a really good example.

And we made those investments in partnership with nurses. It was nurses who told us that these beds were needed, this capacity was needed. And so, we're working directly with the front lines in order to make sure we're making smart investments for now and, of course, for the future.

Now, we recognize that there's a whole lot more we need to do to address these challenges. You know, when you're talking about emergency department wait times, you're talking about what's happening in the EDs, but you're really talking about what's happening throughout the rest of the system and even in the community, which is why we've been so focused on adding beds in key areas in the system. So, we're talking about internal medicine beds, family medicine beds, mental health beds, dialysis capacity, surgical beds. We've added all of this capacity in the health-care system.

And we've added a ton of capacity now in community. And we're actually setting up structures in the community that are going to really support every single site in being able to move folks through the health-care system in a much more timely way, which, if you can improve flow, reduce access block, you take those pressures off the emergency department.

Now, again, this is work that we all want to be moving more quickly than it is, but this is work that started under our government. So, simultaneously, we're staffing, we're repairing and fixing a very, very damaged, near-decimated health-care system, and we're also implementing new initiatives and new resources and new strategies, like extended-hour primary-care clinics, to make sure people have better access to care and to bring those pressures down in the emergency departments.

All of this takes time. That's the reality of this kind of work. It's heavy lifting. It takes time. But we are seeing, you know, areas of improvement here. Manitoba now leads the country. It went from being the worst to being the best jurisdiction in terms of access to primary care: doctors, nurse practitioners. And this is something we can be proud of. We know that, over time, improved access to primary care means that people are going to be going to emergency departments less. But, again, those outcomes and those improvements and those impacts take time to see in terms of the numbers.

So we're going to stick with it. We're going to keep rolling out initiatives and listening to experts locally, not only repairing the damage that was done but also, again, you know, implementing new ways of doing the work so that we can see improvements across the system. But there's much more work to do, and we acknowledge that.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** And, you know, certainly, the minister's provided me a segue to talk about something else I want to talk about, which is, you know, the importance of community care in reducing emergency room wait times.

Certainly, this is a system-wide issue. But I am asking about some very specific things that are mentioned in the supplement, so they're fair game as questions and I just—I can't help but notice that the minister has utterly failed to answer either of the two questions

I've asked so far about the lowering emergency room wait times initiative, launched by their government, and the projects that have been undertaken under that initiative and any results. Because those are—you—we're not seeing results when it comes to ER wait times; we're seeing things, in fact, getting significantly worse.

So, again, I'll ask this question one more time before I move on. If the minister doesn't know or doesn't want to answer or wants to take it under advisement, that would be fine as well. I'm asking what are the piloted changes launched in April 2025 mentioned in the supplement on page 33, and I'm asking the minister to explain the reducing access block at triage initiative that was mentioned when the lowering emergency room wait times initiative launched in May 2025.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member.

**MLA Asagwara:** So the—there's some really wonderful people who we've been working with here in Manitoba, some phenomenal experts in emergency department care—Dr. Kendiss Olafson, Dr. Paul Ratana, you know, co-chaired this initiative, this table of experts—to help guide the way that we would examine what's going on, what damage was caused to our emergency departments, you know, how do we understand the impacts of the closures and cuts to our ER capacity, and then how do we turn things in a different direction, what initiatives would make sense.

And so I'm sure the critic is well aware of varying announcements we've made on this. I even made a social media video about one of the initiatives called the virtual ward. Again, I referenced extended-hours primary-care clinics as something that has made a huge difference in terms of Manitobans not having to go to the emergency department or urgent cares for primary care; they can instead—you know, they can use their now plastic or digital health cards, go to [medinav.ca](http://medinav.ca) and book, in some cases a same-day or

same-hour appointment to get their health care needs met.

\* (10:30)

And so all of this work, really, is tied together in terms of the efforts that are being made to reduce those pressures while we add more beds and while we re-open emergency departments, hire back staff that were fired, put in plans in place for a more sustainable approach to health care moving forward.

And I want to thank Dr. Olafson, Dr. Ratana, Dr. Chochinov, all the folks—Heidi—all the folks who were involved with the work, and in supporting us launching and piloting initiatives like RABAT.

RABAT, Reducing Access Block at Triage—I can just explain a little bit about it. This went out publicly. It includes co-ordination between a triage nurse assigning triage, an acuity scale—so, CTAS score—an ED doctor performing an initial screening, treatment and testing. Models like RABAT add staffing to emergency departments, implement transitional care beds and create triage protocols to jump-start patients' initial assessment and treatment process.

And so, what we've seen is that, you know, one—what we've seen very plainly is that RABAT and other initiatives have to go hand-in-hand with making sure that we're continuing to hire and train and retain staff. Like, ultimately, that's the biggest piece of this puzzle. Any initiative that you want to implement has to be done in conjunction, of course, with staffing. And, I mean, this is no surprise to us. We knew this for years in opposition. We knew it right away in government, which is why we hit the ground running in terms of training and retaining folks.

You know, the critic makes comments on the number of staff and where are they—I hope that she can understand that when she makes those comments, she's reflecting on the fact that even with net-new over 4,000 health-care workers, it's very clear we need even more. And we need even more because so many health-care workers were cut and fired and lost their jobs or left the system under the previous government.

And so, yes, guess what, 4,000 health-care workers net-new; it's a great number but it's not enough. There's a whole lot more health-care workers we need, you know, across the board and we're doing that work. And we're going to keep our foot on the gas because we recognize that an initiative like RABAT needs more staff.

You know, any initiative that we implement, including some work that we're doing in terms of the virtual ward, in terms of making sure that people have more access to community care, after years and years and years of home care not getting the adequate resources staffing there, I hope that she can see that we're turning that around. It takes time, but we're doing the work.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** And I think I would—I just want to put on the record that, you know, some of the concerns that were raised with me about RABAT from front-line health-care workers—physicians specifically, who expressed to me their concern about their liability if they were to be seeing patients in the waiting room, but not actively treating them.

And I hope that those concerns are being addressed. It was also raised with me that it could be the case that patients would be moved from the waiting-to-be-seen category to treatment and progress while they're still in the waiting room, which would be, like, changing the way patients are counted on paper without making a meaningful difference in their actual care experience in the ER. And that would be concerning. And I'll leave it at that because I don't expect I'll get an answer if I were to ask a question about that.

The minister spoke earlier about the system-wide approach that is necessary to reducing emergency room wait times. And we know that. Yes, it's about increasing access to primary care. It's also about increasing access to long-term care services.

And, in particular, I wanted to talk about home care because I was surprised that on page 41 of the supplement, which lists the department's key initiatives with regard to primary, community and seniors' care, home care is not mentioned. And that's deeply concerning, I think, because we know that without access to home care, patients will end up stuck in hospital. They'll be on the ward in the hospital unable to be discharged because home-care services are not available. Or, if they're in community already, and aren't able to access the home-care services they need, they end up in the emergency room.

So I was just a little surprised to see that home care wasn't listed as a priority in this budget given the direct impact that that has on emergency room wait times. And we know that, particularly in Winnipeg, home care has suffered with the decision to centralize home-care scheduling services in downtown Winnipeg.

And then, there was—you know, the minister walked that back publicly, I believe it was last September, apologized for the chaos that was caused by that decision to centralize and said they were walking it back.

But then, this last March, there was a party held to celebrate the centralization, which front-line home-care workers found deeply offensive, and I think the word they used was trauma, that the centralization of home care in the WRHA was traumatic for them. And it was certainly, I would say, traumatic for home-care clients as well, who ended up suffering the results of that, which was thousands of cancelled and missed visits—you know, a different home-care worker coming to one's home every day, which can be particularly problematic when we're talking about folks with dementia.

So I guess my question is why improvements to home care are not listed as one of the key initiatives in this budget and what exactly—what steps are being taken to address what I would call a home-care crisis in the WRHA.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook).

**MLA Asagwara:** There is an increase in home care in the budget year over year. We do reference investing in home care on page 31.

And I just want to caution the critic. You know, I think it's important for us to be cognizant of the folks who are working really hard every day in our communities. An article about somebody in home care who went out of their way—went out of her way to try and do a nice thing for her team—yes, it was in the media, painted a particular way. I had no involvement in that party. I don't host those kinds of events typically. It was a local manager who wanted to put a space together to say thank you to her team.

I think it's really important for us to be really cautious and mindful about how we talk about things without knowing all the information. People are working really hard. They care deeply for their team members. They care deeply for clients and communities. And it can really affect people and hurt people when, you know, maybe they try and do a nice thing and it misses the mark and then it is construed in a way politically that's pretty harmful for them.

So I would just ask her to maybe refrain from referencing a party. I've had the opportunity to talk directly with that manager, who's awesome, cares deeply about home care and is really committed to

making sure that Manitobans get the care they need and to making sure that her team has the support that they deserve.

And I just—I think it's important for us to be really mindful of how we talk about the people on the front lines who are showing up every single day navigating challenges and doing their best for Manitobans.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** You know, certainly, but I think the question that remains unanswered is whether the centralization of home-care services has, in fact, been walked back as was committed by the minister, or whether it's still in place.

And, certainly, by all accounts, if we're throwing a party to celebrate the anniversary of that centralization, that tells me that, in fact, home-care scheduling services remain centralized in downtown Winnipeg, which would contradict the minister's own words and intentions on that topic.

I just did a quick calculation, and the year-over-year increase to home care is minimal. I think the dollar commitment to home care is one thing. I think Manitobans expected to see it listed as a priority, recognizing that there need to be changes in the way the program is delivered. It needs to be more responsive to the needs of home-care clients. I hear from them every week. No exaggeration. They call me from all over the province because I'm the critic—and, you know, the minister was the Health critic at one time, so I think they will understand that sometimes, the role means that you're hearing from people—people aren't calling to tell me that the government's doing a good job. I'm the critic; they're calling to tell me—to complain.

\* (10:40)

And the complaints I hear about home care are serious. I hear complaints about the consistency of visits. Some folks write to me to tell me that their home-care visits are cancelled up to 60 per cent of the time with no notice, or home-care workers show up early when the client isn't there to receive them, or some elderly female home-care clients, who have respectfully requested not to have male home-care staff, continue to receive male home-care staff. It's the unreliability of the service, and that's not a reflection on the front-line staff delivering the care because I hear from them too.

They call me to talk about how it takes them hours sometimes to call in to the central intake line, how

they get home-care assignments that have them driving here, there and everywhere, and don't make any sense. They talk about how they don't have time for breaks, how their entire day is scheduled so tightly that it sometimes doesn't even allow for travel time between clients. How they're running back and forth from the office for supplies because that's now also their responsibility, to pick up and deliver those supplies. They've told me about the difficulty in doing that, particularly in the winter with icy sidewalks, and falls and injuries that they've suffered as a result.

So I guess if I have to turn this into a question, my question to the minister will be, you know, when will those concerns put forward by home-care clients and home-care staff, particularly in Winnipeg, be addressed, and more to the point, are home-care scheduling services still centralized in downtown Winnipeg? Because when I speak to home-care staff, the message they've relayed to me is that the message they're getting from management is that this is a done deal, we have to move forward with it and it's not rolling back, which, again, would contradict the comments put on the record publicly by the minister last fall.

Which is it, I guess, is the question.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook).

**MLA Asagwara:** I'm just waiting on a little bit of information here.

You know, home care in Manitoba used to be the gold standard. Before the dark days of the prior PC government, it was the gold standard. It really led the country in terms of the program: how comprehensive it was, how it delivered care. It was really impressive. It was a template that other jurisdictions used and tried to follow, and just couldn't quite match up to what we had in Manitoba.

It was eroded, it was neglected, it was cut for years and, yet again, we find ourselves in this position as a government where we're doing the work to fix home care. We're being asked—being told by the opposition, you're not fixing it fast enough.

I can receive that, actually. I recognize that home care is an incredibly important service that is delivered to Manitobans across the province, predominantly—you know, the vast majority of the delivery in Winnipeg. It's about 16,000, 17,000 appointments, I believe it is—that a month or day, 16? Can you remind me the exact stat? It's enormous in terms of the appointments, daily, for home care.

And we have, as a government, actually taken the step to intervene and make sure that we have experts. Some wonderful people from our department stepped up and stepped in and were able to work with home care, which had never had that level of engagement from government in many, many, many years—arguably decades, maybe—and support to really understand how home care has evolved over the years. So the demand for home care has exploded, but the investment, for years, lagged well, well behind them.

So, for clarity, I don't know what the member is referencing in terms of us not investing in home care. I think she's just mistaken on that; it's clearly outlined in the budget. We've got an over 8 per cent increase—\$42-million year-over-year increase in home care—it's significant—that is distributed to the SDOs, and they make the necessary investments in terms of staffing, et cetera, for home care. So we're investing in home care.

We're also working directly with home care. We've supported them in standing up committees that are entirely populated by direct service workers, nurses, NRCs, folks who understand home care, been a part of home-care delivery for many years. And they are the ones who are directly informing the work that is being done and how things are moving forward.

We've made sure that there's new leadership that's been hired for home care, which is great. They've got some folks there now with skill sets that they didn't have for a very long time, to really help improve the way the program operates, which is really wonderful.

So, again, these are very real challenges that have been long standing, that we are dealing with in home care. We listen to health-care workers, and so when they highlighted concerns, we took action to make sure that the approach in home care was one that made their lives easier, not more difficult. And our priority is making sure that we continue to listen to home-care workers. I have regular conversations with folks who've worked in home care for 20-plus years. I want to thank those folks—you know who you are—for continuing to meet with me regularly to have those conversations and offer us advice.

I hear from Manitobans who offer us their thoughts on their lived experiences with home care, and we factor that in, too. It's really important for us to understand how everyday Manitobans are affected by what's going on in home care and then make necessary policy changes. So, we've been able to do a lot of that as well.

So we're going to keep doing the work of adding more capacity to home care, including more investments on top of the over \$40 million we've invested year-over this last budget into this year's budget. Can tell you that it's not just playing catch-up for us; we recognize these investments weren't happening for two terms of a previous government and we know that there's a lot we have to do to repair it. But we're also thinking long term: how do we modernize home care in Manitoba?

Services were cut back, in terms of what home care delivered, under the previous administration. And now, we're talking about—okay, how do we build up more staffing capacity and how do we add back some of those services that were eliminated that Manitobans really depend on, so that we can support them in staying in their homes, aging with dignity in their communities? And that also plays a role in reducing folks having to go or ending up in emergency departments or urgent care.

So, you know, this is a really important part of the overall conversation around supporting the system as a whole and, of course, supporting Manitobans in aging with dignity in their communities in Manitoba.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** Continuing in the area of long-term care, I did want to talk a little bit about personal-care homes and some of the challenges that the long-term-care sector has been experiencing as a result of staffing challenges and inflation and increasing costs, which is something that, you know, all Manitobans are dealing with, but certainly, long-term care homes are experiencing that as well.

A specific concern that's been raised with me by a few operators that I've spoken with—well, I'll back up a little bit.

So, you know, following the tragedy at Maples during COVID, there was the—a report—an action plan implemented to help address the recommendations of that report. And as part of that, there was funding allocated to personal-care homes that I understand was to flow in six phases.

\* (10:50)

And the intent of that funding was to help move staffing levels up to 4.1 hours per resident day and to help implement new PCH standards. Now, the first two phases of that funding flowed under the previous government, and my understanding, based on speak-

ing with operators, is that that funding has now stopped.

So I'm just wondering if the minister can, you know, confer with their department and explain why the—you know, what—the time they—the operators refer to it as the Stevenson funding—stopped flowing under the current government.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook).

**MLA Asagwara:** So just clarifying a bit more on the home-care details, because I think it's really important.

So, you know, I explained to the critic how much we've increased funding under our government for home care specifically, but I think it's important. When I reference what happened under the previous administration—I know the member thinks I'm strictly being partisan—what I'm doing is I'm explaining how we got to the conditions in health care that we're dealing with today. And that really matters.

And how we got to the conditions that we're dealing with today in home care are reflected in the year-over-year budget, where we can see the previous government in some years—in many years—1 per cent increases, which, not even to inflation—to de facto cut. We see in—actually, the year that I was elected, 2019—0.3 per cent. The year after that, actually another cut of 0.1 per cent; 0.3 per cent after that. I mean, we were—now we're in COVID years. So now, we're in COVID years and we're seeing cuts to home care, because that's what that—this is. These are de facto cuts that happened. Under our government, we see almost 6 per cent, we see 20 per cent, and then we see the 8 per cent that I referenced in terms of \$42 million, and our last budget was \$87 million in home care.

So the bottom line here is that the previous government decimated—or tried to—yet again, a public service: they cut the services, they cut home care, they didn't give any increases, they couldn't hire any staff, they couldn't approve care for Manitobans. And now we're in a position where we're cleaning that up, we're repairing that damage. But the numbers are in black and white; they speak for themselves. And I think it's important for us to understand them.

Now, in terms of the path forward, again, we're going to keep investing in home care, the same way—the member brings up long-term care—the same way we're investing in long-term care. We saw a net loss in long-term care of over 200 beds. I actually represent the constituency. We're in Union Station

right now, where Parkview personal-care home was closed, and that was a loss of over 200 beds. I have friends, one of now has passed away—she's a wonderful two-spirit Elder—who lived there, could no longer live there when it was closed, and, you know, that cut, that closure, that loss had a huge impact on our communities and on a long-term-care capacity in Manitoba.

They also, you know, made a point of losing and cutting the housing that seniors depended on—again, in my community, actually. Think about Lions Place; that was seniors housing that they allowed to be sold off to a private company. Countless seniors—I see those seniors at least three or four times a year—were affected and continue to be affected by that.

So, when we're talking about long-term care, I can assure the critic, we are making real investments in long-term care. We're building. She knows this. She can go and see some of the sites that are well under way under our government. We're actually building personal-care homes, not just announcing them like the previous government did. And we are investing, again, in making sure that we can staff our health-care system and people's homes in a much more dignified and responsible way.

So the Stevenson report, which was a direct result of the disaster—the devastating disaster that happened in Maples and other personal-care homes during COVID, where we saw the previous government fail to invest in protecting seniors—we've ensured that all of those recommendations from the report continue to be fulfilled in full. We have continued to invest, making sure that our long-term-care homes can move toward that 4.1 hours per resident, per day in terms of direct care. And we will continue to do that.

You know, again, we take this very seriously. We recognize that we're coming into an environment where we lost a lot of capacity. A net loss of over 200 personal-care-home beds is enormous, particularly in a province the size of Manitoba. But we are not only building personal-care homes, we are adding front-line staff to these personal-care homes. We are investing in long-term care.

We just invested an additional \$5 million so that the food and nutrition is better in long-term-care homes so folks can have a better quality of life. And we're also opening up transitional-care-unit beds so that folks have a transitional—appropriate place to get care, get support while they wait for that more appropriate long-term bed. So I think the number of beds we've added on that front is almost

100 transitional-care-unit beds now between Winnipeg and the Interlake, with more on the way.

So, you know, this is something that is close to heart for me because I live in a community, I represent a community where we lost hundreds of beds. And we'll keep doing the work.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

Minister was using a document; can they confirm it was a private or public document, please.

**MLA Asagwara:** Oh, sure. It's public information, but we can put that together and provide it at a later time. We'll provide it. Thanks.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** You know, I'm—I have to say, I'm a little surprised to see the minister advocating so vociferously for Parkview Place. It was a private personal-care home. It was the site of one of the deadliest outbreaks of COVID-19. It had a cockroach problem. It was subject to a licensing review. It was incredibly outdated in its infrastructure with narrow hallways, no outdoor space.

I guess, as far as the minister is concerned, a home under those conditions under the NDP would remain open. But it was not—it wasn't a good place for seniors, and I think, you know, that's been acknowledged. So I don't think the minister's being entirely clear about what the situation was there when those beds were closed. I certainly wouldn't want my loved one in a facility that was the subject of a licensing review with a persistent cockroach infestation, unable to get outside, outdated and inadequate recreation programs. That's not what Manitoba seniors deserve.

But getting back to home care, the minister talks about the previous government, but has still failed to answer the question about the decision that their government made to centralize home-care scheduling services and still has not clearly answered the question of whether those scheduling services are still centralized in downtown Winnipeg. That was a decision made by the NDP government that had devastating consequences for both home-care staff and home-care clients in Winnipeg.

And they still have not answered that question, so I'll just ask again: Are home-care scheduling services still centralized in downtown Winnipeg or have they been repatriated to the community offices?

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook).

\* (11:00)

**MLA Asagwara:** I'm just waiting on some information for home care that I can provide for the critic. But I do want to talk a bit more about what she just stated. You know, I think it's so fascinating to hear her talk about the conditions at a personal-care home which I don't know if she ever had the opportunity to visit. I certainly did. Like I said, I knew folks, I had friends who stayed there. I visited the staff. We advocated for the conditions to be addressed. The previous PC government had two terms of government to address those conditions—seven and a half years.

She talks about the conditions of that personal-care home—I mean, I know folks who actually worked at that personal-care home much, much, much, much longer ago than that—but she talks about the conditions at a personal-care home that the PCs didn't address for seven and a half years. I agree with her. I think those conditions were unacceptable, which is why we advocated for them to be addressed. And not only did they go completely unaddressed by the previous government, that personal-care home was then shuttered and there was no work done to build more capacity so that we didn't displace those folks.

And in addition to that, in this very community that I represent, we lost 185 units right downtown of social housing that many seniors lived in. I remember sitting with a senior in Lions Place who cried—wearing a red baseball cap, I'll never forget this, sitting in his living room with him—who cried because he was so afraid that he was going to be made homeless because he lost his housing at 185 Smith—on Smith Street, was able to get housing at Lions Place and thought, my goodness—you know, they closed that place, they're selling off this one. What's going to happen to me?

And I was grateful that a solve was able to be found at the time, but unfortunately it was a solve that has really changed the makeup of that building. And so it's not just strictly senior housing anymore, and the infrastructure they used to have and the amenities have changed.

And if you go there at Lions Place, it's like a—it is a community. It's absolutely a community. You go there, you talk to Jean—she's 93 years old now—she runs that place. You go talk to Richard; he's the person who brings all the residents together to advocate and have social gatherings and whatnot.

Like, all of these places are communities, and so to reference a personal-care home that had conditions that were unacceptable for seven and a half years under a previous PC government, and then to not acknowledge that not only were those conditions

allowed to persist, but there was no work done to ensure that we had more personal-care home capacity, I think—I just think it's a strange thing to raise in this committee, to emphasize that failure of the previous government in this committee.

All of that being said, you know, our focus is on making sure that we have more capacity. And I'm going to be honest. Like, there's a lot more personal-care-home capacity that we need in Manitoba. We are building one a year. We've got Lac du Bonnet, we've got Park Manor, we've got Bridgwater that we've announced. We know we're doing Arborg. Like, we've got these PCHs that we're going as quickly as we can in addition to transitional care unit homes. You've got Holy Family—26, 27 beds there, in Winnipeg. We're looking at doing more potentially there and other places as well.

We've actually also reopened personal-care-home beds that were closed under the previous government due to staffing or other infrastructure needs that were not being addressed, that were neglected. Those are predominantly in rural communities. Those are about 222 beds that were closed by the previous government and neglected, and we've reopened at this point, I believe it's around—about 150 of those beds have been reopened. Our target is to obviously open all of them. Some of them, at times, are closed due to, you know, an elevator needs to be changed or there's something going on that needs to be fixed.

But, you know, we're doing a ton, and we've got some more innovative steps that we're going to be taking sooner than later, actually, in this space. But again, all of this work is that much more urgent because the work was not only done previously—was only—not only not done, but it was made worse.

So, you know, I'm happy to talk about our investments in long-term care and what we're doing, but I think it's important when we reflect on the past to reflect on who was responsible and why we must do better moving forward.

And I'll get some home-care data, I think, in my next response.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** Well, I find it interesting that the minister brings up Lions. I think they were talking about housing, but Lions also is home to a personal-care home that, last year, stopped admitting new residents because this minister wouldn't meet with them to discuss their concerns. And that represented a loss of beds to the

system under this government because they refused to work with the sector to address their growing concern.

And their concern, of course, is that funding has not kept pace with inflation, and funding increases to the sector have been in place to cover government-negotiated wage increases that operators have no control over. And in Winnipeg, actually, the funding provided to operators doesn't even cover the cost of benefits. I think they get 18 per cent for benefits; the actual cost is 22, so operators are left to make up the shortfall.

But I do want to go back to the question that I asked about the Stevenson funding and why that funding stopped flowing, particularly since, you know, according to the budget documents, the department has a goal of working towards more hours of care per resident day. I don't think that's going to be possible without funding.

So I'd just like to again ask what happened to that Stevenson funding that stopped at phase 2 after the NDP took office.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook).

**MLA Asagwara:** You know, the member reflects on—and when—I will say, the Golden Door personal-care home, we ensured that those beds would be open. We ensured that those beds would remain accessible for Manitobans, which is why we took the extraordinary step of expropriating that personal-care home.

We took actions that the previous government refused to in order to preserve long-term-care capacity for Manitobans. So I—challenging situation. We knew we needed to make sure that we addressed it. We took action. So I appreciate the member highlighting actions that our government has been willing to take that the previous government was not.

\* (11:10)

But, in terms of funding, I appreciate her emphasis on funding for long-term care; it's an important one because funding to long-term care does matter. And our government has ensured that those dollars for staffing continue to flow. We know, actually, that under our government the direct hours per resident, per day have increased significantly. We invested \$40 million into staffing long-term-care homes, like an enormous amount of money.

Our first budget, the budget that we came into, actually, was an \$11-million cost that was allocated for staffing to get to that 3.8, and in our budget we

increased that funding. We flowed dollars to staff. We said staff as much as you possibly can in long-term care, and folks really did an outstanding job of staffing long-term care, so much so that I had to go back and ask the Treasury Board for more money, much more money, because they well exceeded that budget line to the tune of about \$40 million, is what we actually have invested in our last budget, and we've carried that forward to continue the staffing of our long-term-care homes.

So they've done a tremendous job staffing so that we can increase those direct hours per resident, per day. And the outcome has been really, really good to see in terms of, you know, you go to a personal-care home now, and you actually see more nurses, more health-care aides, recreational workers. We're having conversations about, you know, rec workers, spiritual-care workers, folks who lost their jobs under the previous government.

Because, again, as the member rightly notes, funding matters, which is why it's so concerning to see that, under the previous government, years of zeroes—zeroes and, actually, in one year, right before COVID, a cut, so negative 0.4 per cent. I mean, all these other zeroes are cuts; we know that. But 0.2 per cent in 2017-18; negative 0.4 per cent, 2018-19; 2019-20, 0.2 per cent; '20-21, 0.1 per cent. We're talking about, at that point, given everything that was going on in long-term care, and still 0.1 per cent. After that, a 1 per cent increase de facto cut, especially after years of zeroes from the previous government.

So, you know, our government is investing in long-term care, and when we compare our record to that of the previous PC government, when you factor in, yes, a rapidly aging population, yes, a population that is growing in number, growing in complexity of health-care needs at later stages in life, when you look at zeroes across the board, the PC government of the day had the same information that we have. They knew the population was aging rapidly; they knew that people were getting much sicker and living longer; they knew the complexities of what they were dealing; they knew about the pressures; they knew long-term care needed more help, and they gave them cuts year over year over year over year over year, including during COVID.

We're going to keep investing in long-term care, but certainly when, you know, you hold up our record against theirs, it really paints a picture for how we got to be in the challenging situation that we're in and how much work our government must do to make sure that

seniors are able to age in their place of choice with the dignity they deserve.

Now, we recognize there's more work to do. We haven't slowed down. We're not going to take our time away from this. We are focused on making sure that seniors in this province consistently have a government that's investing in their well-being, which is why we stood up the independent office for the Seniors' Advocate. It's why we're investing \$5 million in this budget dedicated for better nutrition in personal-care homes. It's why we go to personal-care homes and listen to the staff and listen to the residents themselves.

And so, you know, again, stack up our record against the PCs, in black and white, it's pretty plain for Manitobans to see who actually cares about seniors and who's willing to invest in seniors.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** You know, I just want to reflect on how disappointing it is that all the minister wants to do is sit in committee here and engage in partisan attacks and partisan debate and talk about the previous government when I'm giving them ample opportunity to showcase the things that they say they're doing under their government.

I've asked twice now whether the Stevenson funding has continued to flow. I'm assuming the answer's no because the minister hasn't answered the question and hasn't been able to point to where in the Estimates of Expenditure that funding is. So I'll take that as asked and answered now.

I do have a question about the money that was announced for food. You know, we know that Manitoba's led the country in food inflation, and, certainly, long-term-care operators have felt that, as food is one of their significant cost drivers. So that \$5 million works out to about \$40,000 per PCH.

And I'm just wondering how that funding will be distributed. Will it be distributed sort of on a per-resident basis, a per-'fertility' basis? Is it going to SDOs for SDOs to determine?

This is just a really straightforward question about something their government is doing. So I'm hoping we can just get a really straightforward answer instead of a five-minute partisan diatribe. Thank you.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook).

**MLA Asagwara:** I don't know if the member—if the critic missed it, my answer, in what she calls a partisan diatribe. The way that I articulate myself has been described in other ways, but I'll accept that. But I did say, yes, the funding continues, so I don't know where—I think she's mistaken. I know she's mistaken. The funding continues in order to make sure that the direct hours per resident, per day continue to get to the target of 4.1.

And actually, you know, what I would say is that our government understands that 4.1 was a number that was at a target when I worked in long-term care. So when I was working in long-term care in community, that 4.1, it was like 3.9 for a while, then it was 4.1. There was a national consensus around that. And, you know, we're at the point where we really need to evaluate going beyond that; 4.1 has really become the floor, not the ceiling.

So there's work that we're doing to understand, you know, what does that new target need to be? How do we invest in supporting getting there? And what does that mean in terms of the makeup and the composition of staff? Particularly when we're talking about work around nurse-to-patient ratios and that conversation, lots of work in that space right now.

What I can also say is that, you know, we made a big investment as a first step in nutrition for seniors in long-term-care homes because we've been hearing—and we are a listening government—we've been hearing from operators and from residents that they wanted more support there. And so we invested—and we announced this at the Simkin centre—five point—\$5 million, rather, for nutrition dedicated to that, as the member has asked about.

And what I can tell her is that the work is being done to work with our partners. And I want to thank our partners—so MARCHE, LTCAM—these are wonderful seniors organizations that have been advocating for those in long-term care for many years. They've been very, very supportive of that particular announcement, so I want to thank them for their support and their acknowledgement of that investment as a meaningful step in a much better direction in terms of making sure that elders have the nutrition that they deserve and the choice that they deserve in their homes.

We know that that makes a really big difference. We have an incredibly diverse province; we have seniors of many identities aging in Manitoba. And when they choose to live in a personal-care home, they should have the ability to choose the kind of nutrition that aligns with them culturally, spiritually,

physically, and this investment is a step in a direction that really supports that.

\* (11:20)

And so, the work is being done with our partners to make sure that, you know, they are able to use those dollars in a way that is most impactful for them. And again, this is a first step. This is a step that we haven't seen taken in this particular area—I'm not sure the last time, actually, that an investment like this was made in terms of nutrition in long-term-care homes. But again, our government is committed to making sure that when advocates, when our partners, when seniors are speaking up, that we are listening and that we're doing what is necessary to respond.

And I just want to give a shout-out to my legislative assistant, the MLA for Radisson, who is a stellar, stellar MLA, but also somebody who just does a great job going out into our communities, meeting with seniors, hearing their stories, bringing their concerns back to me and making sure that we act on those ideas and hopes and concerns that they have.

Alongside, also, I want to acknowledge the MLA for Tuxedo, who's also the Premier's (Mr. Kinew) special adviser on nursing culture who also goes to nursing homes, seniors—personal-care homes, rather—apologies—and connects with folks. And actually, quite frankly, like, our team is really good at getting out in their communities and going to long-term-care homes and advocating for their community members.

So, you know, we were at Simkin that day because the MLA for Tuxedo, the MLA for River Heights, they both had built great relationships there. It was a great place, a natural fit. Interestingly enough, I didn't know that a community auntie was there that day for her day programming on a Thursday. I saw her on the weekend and she said that she was really thrilled to see us there for that reason. So, I know I need to go back to Simkin on a Thursday and see—spend some time with my auntie at day programming.

But all of that to say, you know, we're going out, we're listening to folks, we're showing up and we're making investments as a result of those conversations. And I can't thank my colleagues enough; they do a lot of the heavy lifting in terms of getting out and talking to folks.

And I can't thank the folks at these personal-care homes enough. They've been advocating for these investments for a long time. These operators have been advocating for a long time.

So we're going to keep doing what we can, step by step, in partnership with these organizations, with these operators in Manitoba.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** I'm going to shift gears a little bit and I just want to talk about paramedics. This is discussed at some length on page 37 of the supplement as—listed as a—one of the key initiatives of the department. And we know, certainly, the current government had promised to hire 200 paramedics within their first term, 90 in their first year. Both of those goals look out of reach at this point. Certainly, the first-year commitment was not met.

But there's been some discrepancy around the numbers and I'm wondering if we can clear that up today. So, first of all, the government said that they had hired 241 net-new paramedics; that was an error and was later revised to 18. MAHCP released some Shared Health data last month showing a net loss of 34 paramedics, and then, I think it was yesterday in question period, where the minister said there has actually been a net gain of 41.

So I guess my first question is: Can we clear up these numbers? And I'm wondering if, you know—when the minister cites the number of net-new paramedics, if they can explain where that number comes from and where those paramedics are located.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook).

**MLA Asagwara:** I'm just waiting on a bit more information, but in the meantime, I can provide a bit of clarity, I think, for what the critic is asking about.

So in regards to the paramedic numbers, you know, this is a priority for our government. Certainly, you know, we set very ambitious targets across the board in terms of what we want to do in health care in hiring net-new health-care workers. You'll notice that the critic doesn't reference all of the targets that we've blown out of the water, but that's okay. That's okay.

Accountability is important, and the critic is correct; we have not hit our targets on net-new paramedics. But we also recognize that when we came into government, we saw the way that that infrastructure to train and retain paramedics in a timely manner had been eroded. It had been cut, slashed, for years. I mean, paramedics went almost six years without having a contract in Manitoba. Even during COVID, these folks were working without a contract, as were nurses. That really damaged the morale; it damaged

the integrity of the system's ability to recruit paramedics and attract folks.

The paramedic training seats were never full, not even close, because who would want to be a paramedic in Manitoba where your government doesn't respect you? That was the narrative paramedics were telling each other: This government doesn't respect you, they're not going to pay you fairly, they're not going to bargain fairly, they're cutting all of our resources across rural communities. If you're an advanced-care paramedic, they won't even let you get a job in rural communities where you can really maximize your skill set. So, you know, a lot of folks were just turned off and turned away from the profession as a whole.

And so our government came in and we recognized—my goodness, like, there's a lot of work we're going to have to do here to change the narrative around that. And so, you know, ensuring that there is a fairly negotiated agreement was a really important step, and an agreement that actually brings paramedics to parity with Winnipeg so that we have the ability to successfully, and more competitively, recruit people to rural and northern communities. That was a really huge step to take.

Now, the other step to take was making sure that we are adding more training seats. Again, this wasn't done for seven and a half years, two terms of a previous government, and the training seats that were there were not full because people didn't want to pursue it in that environment. So we added additional training seats. We have funded training seats so that folks can have their tuition covered and get their training in a more accessible way. And we funded advanced-care paramedicine training seats as well—16 of them, actually. And we created jobs in rural communities for advanced-care paramedics.

So there is a ton of work that had to be done to build up the capacity and the infrastructure for paramedics in Manitoba because it had been cut and ignored and neglected for so many years. All of that work has resulted in where we're at now.

So the most recent number that I've been given and provided is 41 net-new paramedics. This is a number—it wasn't just yesterday in question period; I've been saying that now, I think, for a couple of weeks. And it's important to know that the way that we calculate that number has been explained to MAHCP. So my special adviser sat down with them before our budget was introduced. At that point, it was 29 net-new paramedics. They were in support of that

process and in support of that number. And now we've gone up to 41.

It's also important to recognize, you know, we have the first full class of paramedics in Manitoba in many, many years. I have been there several times; the Premier (Mr. Kinew) was there. You might have seen a somewhat embarrassing video on social media of me running down the hall and high-fiving all these paramedic students in the hallway. I was pretty excited to meet them all. I think they're pretty happy to see a government there supporting them and learning about their training in this incredible sim lab that they have at Red River College, who's been a phenomenal partner in getting these additional training seats up and running. And it was also really cool to see the 18 learners who are part of the direct-entry pathway to paramedic training now.

\* (11:30)

So we've done a lot to support better infrastructure and a better process to get more paramedics trained, and, for the first time in many years, we have a full class of paramedics who are going to be joining our health-care system and joining our communities.

So, no, we haven't hit our target yet; yes, there's a lot more work for us to do to get there, but we're working with our partners to build that capacity.

And I want to give a special shout-out to AMM. We have been working with municipal leaders, with our municipal partners, to do this work, really following a lot of their guidance in terms of what they want to see in their rural communities. And it's thanks to their leadership and it's thanks to the advocacy and the leadership of someone like Kathy Valentino and all of these other representatives that for the first time ever in Manitoba, we have advanced-care paramedics working in rural Manitoba. They have jobs there.

So more work to do; we recognize that. But these are good steps in the right direction.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** Can the minister confirm those 41 positions are all paramedics and not a combination of paramedics and EMRs?

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook).

**MLA Asagwara:** I'm just waiting on some information for the member in terms of answering that question.

But I do want to flag that in April—just going back to home care, because I think it's an important detail—in April of 2023, the home-care cancellation rate was 3.62 per cent. The cancellation rate—which we are not happy with today; we know we need to do better—is 1.2 per cent. So, of course, that 1.2 per cent represents people who are rightly frustrated about their cancellations. They're rightly frustrated about the level of consistency around the care that's being delivered to them in their homes. And we are going to do everything we can to make sure that we continue to move in the right direction in home care.

We're improving staffing. We've hired more direct-service—support workers, nurses. We just had, actually, our first job fair hosted by government. That didn't happen for two terms of the previous government. And we hosted this in Union Station. Yes, there's a bit of a bias there because I'm the MLA. Maybe I really wanted to host it in my neighborhood. But we also knew that it would be a really accessible place for people to get to. And we hosted this job fair.

We had, you know, over a couple hundred people register in advance. We had two hundred and—over 200 people register in advance, 131 people show up on the day. We did interviews on site. And as a result of that, I can tell you that we had about 40 jobs accepted after that, which is really wonderful. Like, these folks showed up.

Many of them have been asking questions, but for different reasons; you know, showing up and talking to a person in real time can make all the difference. Some people like virtual, some people like the phone, some people use, you know, all kinds of apps to communicate. A lot of folks, including myself, prefer that in-person conversation. And out of that number, 22 are nurses who are working in home care imminently. Like, that is—out of one event, we hired 22 nurses for home care.

And, again, we know there's a lot more work to do, but, you know, it goes to show you that if you're if you're willing to do things a little differently as a government, you can get results.

And we've got wonderful people at our retention and recruitment office. Just—these folks are absolutely stellar. They're great people. They're passionate about health-care human resource. They're passionate about connecting people to job opportunities and making sure these pathways are clearly understood. And they just create a space where people can feel comfortable to ask questions and get their needs met, which is why we saw that event be so successful.

And it's why we're seeing cancellation rates in home care go from, under the previous government, 3.62 per cent in April to now 1.2 per cent. And, again, our target is to get that under 1 per cent. That's what I would really like to see. And then also do the work of restoring services in home care that were cut and eliminated by the previous government.

Now, I have a constituent named Michael [*phonetic*]. He's a wonderful, wonderful guy who depends on home care for daily care. He's essentially wheelchair bound. And, you know, I remember he would reach out to me, years ago now, that the services that he was receiving around laundry support and other things were being rolled back, and it made it impossible for him to have a good quality of life on a day-to-day basis in his home.

So when we're talking about home care, we also have to recognize that it's also about the comprehensiveness of that program. We also recognize that we need to do more in rural and northern communities, and there's a lot of work that we're doing to build up that capacity with our regional health authority partners—in the North, the Interlake and Prairie and Southern—so that work is ongoing. But I wanted to go back to that because that's a really, really important detail.

And, again, you know, when we're talking about paramedics, they're often responding to people. We've got our wonderful MLA for Waverley here who knows all about it—a wonderful teammate and colleague who really does a great job of informing me and educating me in terms of the realities that paramedics face in our communities—and we know that they're sometimes responding to people who haven't gotten the right care in their community. So by investing in the ways we are in Home Care, by bringing that cancellation rate down, we're also taking pressure off of our EMS services to make sure that they can focus on delivering care elsewhere—and also pressure off of our emergency departments.

So this is all connected, right? So I wanted to make sure I shared that detail because I think it's a really important stat to have on the record here today.

And then, in terms of EMS, I mean, there's a lot more I want to say about what we're doing on that particular file. I want to thank the paramedics who I've been sitting with and talking with, learning from in terms of what we need to do differently and better, but I'll share more in my next response.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** I just want to name the behaviour we're seeing here today.

So I'm asking questions on behalf of Manitobans and the minister has directly answered one—question that I've answered, and we've been in this committee for an hour and 40 minutes. And they choose, instead, to spend each five-minute segment just talking, just talking about whatever they feel they want to talk about, not answering the questions. And I had hoped we might be able to close out Health today; we will not be closing out Health today because we're not getting answers to the questions that we're asking.

So I'll return the conversation again to paramedics. According to MAHCP, which would know, rural vacancies have advanced. Intermediate and primary-care paramedic positions have actually gone up under the current government. As of December, they were—vacancy rate was at 25 per cent, up from 14.8 per cent two years ago. So MAHCP has proposed some solutions, including an earn-as-you-learn program. And the minister mentioned AMM; they have also suggested paid training could be a solution to this.

So I'm just wondering if there's any consideration in Budget 2026 for either of those proposals.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook).

**MLA Asagwara:** I love talking about health care. I love it and I'm passionate about it. Our whole team cares about it deeply. It's our top priority. It's Manitobans' top priority. And I will always provide context and information and details that Manitobans deserve to know. Manitobans deserve to know the details, they deserve to have the information, and committee is our opportunity to share a lot of that information with Manitobans.

I recognize that some of the information I'm sharing is probably somewhat of an irritant for the critic because it reflects on the previous government's failings in health care, but it's important information for Manitobans to be aware of, especially as we talk about what we're doing to fix health care.

And, you know, the EMS conversation is a really important one. When I sit down with reeves and mayors, municipal leaders, community members, local health councils in rural Manitoba, colony leaders in rural Manitoba, they made very clear to me that the conditions right now for EMS are totally unacceptable, and I wholeheartedly agree. We need more EMS capacity across rural Manitoba and northern Manitoba, which is why we've ensured—and it is outlined in our

budget on page 36—that we have invested in making sure that we can train and retain more EMS providers in Manitoba.

\* (11:40)

So just as an example, the EMR pathway, the EMR program, something that AMM, that rural leaders have been advocating for for years. They've been asking for this, saying that we need a more accessible way for folks to get their foot in the door in this career choice and then scale them up to PCPs and beyond.

I met a 40-year paramedic—just awesome—when we were out in Souris, Manitoba, and she talked about how she started her career as an EMR and then became a PCP. Just a phenomenal, phenomenal paramedic. And so we were able to take that step with our partners. We finally have the EMRs that can work in Manitoba now that training has been reinstated. We're working with the college to make sure that the hours required are reflective of what community needs in terms of getting them out in a timely way.

And we—you know, following the addition of up to 60 EMR positions, we created a new pathway that's going to support them with a \$5,000 bursary for a one-year return of service. Like, those are real dollars for folks to become an EMR, have a guaranteed job and then, again, get skilled up to becoming a PCP. And we are working as quickly as we can to get that PCP pathway formalized. We're excited to share more on that soon. But we are investing in making sure that we've got these folks in communities as quickly as possible.

The breakdown—we're looking at some numbers here and trying to pull that together, but I can tell the critic, in regards to the makeup the EMS numbers, the 41, that is ACPs, PCPs, ICPs and EMRs. As you can imagine, because EMRs are very recent, that would be a low count for right now. But we've got cohorts of training for EMRs happening right now in Manitoba, which is really exciting because, again, this is in conjunction with the ACP training seats we've added; this is in conjunction with the direct-entry paramedic seats we've added that are now full and the jobs that we're creating in rural Manitoba.

We've been able to, as a result of the work that we've done, stand up community paramedicine programs in rural Manitoba, which is great. That means that folks can engage with paramedics in their communities before needing to go to a hospital or an ER or something more acute.

And we want to see more of that model rolled out, but we also need to make sure that we're supporting paramedics right now. So that's why we're doing everything we're doing around training more paramedics, getting skilled EMRs on these ambulances and then skilled up to becoming PCPs as quickly as we can. And then advanced-care paramedics, if that's what they choose, that would be really great, too, because those folks are highly, highly skilled.

So, again, we've done a lot to get to this net-new 41. At this point now, we anticipate being able to see that number really develop more quickly because we've done the work of establishing a strong foundation in training and, you know, packages to retain people and recruit people to the front lines.

Again, there's a lot more work to do here, but we're listening to rural communities, we're working with them as full partners and we're going to keep moving things in a better direction.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** Certainly, EMRs have an important role to play in rural communities, but I think one of the concerns that MAHCP has raised and what they have said is that Shared Health is choosing not to hire qualified paramedics for some open PCP positions and instead filling those with EMRs. And they were concerned about that.

They also had made a suggestion, you know, regarding the \$5,000 bursary for EMRs to scale up. That's a good thing, but MAHCP had made a suggestion that the Province require EMRs to enroll in a PCP program within a specific period of time.

So I guess I—I've got a couple of questions here. I'll break them up. How many EMRs have been hired into PCP positions, I guess, is what I'd like to ask.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook).

**MLA Asagwara:** Yes, I want to thank MAHCP for their advocacy on this particular issue. And I understand their frustrations with Shared Health. I'll just, you know, name it. It—they've had big frustrations with Shared Health. Actually, I would say a lot of folks, particularly in rural, northern communities, have had a lot of frustration with Shared Health. It was an organization that was created by the previous government. It was very murky. Couldn't get a sense of what was going on in that organization, who was responsible for what, who was accountable to what.

And we've done a lot of work to understand—better understand Shared Health and what's going on there. And, you know, work with our partners who bring valid concerns forward, and then we work to address those concerns with Shared Health.

I want to thank Dr. Chris Christodoulou, who is the interim CEO of that organization, who has really been working tirelessly to address those concerns and to build good relationships with partners across the province. And, you know, we've been working closely with him to ensure that those concerns are addressed. But there's more work that needs to be done, most definitely.

And I want to thank MAHCP for highlighting their concerns and for bringing forward ideas. You know, we welcome ideas, we welcome solutions, we will always take that feedback and see what can be done, how we can make sure we're supporting paramedics and EMS in the best ways possible.

Certainly, you know, we really, really want for EMRs to choose to skill up if they have the capacity and the desire to becoming full PCPs. We're going to support them in being able to do that, which is why we're setting up a dedicated pathway for that. And we will—we've given the direction to Shared Health to say, listen, identifying these folks very early on and making sure that they are connected immediately to that pathway is important. We also have to recognize that there are going to be some folks who don't want to become PCPs, perhaps. Perhaps it works for their lifestyle, whatever it is. and so we want to make sure that they are highly skilled EMRs and that they can spread the good word about that being a step into a career that's really positive so we can get more folks on track to becoming paramedics.

So that direction has been given in terms of ensuring that we are doing the work of facilitating those outcomes in terms of their professional development and their contributions to our health-care system. I also want to recognize here that this is all work that's been done in the last matter of months, like, the last year or so, really. Not that long ago we were—we've been working on this, working with our local community partners, but this is all work that we've been working with them quickly to do because it wasn't done for seven and a half years, right? We would have been in a much different place had this been done even five years ago, we would have, you know, a program established of EMRs training, pathway to PCPs, ACPs who can get jobs in rural and northern communities.

We're in a place where we're standing this up now and we're advocating and meeting with the college so that they can ensure that the program for EMRs is a model that works best for communities. That model changed under the previous government, and as a result, there are services—paramedic services, EMS services—in communities that have eroded because they don't have the EMR pathway any longer.

And that was really accessible, particular in First Nations communities who have done a great job historically of standing up this kind of service and had well-established pathways that worked for their communities. So we've now been able to get that reinstated. We are working with the college at the request and the urging of our municipal First Nations and northern partners to ensure that that program has a—is a model that works best for those communities.

And that work will continue. We're hoping to see some outcomes from that advocacy sooner than later.

But, certainly, you know, we want to make sure that we're doing everything we can to encourage folks to join health care. It's a great career. It's a wonderful field. We've got several health-care workers in our government's caucus. You know, it's certainly a rewarding career and one that lends itself to many other opportunities where—of public service.

So when I go talk with those students every single year, which minister—the Minister of Advanced Education and Training (MLA Cable) and I do, we always share with them the opportunities to get that letter of offer in their hands before they graduate so they're connected to jobs.

And we're really excited to keep doing that work so that we can continue to see these full seats. And I'm happy to share that, you know, for the first time we actually have more demand than there are seats, right? And so the EMR program is great, too, we can give folks another option to joining that pathway for a career.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

\* (11:50)

**Mrs. Cook:** I'm going to shift gears a little bit, and ask a series of more policy questions that may or may not be addressed in this budget, that have been brought to my attention by individual Manitobans. And I had committed to them that I would raise these issues in Estimates and ask the minister directly about the department's intentions with respect to these policy issues. It's not casework specifically.

One of those is around colorectal cancer screening. And this one feels a little personal to me. I actually just, on Sunday, attended a celebration of life for a good friend of mine and my husband's who passed away in January from colorectal cancer. And he was in his early 40s, he was an ambassador for CancerCare Manitoba, just a wonderful human being. I think he would want me to ask this question, and certainly the Canadian Cancer Society has been advocating to lower the age for routine screening for colorectal cancer. I know a couple of other provinces have moved in this direction.

So I guess I would just like to ask if there's any consideration in this budget or any plans to lower the age for screening for colorectal cancer in Manitoba.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook).

**MLA Asagwara:** I am sorry for your loss. That's really sad. It sounds like your friend was obviously quite young as well, so that makes it—you know, it's a hard loss any time, but certainly when folks are young and pass, that's incredibly difficult, so I'm sorry for the loss that you and your family are navigating right now.

I don't—I'm not super clear on the protocol, honourable Chair. It's not specifically in the budget; it's not an Estimates question. However, I'm happy to answer it, if that's permissible.

**The Chairperson:** Honourable Minister of Health, Seniors and Long-Term Care (MLA Asagwara).

**MLA Asagwara:** Thank you, honourable Chair, for your guidance.

So screening saves lives. Early screening and early detection saves lives. We know that. And we spend a lot of time talking about screening as a government. We've invested a lot of resources to ensure more Manitobans understand screening, particularly in the breast cancer screening space.

However, very recently—actually, this week—I think maybe folks will have seen I shared on social media a video that I made with Dr. Turner, Donna Turner, who's at CancerCare Manitoba, regarding colorectal screening. This is something that we know—it's actually—if you've ever had the opportunity to see a mobile breast cancer screening van, there are other types of screening that are actually on the vehicle, and colorectal screening is one of them. And they have that there to generate awareness. They used to do some form of that screening there; they don't have it

fitted right now for that. But they do make it really accessible and easy for folks to get those FIT tests and access the information regarding that.

So, you know, we know—we've seen that other jurisdictions have lowered the screening age for colorectal cancer screening. We've talked to CancerCare Manitoba about this because we saw that was happening. We are in active conversations with them about what that could look like in Manitoba, what is their recommendation on this. You know, similarly to breast cancer screening, these decisions are not made in a vacuum. It's not you just lower the age and then that's that. There's a lot of work that has to go into making sure that you've got the right capacity and the infrastructure, the people, all of the tools that are necessary to lower a screening age.

So we've initiated those conversations with CancerCare Manitoba. I want to thank Dr. Stobart, who is the CEO who's doing a phenomenal job. I want to thank Arlene Wilgosh, who's the chair, just doing a really great job. And I want to thank Dr. Turner who was the acting CEO for some time and is just a phenomenal, phenomenal leader over at CancerCare. Very responsive to us, wonderful partners to work with. CancerCare is obviously a jewel of an organization in Manitoba.

And, you know, all of us in some way, shape or form are affected by cancer. We have loved ones—it's either, you know, ourselves or community members; we're all affected in some way. And so it's so important for us to make sure that we're getting the information out there, generating awareness and eliminating barriers to accessing screenings.

So I would say the—one of the first things that we need to do, actually, is to work with CancerCare to get a sense of what more must be done to ensure that those who are eligible understand how to get access to cancer screening.

And, actually, there is a website. So, if you go to CancerCare Manitoba, it's [CancerCareManitoba.ca/screening/info](http://CancerCareManitoba.ca/screening/info), and you can get all the information on how to get screened. So I encourage folks: call them, go online, ask questions, get screened. Early detection, early screening does save lives.

So there's a lot of work we are looking at in this space in addition to other areas as well, including lung cancer screening. That's something that we know not enough folks, Manitobans in disproportionately marginalized communities, aren't getting screened early

enough. So there's also work that's happening in that space as well.

So big area of priority. I appreciate the question from the critic.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** I appreciate the answer genuinely. Thank you.

I do have a couple of other questions, and I'm trying to find the budget line that this would refer to, but it would be under insured benefits, and it's with respect to a couple of different medications.

And this isn't a partisan question because, you know, this has never been covered in Manitoba under any government. But I think the minister will have been in receipt of some letters of advocacy. I know the MLA for Radisson has also met with these folks who've been advocating for anti-rejection medications for transplant recipients to be covered. And I'm just wondering if there's any consideration in this budget for covering those medications. What the estimated cost of doing that would be, I don't know. I'm wondering if the department has done any work on that to look at what that cost would be and if it's feasible in this budget year.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook).

**MLA Asagwara:** Can the critic clarify: Is this a broad question about the process or about the medications, or is there a specific medication that she's asking about that she'd like some clarity on?

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** I'm going to have to look up the name of the drug, but I think it's more of a—anti-rejection medications for transplant recipients. There's been some advocacy from a number of Manitobans looking to have these medications covered by Manitoba Health. They have not, to date, been covered in Manitoba, but I understand they are covered in some other provinces. So if the minister wants to look at that, I will look at finding the name of the medication.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member.

\* (12:00)

**MLA Asagwara:** Thank you for the question.

We—the critic is correct; we've been receiving advocacy on this, and I want to thank those advocates. We know that, you know, life-saving care like the transplant program delivers is incredible. And our

ability to deliver that care in Manitoba has grown, which is a good thing. We still have relationships with other jurisdictions for transplants that we can't do in Manitoba, and I want to thank those other jurisdictions for those relationships and the care they're able to provide to Manitobans when it's out of our scope.

This is an issue that, yes, the MLA for Radisson has been listening to and sitting with—and I want to thank her for that—members of community who have been bringing this advocacy forward. And, you know, she's done a great job of helping myself better understand their concerns and their advocacy.

So the critic is correct; this is a long-standing policy reality in Manitoba. We are doing work in this space. We are taking a look, really, at what potential options there are available. We're looking at other jurisdictions. So a cross-jurisdictional scan, an environmental scan, is being done to understand what the practices are and why.

And, you know, in Manitoba, there's obviously a process in terms of how drugs land on the formulary and in what way. These medications in particular, I believe for the most part, are Pharmacare-deductible specific. And so we are taking a look at this because we know that, you know, we—Manitobans who have received a transplant are in a pretty vulnerable time health-wise. It's really important that they're able to recover and have what they need in order to do so.

And so, you know, any time Manitobans speak up about concerns about their health-care needs and ask us to take a look and see if and what can be done, we're happy to do that. So our department is taking a look at this, looking at the work that's happening in other jurisdictions, and we'll continue to meet with the local advocates and make sure that their voices are a live part of the conversation and the work that's being done at the department level.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** Thank you for that answer.

I have a similar question regarding coverage for a particular vaccine. There's been a significant amount of advocacy lately around the shingles vaccine.

And I know the minister will know that it can be fairly costly for Manitobans to get the shingles vaccine, as they pay out of pocket, but shingles itself is an incredibly painful condition.

So, certainly, I think a lot of doctors recommend to their patients—I think once they start hitting about 50 years of age—that they get the shingles vaccine.

I don't think it was announced as part of the budget that that's something that Manitoba Health would begin to cover.

But I—again, I'm just asking if there's any consideration in this budget for beginning to cover the shingles vaccine. And perhaps there's a graduated rollout program that the department could consider where, you know, immunocompromised people or an income-tested way of doing this—I just wonder if the shingles vaccine is under consideration by the department.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook).

**MLA Asagwara:** I just—I will answer the critic's question. I do want to just go back and highlight some of the folks who the MLA for Radisson has been meeting with who are incredible advocates for the anti-rejection transplant medications.

So she's met with Zenon [*phonetic*], who is actually a Union Station constituent, and I really appreciate that we've got a voice in Union Station who's a part of this advocacy conversation. We've got Kristen [*phonetic*], who's a Radisson constituent; Barb [*phonetic*], who's a Radisson constituent; Taylor [*phonetic*], who's a St. James constituent; and they've been meeting—and the MLA for Radisson's been meeting with them to learn about their experiences.

And there's a direct quote from someone here that says: There is a whole journey after a transplant happens—end quote—which I think is really, really powerful, right? It's a whole other experience post-transplant. And so, we're taking a good look at what we can do here in better understanding this space in Manitoba.

It is important to note as well, and I can get a bit more information on this for the critic, but I've been advised that there was once coverage in Manitoba that was actually cut by the previous government specifically for low-income Manitobans, which is, I think, a really important detail to note, that the lowest income folks no longer benefit from that. So we're taking a look at this overall and seeing what can be done.

But in regard to her question now, just want to make sure that I can touch a bit on some of those details. So we have been hearing a lot about advocacy for shingles. Actually, the MLA for Tyndall Park has been a really great advocate for shingles and I want to give her a shout-out because I know she's busy right now—very busy, probably, hands really full raising her two kids. Her second baby, I hope, is doing very well,

and I hope they're very healthy. But she's been a really great advocate for this in communities.

\* (12:10)

And, you know, our government has been listening, so we do have a plan in terms of providing coverage for shingles—the shingles vaccine. As you can imagine, you know, we've really expanded the way that we deliver vaccines in Manitoba. We've allowed for more people to provide vaccines in Manitoba. We have expanded the coverage for RSV vaccines for infants, which is really, really great and really necessary. We introduced RSV coverage for seniors in personal-care homes, with more to come on that. Measles, obviously, is a hot topic of conversation.

So our government is in full support of vaccines. We believe in science, we stand with science, we trust our experts, we follow their clinical guidance and their expertise.

And there's been new and emerging evidence that suggests that, actually, the shingles vaccine can help mitigate some of the impacts of Alzheimer's. It's more recent research that's emerged. I think it's really important to pay attention to, and we are.

And, you know, given they trajectory of Alzheimer's and dementia in our communities—which is enormous—and the impacts on people and families and on our health-care system, it's really important for us to make sure that we're live to that research, that data.

So I am happy to share that we do have a plan for the shingles vaccine. We'd like to move on it much more quickly, but obviously, you know, that—and we're going to if we can, but we don't have a clear timeline just yet. We are planning for it. We know that it's a priority for seniors in this province. We have done a lot to enhance coverage of vaccines in this province and care in this space. We're doing this the—in a fiscally sustainable way. And so we will keep Manitobans up to date and up to speed in terms of when we hope to take that step.

But I want to thank all the seniors who certainly talk to me on a pretty regular basis about concerns around vaccines, whether it's RSV, the shingles vaccines—just generally—you know, measles, they—seniors are the folks who built this province. They want to be protected, they want this province to be as healthy as possible and they recognize that vaccines are part of that, and so do we, as a government. So we'll keep working on this, and share more information for Manitobans when we have it.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** A constituent brought to my attention recently the wait for bone density testing. And if you go back and you look at the publicly posted wait-time statistics for bone density testing, the wait time has gone up consistently over the last year. The most recent posted wait times are for February, and in February 2025, the wait time in Winnipeg was 11 weeks. It's now gone up to 26 weeks, and the number of people waiting for a test has actually more than doubled.

So I'm not sure the reasons for that, but I would like to know what—where in this budget there is consideration for the need for increased capacity for bone density testing to address this very steadily increasing number of people waiting for a bone density test.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook).

**MLA Asagwara:** Yes, this is a really important question that the critic has raised.

You know, bone density testing is incredibly important. You know, obviously it disproportionately affects women, women of a particular age as well. We want to make sure that folks have an understanding of what's happening with their bone density and in their bone health so that we can prevent experiences like fractures and things like that, which can have really, really almost catastrophic impacts on people's outcomes if they're not proactively addressed.

So what I can tell the critic—well, I'm waiting for some information, so I'll just talk a bit about the diagnostic space. One, in terms of the volume, what I would say is that we have more providers in Manitoba. We are hiring record numbers of physicians and so we're seeing an increased pressure on diagnostics. We absolutely recognize that Shared Health needs to do more at building up capacity in a diagnostic space. Dr. Sokoro is our provincial lead for diagnostics in Manitoba. We've met with him many times, including in conjunction with Advanced Education and Training, because there's shared responsibility there in terms of how we build capacity.

And, interestingly enough, when I first met with him, he made very clear that he was kind of really just on the edge of his seat waiting to get a mandate from government to say go ahead and develop that plan to train the number of folks that you need in a diagnostic space. He had never been given the direction or the mandate from government before. He hadn't been given the resourcing to do that.

And so Manitoba, for almost eight years under the previous government, did not have a strategy for diagnostics in this province, which is a huge concern because, as the critic will know, these are highly specialized folks and you have to have a capacity plan in place to make sure that if you are bringing on more doctors and more providers, people who can order diagnostics, that you are in conjunction with that developing the capacity plan for the people who are going to be responsible for delivering that care directly to the patients.

And so he's been doing that work. We've been working with Advanced Education and Training to ensure that we are training more people for these opportunities. We've actually taken the step to buy additional training seats in other jurisdictions to make sure that while we build up our own capacity in Manitoba we are buying seats in other jurisdictions with our partners so we can get folks trained in the province with a return-of-service agreement in place.

So we're really kind of attacking this issue from all angles. That's what's required to make sure that we can address the fundamental lack of capacity, because it wasn't addressed for years.

And we want to make sure—I mean, Manitobans deserve to be able to access these kinds of services when they need them in a timely way. It really does matter for their overall health. We know that and we know that we need to do better here in Manitoba.

And so Shared Health has been given the direction to ensure that there's an immediate but also a long-term plan to address these waits, to make sure that we have capacity where it needs to be and to improve the timeliness of which people are getting these tests done, whether that's, you know, CIHI, or doing better than CIHI, quite frankly, is our ultimate goal here. But Shared Health is responsible for diagnostic services and imaging in Manitoba and we've been very clear with them. We meet with them to reinforce the direction that—and to reinforce that they have the support of government in terms of training, recruiting, developing strategies to get folks where they need to be so that folks can get care in a much more timely way.

So that work is going to continue. It's—we've already made some changes at the post-secondary level to make the training for these jobs and specialties more accessible, more expedited so that we can get folks on the front lines more quickly, recognizing that with more providers in our health-care system in our

province that we're going to see an increased pressure on diagnostics.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mrs. Cook:** The question was about bone density testing specifically, and the minister sort of broadened the conversation into diagnostics.

And I think it's important to note that diagnostic wait times have increased substantially almost across the board, whether we're talking about MRIs, CTs, ultrasounds, or bone density scans. Almost every diagnostic test that we track and measure publicly has gone up, and the number of people waiting for those tests has gone up. And I think that's something that's probably very difficult for the minister to blame on the previous government. That tends to be their go-to strategy when I ask a question that's difficult, is to blame the PCs.

\* (12:20)

But these wait times are increasing significantly right now. They've gone up significantly over the last year, and there's really nothing that the minister can do to attribute that to a previous government when it's happening right now under their watch.

Bone density testing is very important. As I mentioned, this was raised with me by a constituent who was waiting months for a bone density test. And the same could be said of folks waiting for an MRI, waiting for CT, waiting for an ultrasound.

So, again, I—you know, rather than just looking backwards and blaming other governments, I'm wondering if the minister could point to where in this budget there's an emphasis on increasing diagnostic capacity in this province and how they intend to do that.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Member.

**MLA Asagwara:** Yes, I'm just waiting on—thank you, honourable Chair—I'm just waiting on some information for the critic on this, so I thought I would talk a bit more about what we're doing in the diagnostic space and give a shout-out to Melita.

We were out in Melita and—at their health centre, if I'm not mistaken—and we met some really wonderful folks there who explained to us that they've got cross-trained lab technicians there; one in particular—whose name is escaping me right now—but she was really, really wonderful to meet.

And they were explaining that what's really worked for them is identifying folks in their communities and

securing a training seat and having that relationship. They get the training and then, of course, they go back to community. It came directly from her. She's like, you know, that really worked for me. I love my job. I love what I'm doing here. And I want to see you folks do more of that.

We said, absolutely; like, we can do that. And we took that away and we purchased five additional seats in Saskatchewan, and we worked directly with our municipal partners to identify—for them to identify folks from their communities who they knew wanted to pursue these opportunities and connect them with those seats and know that they have a guaranteed job once they're done in their home communities.

And so this is a partnership approach, it's a collaborative approach, it's one that we know—it's a grow-your-own approach. It's one that we know works, and it's the approach that we're going to be taking consistently moving forward.

Again, as we build up that capacity in terms of being able to train folks in in these ways, more specialized diagnostic areas in Manitoba, that work takes time. Would have loved, again, if this had been done prior to us, but it wasn't.

And so we're doing the work of standing that capacity up in Manitoba, at the same time purchasing training seats elsewhere so folks can get trained, connecting them proactively to communities where we know they need more diagnostic providers and, also, you know, getting the plans from Shared Health in terms of how they intend to address these wait times that are unacceptable.

And, you know, we as a government are investing in making sure that those plans can be executed for Manitobans.

And so, you know, we'll continue to invest where we've—you know, \$10-billion budget this year. Year over year we've invested substantial double-digit increases in health care to support the health-care system.

And, you know, again, as we add more providers to our health-care system and as more people have access to primary care, which is a very good thing, we also know that we need to, in parallel, be ensuring that we're strengthening and bolstering diagnostic training retention and recruitment capacity as well.

So that work is being done, and we know that there's much, much more work to do. We certainly recognize that. And Shared Health—I look forward to

seeing their updated plan and approach in terms of how we're going to drive some of those concerning wait times down in a better direction and how our government can continue to invest in this area so that Manitobans are not waiting too long.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister.

Honourable member for Burrows—honourable member for Roblin (Mrs. Cook), sorry.

**Mrs. Cook:** You know, I—our honourable Chairperson has been chairing many committee meetings lately, so I could absolutely understand the slip of the tongue there.

You know, we're coming close to the end of our agreed-upon time to do this today, so I just—I have a number of additional questions for the minister and the department on behalf of Manitobans, and I just—I'm a little disappointed in how the conversation went today.

Didn't hear a lot of answers to the questions that I posed, and I think that will disappoint folks when I send them this Hansard transcript later and I say to them, okay, I asked that question on your behalf and I—or, I pursued that issue that was of concern to you and I wasn't able to get an answer from the Minister of Health, that instead the minister preferred to lecture me on the previous PC government and—rather than then talk about what steps they were taking to address things like record-high ER wait times and hospitals that are greylisted in multiple, a concerning number of home-care cancellations, struggles in the long-term-care sector, extremely lengthy and growing diagnostic and surgical wait times.

We didn't get to surgery yet, but we will, particularly as I'm hearing even today of a concerning number of surgical cancellations at major hospitals in Winnipeg.

We didn't get a chance to talk about nurse practitioners. I wanted to talk about how I was surprised to see that this budget didn't include any movement to ensure Manitoba was in compliance with the federal government's interpretation letter and, you know, Manitobans' disappointment that they are still paying out of pocket for physician-equivalent services provided by a nurse practitioner and what a missed opportunity that is for Manitoba and for Manitobans to better and more fully incorporate nurse practitioners into Manitoba's health-care system simply by modernizing the funding model that would provide—you know, we talked a little bit about access to primary care.

Nurse practitioners are part of that solution. And several other Canadian jurisdictions have already implemented—

**The Chairperson:** Order, please.

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

## CHAMBER

### TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

*(Continued)*

\* (10:00)

**The Chairperson (Tyler Blashko):** Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. The section of the Committee of Supply will now resume consideration of the Estimates for the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure.

At this time, we invite ministerial and opposition staff to enter the Chamber. Could the minister introduce her staff.

The honourable Minister for Transportation and Infrastructure, introducing your staff.

**Hon. Lisa Naylor (Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure):** Oh, yes, I can do that. It's the same folks that were here yesterday. We have Ryan Klos as the deputy minister; Amber Zhang is the ADM and executive financial officer; and Ciara Shattuck is the director of ministerial affairs.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you.

And could the member for Borderland please introduce his staff.

**Mr. Josh Guenter (Borderland):** We have Mark Stewart with PC caucus with us today.

**The Chairperson:** As previously stated, in accordance with subrule 78(16), during the consideration of departmental Estimates, questioning for each department shall proceed in a global manner.

The floor is now open for questions.

**Mr. Guenter:** I appreciate the opportunity to ask questions of the minister and her department. The minister had indicated the other day in question period that she really appreciated answering questions and, certainly, my caucus colleagues have many of them. So I thank her for indulging us in our questions.

And I would just—I believe my colleague for Lakeside has a few more, following up from yesterday. So I'll pass it over to him.

**Mr. Trevor King (Lakeside):** Yes, I would certainly like to pick up where we left off yesterday with my question to the minister in regards to the bridge structures on PR 227, which have been under construction since October. And the highway has been closed and has been detoured onto municipal roads, in which the RM has spent a good chunk of their budget gravelling, grading and maintaining, which—the structures also appear to be complete, yet not paved.

So my question to the minister yesterday was maybe some timelines. I think the original project timeline was 'til July, is what we've been told from the RM. And I'm just wondering, since the structures are complete and just the paving hasn't been, if there's an opportunity to bump up those timelines to ease the burden on the municipal roads and residents from the dust and the damage to the infrastructure.

Right now, they're grading the road once a week just to keep it maintained for the traffic, the high volume of traffic and trucks that are going down there. And the RM has actually put aside \$250,000 in their budget for the gravel and maintenance of these municipal roads that are incurring this high volume of traffic.

So I guess my question is to the minister: Can the timeline of opening up 227 be expedited if it can't be paved right away, maybe? The suggestions out there from the RM and residents are reducing the speed limit so the traffic can still cross the structures. As I'd said yesterday, I had actually drove out there and looked at them myself. They're complete. There's a little bit more aggregate, I think, to put in there.

Just some suggestions, but maybe the minister can inform me a little bit more of some timelines there. And part of that question also would be: Will they be compensating the municipality for the extra \$250,000 that they budgeted maintaining these roads since October until whenever the project is complete?

**MLA Naylor:** Yes, so regarding those structures, first of all, you know, I didn't have the chance yesterday when that question first came up to, I guess, commend the member. He mentioned his temptation to remove the signs and drive over the bridge yesterday—or when he went to inspect them and assess their state. So I want to commend him for not doing that, as that would be in violation of The Highway Traffic Act and also cause issues with the structures that we've done work on.

As for the project, it is right on time, exactly what was planned and committed to. The work will be com-

pleted this summer. We are in communication with the RM about the status of that project. And, you know, I think I would also just recommend that we leave it up to the engineers doing the work to let us know when the work is done, rather than have that decision made by citizens.

**Mr. King:** I didn't suggest that the decision be made by the citizens. I was suggesting that maybe the minister and her department could work with the RM on some way to expedite it and get a timeline that they can inform the residents and the RM of when this—if it could happen sooner now—there's certain safety issues that are going on on the municipal roads, with the dust.

Agricultural season is among us, with heavy machinery and trucks on these municipal roads that weren't built for this traffic. So all I'm asking the minister is that her department work with the RM and—because there was a number of weeks where there was no activity happening once those structures were complete.

So, although people have been patient and understand that this infrastructure improvements need to happen, that's a route that carries an awful lot of traffic. It's an east-west corridor here in the province, all the way from 16 Highway, all the way out to the Whiteshell.

So there's an awful lot of traffic and they don't always follow the detours that the Province suggests. They follow the municipal roads; they follow their GPSs, and they go wherever it takes them. And a number of times through the winter, people were getting stuck, so now we're faced with the dust, the traffic and the roads getting beat up.

\* (10:10)

So it's just a—it's a suggestion coming from the MLA for the minister to work with the rural municipality as getting this project done as quickly as they can to keep them from having to blow their budget on maintenance of these roads.

And just as of a few days ago, actually, with my communication with the RM, they had sent a letter and they had—to the minister's office and included me on it as far as a request for some compensation for the gravelling and grading.

And I'm just wondering, also—it was the second part of my last question—if there would be some compensation for the municipality on these costs that

they've incurred because of the highway closure due to the bridge structure upgrades.

**MLA Naylor:** So I'll just repeat that this project is on time and on budget, exactly what was committed to. I will repeat that we are in-working with the RM directly and I'm very aware of their concerns about damage to their roads. We will work with them on repairs to make sure that that's taken care of in a way that works for them and for us. And just—I guess, just a reminder that, you know, for everyone, that when we are out repairing structures and roads in Manitoba, sometimes it's going to be a bit inconvenient. Sometimes there are—well, often there are going to be detours. Sometimes that's going to do a little damage to other roadways, especially in spring.

But it's still essential that we continue with repairing Manitoba's infrastructure, that we keep our highways in good repair, that we make up for the years of deficit under the previous government—the backlog of work that wasn't able to be completed with all of the financial cuts.

So we're working to do that, and I understand that sometimes that doesn't feel convenient. It's a little frustrating. The member is frustrated because he feels like it's taking too long, but we are working directly with the RM, we are on time with exactly the plan that was committed to and within the budget that was committed to. And we will complete this project this summer.

**Mr. King:** I thank the minister for the answer, although in that answer I didn't hear that she was willing to work with the RM to see if that could be expedited. I appreciate that it could be on time, but when the RM is—and the residents are seeing that the structures are complete, we would like, maybe, an update on if there's a chance or if that they will work with the RM to see that it can be expedited, just for the safety of our residents.

With that, I just want to move on to one more question here in regards to our P—provincial roads or secondary roads—gravel roads throughout, not just through Lakeside, my constituency, but throughout the province, and if the department has put enough money in the budget to see that these roads are being gravelled and maintained.

Last fall, we had a number of our provincial roads throughout my constituency that were in terrible disrepair. I want to thank the minister and the department for doing some last-minute work before freeze-up on PR 323 just to get it back into shape, but

these roads are becoming impassable without any maintenance or gravel.

So I'm just asking the minister what their plan is, this year, for those secondary roads throughout the province and if they could do their best to keep them maintained and passable for the residents.

Thank you.

**MLA Naylor:** I think, you know, this is a good opportunity to—I want to say to the member for Lakeside (Mr. King), I really do appreciate the concerns that you're raising for your municipality and others, in terms of gravel roads. I know that, you know, this is something we've talked about a lot in the department, a lot since I came into this role.

\* (10:20)

There was significant decrease in capital budget across the province—or in transportation for many years, which really slowed down the opportunity for long-term improvements to gravel roads. When the capital budget is cut like it was for six out of the seven and a half years that the last government was in power—it was cut year after year, or underspent as well—it means that it just creates more long-term maintenance problems and challenges, and so that is what we've been trying to address since I've been in this role.

So I'll just explain some of the things that we are trying to—that we've done in order to do these improvements. For one thing, we've really worked at trying to increase gravel road maintenance agreements with RMs, and so—and municipalities so that folks in those areas can not only, you know, have that partnership with the Province, but make decisions about what and where needs to be done.

So gravel road maintenance agreements have been around a long time, but we're working actively with municipalities to have more of these maintenance agreements. And one of the things that we understood, that the rates that were being offered to municipalities were too low, so last year those contracts, the rates we pay municipalities, we increased by 21 per cent, so—which is way more motivating for municipalities to take part. There was a further increase to those agreements by an additional 2 per cent this year.

And then—so that's one step that we're taking to try and get more work done in a timely manner on gravel roads. We've also increased our capital budget, which is—while it's not the maintenance portion of things, it will help with the long-term gravel road

improvements. And then there's also our staff. We have staff out assessing at all time—all the time, what is going on with gravel roads, what work needs to be done, taking steps to plan that. But we also do count on municipalities to let us know when there's challenges.

So another tool that my department has introduced is a team of liaison officers. So we have four liaison officers across the province who are direct contacts for municipalities so that they can, you know, get their issues, get some focus on whatever their issue is across the department, whether it's gravel roads or something else entirely, the liaison officer can direct them to where those concerns and questions need to go.

The municipalities have said this is an incredible asset. They really appreciate knowing who to call, like who their CAO can call and ask and get directed to whatever they need in the department. Those liaison officers often sit in on my municipal meetings with communities as well.

So those relationships are getting stronger. It's still a relatively new position that we introduced. And so I'm confident that having that direct contact from municipalities when there's an immediate problem will help us responding to challenges in a timely manner, because I'm sure the member knows that sometimes on gravel roads, everything can be fine one day and a problem the next, depending on weather or the use of the road or some surprise challenge that comes along.

So we are working really actively and directing money in the budget to address these concerns.

**Mr. King:** Thank the minister for that answer.

I'm happy to hear that they're working—trying to work closer with and communicate with the municipalities. Just want to make note, though, and I had mentioned in my last question that there has been no response from her department from the RM of Woodlands on a letter that was sent to them. So just—if you look on page 31 of the supplemental Estimates, it shows that they have a tracking metric for her department for certain things.

So is there a time communication from this minister that they get back to municipalities? And then the other thing, going back to the timelines for 227 now, that project was originally scheduled for '24-25.

So if the minister considers that on time—on time is a year overdue—to me, that would encourage maybe

expediting a timeline for completion on that. But does the department track how long it takes for them to get back to municipalities or anyone for that matter with correspondence? Because, as I'd said earlier, my municipality had sent them a letter a month ago and still no response in regards to the maintenance of these detoured roads.

Thank you.

**MLA Naylor:** So I think the member is still talking about a letter from Woodlands. And so I just want to speak in general about how response happens from the department or from the minister's office. Obviously, people direct correspondence in a variety of ways.

There's hundreds of pieces of correspondence that come through the minister's office, and we respond to them in a variety of ways. So sometimes there's a letter response. Sometimes my staff pick up the phone and call the CAO. Sometimes I have contact directly with the mayor or reeve, depending on the relationship and depending on the issue.

In terms of the community of Woodlands, we have scheduled a meeting with them in a few weeks time, right after the House rises, which was the response to any requests from that community.

Where the actual letter is in the system, I can't speak to that right this second, but I can tell you that the response has been to schedule a meeting so that we can work together, and that is generally my response.

\* (10:30)

I spend a lot of time—I—there may be a couple of municipalities in the entire province I haven't spoken with in the last few years, but I'd be surprised. I have—try—I've met with every municipality that has requested it. I have visited municipalities. It is my absolute goal to have timely response and for us to build that positive relationship.

I mean, really, what my department does is serve municipal Manitoba. All of our infrastructure, except for the Perimeter, is outside the city of Winnipeg, so that's where my work is, and that's where my department's work is. And we will continue to build those relationships and love to hear directly from communities.

**Mr. King:** I want to thank the minister for addressing some of my questions here today. I hope that she'll do her best to work with the RM on the issues that I brought forward.

With that, I have no further questions. I'd like to turn it over to my great colleague from Midland to pose some questions.

Thank you.

**Mrs. Lauren Stone (Midland):** If the minister could please give a progress update as to where the project is at for the permanent bridge at—over the Morris River at No. 3 and whether that project is still on time to completion for this fall, 2026.

**The Chairperson:** Order, please.

### Introduction of Guests

**The Chairperson:** While the minister is conferring, I'll just direct all honourable members to the gallery where we have seated in the public gallery from Oakenwald School 27 grade 5 students under the direction of Mary-Ann Mitchler. This group is located in the constituency of the honourable member for Fort Garry (Mr. Wasyliw).

\* \* \*

**MLA Naylor:** Yes, I'm just going to ask the member from Midland for some clarity. Sorry, we're having a little struggle over here. We thought we heard you say that it was on PTH 3, not PTH 75 over the Morris River. So if you could clarify.

**The Chairperson:** Yes, the honourable member for Midland (Mrs. Stone).

And I'll just—for all members, that comments come through the Chair.

**Mrs. Stone:** The minister is one step ahead. I do have questions about the Morris bridge at 75. I'm specifically asking about the bridge on the No. 3 at Brunkild over the Morris River.

There was an emergency closure of the bridge last fall and a temporary bridge was put in. However, work has begun on a more permanent bridge. That work is expected to be completed by this fall of 2026.

So my question to the minister is if she could just provide a progress report of how that work is going and if the expected timeline is still to be completed by fall of 2026: Morris River, PTH 3.

\* (10:40)

**MLA Naylor:** I appreciate the member for Midland providing that clarity on the question for me. And, yes, I'm—also appreciate the opportunity to talk a little bit about this project, because it was an incredible response from the department.

That was—you know, that wasn't—that bridge had been inspected last summer and was expected—wasn't showing signs that it needed to be replaced or any of the concerns. And then it failed, and it failed suddenly. But the department was incredibly responsive. In my time in this role, it's the fastest response I've seen for a—kind of a highway or a structural emergency. And so, as the member indicated, there was a temporary bridge—the shoofly bridge that was put in place in order to allow the work and repairs to happen on the structure itself.

And, at this time, things are on schedule. We're expecting to open the permanent bridge in fall of this year.

**Mrs. Stone:** Okay, I thank the minister for that response, and pleased to hear that the progress continues for completion of fall of 2026.

As it relates to PTH 3, under the previous PC government, significant investment was made to add passing lanes between the communities of Carman and Brunkild. The No. 3 Highway is one of our largest trade and truck transport routes, linking Winnipeg to south central Manitoba. The passing routes ended at Brunkild. That is certainly not where the highway ends; the highway and the traffic and the trade routes continue through to Winnipeg.

So I'm just wondering if the minister and the department have any plans to complete the passing lanes from Brunkild to Winnipeg.

**MLA Naylor:** Yes, so I'm going to say a couple of things. One, if you're wondering why it's taking us so long to get answers, we're very here, ready and prepared to talk about the budget. A lot of these, like, individual projects, we're trying to reach our regional staff, folks out in the field, people that aren't in this room or maybe even in this building to be able to get accurate timelines. So we're working through that in terms of these very casework-specific types of questions.

To the member's question about the passing lanes: at this time, passing—additional passing lanes from Brunkild are not in the five-year plan. Having said that, we are continually assessing the network.

Safety is the first priority in decision-making, with the review that was completed in this past year looking at the safety of the entire network. We're—that's helping us prioritize projects, and moving, you know, being able to know whether things need to move up the five-year plan because of safety

considerations or whether or not things need to be added to the plan.

And, of course, we're updating that plan annually so that the next year and the next year are built into that. So we—I have noted the concern about additional passing lanes in that area and we'll take that back to the department for review.

Thank you.

**Mrs. Stone:** I appreciate the answer from the minister and understand there is a lot of PTH and PR roads throughout the province; we have quite a large network. So, appreciate the response, and I do hope to see that those passing lanes on the No. 3 Highway continue from Brunkild to Winnipeg. As I've mentioned, the No. 3 Highway doesn't just stop at Brunkild.

In fact, most of the cars and the truck transport continue on through to Winnipeg, as mentioned; it's a major truck and trade transport route for south central Manitoba and links south central Manitoba with the city of Winnipeg. So I look forward to more reports and progress on whether that will be included in future infrastructure plans and updates.

I do have another question for the minister now, regarding the Morris bridge on No. 75 Highway. I have been getting some questions from constituents regarding the project and for the structure replacement on the—on Highway 75 and Morris.

The website, Manitoba infrastructure-transportation website, shows that it is in the design phase. So I'm wondering if the minister could provide an update as to where that project is at and whether that bridge will be built to flood-proof level.

\* (10:50)

**MLA Naylor:** So PTH 75 structure at Morris is—it is in the functional design stage or preliminary design stage, and that design stage is expected to be complete in 2027 with the detailed design anticipated to start summer of 2027.

And I'm just trying to get you a construction date. And then the 20—so, construction to begin summer of 2029; we've already had the first round of engagement with the Town of Morris and the Rural Municipality of Morris, as well as landowners adjacent to the project area. So that all took place this spring and there—that there—you know, certainly to the question about flooding considerations and community dike closures will be an important factor. That will be assessed as part of the evaluation and selection of a preferred alternative.

And just—there was—oh, there was also a public open house that was held in the Town of Morris and the—yes, sorry; I'm getting different pieces of information. The preliminary design will be complete by next spring. I think that's the main question.

And the member had noted in her last question that there's a lot of kilometres of highway and it's true; there's over 19,000 kilometres—19,600, I believe, and that's not counting our winter roads of kilometres of infrastructure across the province. So it does take a little bit of digging to get down to the details of every project.

We currently have 1,400 projects of all different sizes in our current—that are currently in play across the province, and so they're not usually as big as this project, obviously, but it can take a little bit of work to find all those details.

**Mrs. Stone:** And I appreciate the minister's response and look forward to that work—design work—being completed and then the project coming to fruition. I just want to emphasize how important the bridge over 75—at 75 is done to flood-proof levels. As we know that is an area that is known to flood. We saw it a few years ago where the road was under water and it is a significant concern for the community to be able to get in and out of the town, but also 75 being our most important trade route to the United States.

So I just want to emphasize how important it is that that particularly area continues to be floodproofed for the needs that they do need during those flood—flooding seasons.

The next question I have is in regards to Highway 422, which is from Rosenort to Highway 23. There are a number of manufacturing plants and large farms located on that stretch of highway. This road significantly deteriorates every single spring, summer and fall, and I recognize that the department has put some work into it, in fixing it up. However, it does deteriorate fairly rapidly as it is not up to RTAC standards for the needs of the industries that are there and continue to grow from that area.

In my conversations with the RM of Morris, they are willing and have expressed interest in working with the department and the minister in order to bring that stretch of highway up to the standards that that growing community needs.

So I'm wondering if the minister could please provide an update as to where those conversations are at with the RM of Morris and any plans for strengthening Highway 422 between Rosenort and Highway 23.

**MLA Naylor:** And to the member—or, through the Chair to the member for Midland (Mrs. Stone).

\* (11:00)

So I—yes, the member is correct. We—I have met with Morris; I just met with them most recently, I think, in November. And I know the importance of this particular stretch of road, and it—we're very aware, the department's quite aware of the condition of PR 422 between PTH 23 and PR 205. And there are not currently any capital projects planned there; however, last summer, there was an 11-and-a-half kilometre surface rehabilitation project. So not just maintenance, but an actual rehabilitation, rebuilding project of over 11 kilometres of that highway. So, hopefully, that will lead to a better spring and summer condition this year.

And just regarding RTAC, I mean, we're always listening and thinking about future RTACing, but under the previous government, there was a plan for RTACing the trade and commerce grid that was created by the PC government.

And, of course, we're continuing that plan. We're at about 90 per cent completion rate of RTACing that grid, and that is the RTAC priority for the province that both governments have agreed to that at this point. And so we will—after—you know, we're always—then we'll be looking ahead at what should be the next routes in the province that would get an RTAC treatment, but for RTAC, our focus is really sticking with that grid and with that plan that was committed to previously.

**Mrs. Stone:** I thank the minister for that response.

Another project I'd like to ask the minister: At the intersection of the No. 2 Highway and No. 13 Highway at Elm Creek, we have two major highways crossing each other, with a significant amount of traffic—car traffic, commuter traffic and truck traffic. There has been a number of accidents. The department has indicated that they plan to put in a roundabout at that intersection, and I understand work has been under way working with the landowners around that intersection.

So I'm just wondering if the minister could give a project update as to when that roundabout will be completed.

**MLA Naylor:** I thank the member for the questions.

This is a good opportunity for me to just talk a little about our road safety priorities and that that is, you know, really, the focus of our government is how to make every intersection as safe as we can using

modern engineering techniques and designs in order to, you know, take away the—to minimize driver error. I think, historically, in, you know, the past, a lot of designs across North America don't account for driver error, and so I really appreciate designs such as the roundabouts that can slow drivers down and ensure that we eliminate very dangerous, sort of, 90-degree collisions by these processes.

So in terms of this particular roundabout that the MLA's—of Midland is speaking about, the functional design was completed in fall 2025. That included public engagement with the Rural Municipality of Grey. And there is a request for services for the detailed design that's under way. And the department anticipates detailed design to be completed by fall of 2026, with construction beginning in spring of 2027 and substantially to be completed by fall of 2027. But the—a more detailed timeline could be available once the design phase is complete.

**Mrs. Stone:** Thank you, Minister, for that answer. I appreciate the details and the timelines that the minister is providing to me today.

The last question that I have is specific to Highway 330 from the Perimeter to La Salle specifically. La Salle is one of the fastest growing communities within the province and has increased substantially over the past five to 10 years with more development that is occurring currently and plans for the future.

So, with the growing younger families that are moving into this community at quite a significant rate, does the department have any plans as to what they plan to do with Highway 330 specifically? It is a undivided highway, like I had mentioned. Since I certainly moved there 10 years ago, it's almost doubled in size. Since we're only about eight minutes away from the Perimeter, we have a number of commuters that come in and out of Winnipeg in order to work, go to sports, groceries and things like that.

So, if the minister could just give me an idea as to—if the department is monitoring the level of traffic on the 330 from La Salle to the Perimeter and, more importantly, what plans there are for that intersection at 330 and the No. 1 Perimeter.

There was a time when they were looking at some significant investment to connect—better connect the 330 into the Kenaston interchange at the Perimeter and Kenaston, so I'm just wondering where the department is at on that and what the plans are.

\* (11:10)

**MLA Naylor:** So this stretch of highway is in La Salle, I believe the member said, and La Salle is one of the municipalities that I recently met with through the association of bilingual municipalities, and we had a really good conversation there with those municipalities about, kind of, regional projects and priorities that, you know, would serve a large area of people, so I'm continuing that conversation.

As for this particular—for the twinning and the intersection around 330, that has been reviewed by the department. Currently, traffic volumes don't indicate that that would be a priority for either of those projects at this time, but we are continually monitoring that, and things change. I mean, a really good example—probably the members heard our recent announcement in Niverville, for example, where a community has grown very rapidly, and so a project that might not have been on the books two years ago is now, you know, starting work this summer because the situation changed in terms of population and businesses.

So we're constantly monitoring that, constantly encouraging municipalities to bring things to my attention where there is a substantial change in use of a roadway so that we can go out and do traffic counts and review the safety of the area. And I would encourage that, you know—just say that we're continuing to monitor this particular area as well.

**Mrs. Stone:** Sorry, just a quick clarification for the minister. Did she meet with the RM of Macdonald, where the—where La Salle is located within that rural municipality, and if so, when?

**MLA Naylor:** I did misspeak in my last question because I—it was not—I didn't know that you—that the MLA was speaking about a project in the RM of Macdonald, and there's been correspondence with my department; the department has had meetings.

I currently can't locate a meeting on the books that I personally have had with the RM, but I'm frankly surprised because I know I recognize the council members and I'm sure that there's been engagement at some point, but if I haven't, they might be one of the only municipalities in the province I haven't sat down with, so we'll try and rectify that.

**Mr. Guenter:** And, again, you know, I want to thank the minister and her staff for obviously indulging us today and yesterday, and this is an important process.

You know, 500-and-some million dollars to our highways budget and, of course, as the minister said 19,600 kilometres, so it is a very, very substantial undertaking to manage and ensure safety for motorists,

ensure that there's economic development as a result of the projects that are done and also to ensure that they're kept up to standard and meet the needs of growing communities.

So, yes, I appreciate the answers to specific questions. I do have questions with regard to the budget that I think the minister would like to talk about as well, but I do, before I get there, have just three questions. I have many projects, many—or many highways that, you know, I could talk about in my constituency that are in real need of repair and overhaul.

You know, I think of, just for the benefit of the minister and her staff, but I'll raise them. So, there's the four-mile section south of Morden on PR 432. It did receive some attention last summer so that was good to see.

\* (11:20)

However, that highway is notorious for falling apart given all the gravel pits in that area. There's schools—school buses that use that route. You know, you've got visitors to Stanley park that'll use that route and, of course, local residents who use that route to get to and from work and do their daily business.

So, that's an area of concern, as well as the stretch north of Morden on that same highway, four—I believe it's the 428, actually, north of Highway 3. Yes, so the road numbers change there. But the Highway 3 and 432 junction, north of that, I think, is considered the 428, and that highway is also, I mean, pothole city. So there's that.

And then north of Winkler—actually, the highway north of Winkler, at the—from the junction of 14 and 32, the—that stretch north of Winkler all the way to Roland is actually the 428, so I misspoke.

So there's two highways; one runs north of Morden, and it is—that's the 432. And the highway north of Winkler is the 428, and that highway, as well, is just in absolutely terrible shape, has been for many years, and is in need of real attention. So—and then there's the 201 east of Highway 32, you know, pretty well to 306, for sure, and even to Altona, is in rough shape.

So, anyway, like I said, you know, I've given the minister and her staff some highways to look at, and, of course, I intend, as the local MLA, to continue to advocate for their upgrades.

I know, you know, there is a significant infrastructure deficit in our province, and the provincial budget right now is only \$500 million a year. And so

it is, of course, a challenge to fix all these highways, all these problems, at once.

That said, I did want to specifically ask about Highway 14, which this year has just absolutely deteriorated. It is a very important highway used by commercial truck traffic—heavily used by commercial truck traffic heading either to Winnipeg or south to the United States through the Emerson border.

And, you know, I have serious concerns, as do many residents, about safety along that highway. But I'm just wondering—and I do see in the '25-26 update that the minister tabled in question period just the other day that there is a project in the capital plan; however, I don't see a date for it.

But I wonder if the minister could talk specifically about when Highway 14 east of Winkler to Highway 75 will receive attention.

### Introduction of Guests

**The Chairperson:** While the minister confers with her staff, I'll just direct all honourable members to the public gallery where we have with us the Oakenwald School, 27 grade 5 students under the direction of Mary-Ann Mitchler. This group is located in the constituency of the honourable member for Fort Garry (Mr. Wasyliv).

Welcome here.

\* \* \*

\* (11:30)

**MLA Naylor:** There was a lot of questions embedded in the last question. So I'm going to see what—got a bunch of answers to throw; we'll see what sticks, and if I miss anything, the member can let me know.

First of all, I want to appreciate the member for talking about our infrastructure gaps. It's absolutely true. And I have mentioned in this Chamber before, and on committee before, a big reason for that is the cuts that happened and the underspending that happened for over six years under the previous government. There were years where the infrastructure budget was underspent—you know, where the government spent barely over \$300 million.

And so I—and I also want to just correct—the member mentioned that our budget is \$500 million. It's actually \$525 for highways. And our overall—in this year's budget—and our overall capital budget is over \$605 million, which is a \$10-million increase from last year. And we're really working hard to spend.

I think part of the problem has been an underspending of budget in previous years and under the previous government. But we're really working towards spending everything that we budget. Sometimes a challenge—if projects get interrupted for any number of reasons, that can be a challenge to meet that. But we're working at that.

So as for some of the projects that the member asked about, right now, we have an intersection improvement at Willcocks Road on 432 south of Morden. I believe that is already under way. We're planning surface reconstruction south of Morden later this year on 432. We also—there is surface reconstruction on 428; also later this year, eight kilometres north of—going eight kilometres north of Highway 14. And there's also passing lanes under construction on Highway 14.

Maybe I answered everything. And if I didn't, I'm sure the member will let me know in his next question.

**Mr. Guenter:** I thank the minister for that. And it's good to hear that there is construction planned on the 428 as well as the 432. With regard to 14, it's also good to see the passing lanes being installed there.

You know, I—and I will just take this opportunity now as the—again, as the local MLA, to put it on the record, that I do believe and, you know, I've heard conversations, been party to them as well, that there are many people who believe it is now time to look at and begin planning for four-laning the Highway 14, just because it carries such a substantial amount of traffic.

But I guess my concern, though, is with regard to the state of the highway and the very apparent need for surface reconstruction, rehabilitation. And just—it's—this year and last year, it has really deteriorated.

So, again, I would just ask the department to look at that, specifically the section—it's most acute in the section from Highway 30, to the junction of Highway 30 and Highway 14, all the way to Highway 75. So, you know, that's an area of concern.

I will just ask the minister, take this opportunity, and the last two projects—I mean, there are many others that I could talk about, but I know we're under time constraints. And, again, I thank the minister for—and her staff for their indulgence today.

But I would just, specifically, like to ask about—you know, it was good to hear the minister talk about RTAC and the importance of RTACing highways. I certainly share that sentiment.

I—you know, I am a former long-haul truck driver, believe it or not. And, you know, it's one of those things I say, believe it or not, because it's one of those things that I never wanted to do. My family are heavily into the—involved in the trucking industry and—my extended family, I should say—a lot of uncles who drive truck, and they do great work.

And I know I represent many truck drivers as well and I'm proud of that, and also proud of the fact that I do hold the class 1s, and I'm a truck driver, I have that experience. But that was something, growing up, that I just—I never wanted to do and, lo and behold, life has a way of changing circumstances, and there I was.

So I had the pleasure of driving truck—long haul—for about two years, and certainly in that experience have learned a lot about the importance of RTAC. And there's a huge gap in the eastern part of my constituency, particularly from Highway 200 near Dominion City to Highway 59. That stretch of the 201 is also on the five-year capital plan. However, there's no date attached to it, no indication of when this project might happen. The department appears to peg the project cost at \$34 million, roughly \$34 million.

Again, this is an incredibly vital project that needs to happen. I believe it was slated initially. I saw it in a previous multi-year capital plan, target completion date 2025-2026. However, in this year's departmental update, I don't see the project timelines in there. I see the project in there.

So I'm just wondering if the minister could provide an update on that and, again, would strongly encourage the minister and the department to undertake that project as soon as possible. There is a very substantial need there for that project for the 201 to be RTACed from Dominion City to Highway 59.

And then, secondly, I would just ask about Highway 32, south of Winkler all the way to the US border. I believe there was a plan to pave the shoulders of that road, Highway 32. Again, that's an—heavily oversubscribed highway with real safety concerns and, really, those shoulders should be paved and, you know, the highway really should be widened as well—and, frankly, four-laned. I'll take the opportunity as the MLA to put that on the record as well, and make a request to the minister and department to begin planning for four-laning Highway 32 from Winkler all the way to the US border.

But I'm wondering, specifically, if the minister could indicate whether or not there is any plans to pave the shoulders of Highway 32 south of Winkler?

\* (11:40)

**MLA Naylor:** The department is still working on a response to those—the two items that the member asked about, but I know—so I'll just mention, the member brought up his background in long-haul trucking. So I just thought I would mention, too, my older brother also was a long-haul trucker and I think, like the member across the way, that was not his life dream but it's how he put himself through university.

So I grew up with an older brother who was a trucker. And certainly, in this role, I think the member can appreciate that we, you know—a lot of the relationship of the Minister of Transportation is with Manitoba Trucking Association and with truck drivers across the province.

So that's also a really good source of information for us on highway challenges and repairs that need to happen, budget priorities. So I really value that relationship with Manitoba Trucking Association and with all of the individual truckers that I've met along the way.

And, you know, certainly a lot of the work of our department is encouraging road safety and through The Highway Traffic Act, through our Motor Carrier Enforcement officers, making sure that truckers are using the road as they should and in a safe way.

So that—I'll just flag that as part of the work of our department and the budget is that very, very important work of our Motor Carrier Enforcement officers to both support trade and the trucking industry as well as to support all road users in making sure that our roads are safe.

So I thank the member opposite for his career in that area and, like my brother, it looks like it led to better things for him as well, if that was his choice to do this career instead. And maybe I will wrap it up there and hopefully by the time the member asks another question, we'll have an answer from the department on the last question.

**Mr. Guenter:** Sure, I appreciate—and I thank the minister for, and again, her staff as well, for undertaking to provide that information on those two projects and I'm glad to hear, you know, that she has a relationship with the trucking associations in this province and, of course, of her brother who's a—had experience as a truck driver as well.

And I just, you know, on that, there's so many things you learn as a truck driver and it's an experience that I think is really useful, actually, in life. And I'm sure her brother has found that to be the case as well.

\* (11:50)

So—but just while we're on that subject, actually, I did want to ask the minister, you know, and I've had constituents ask me these questions and have had many conversations about trucker safety in my area, and many of them want to understand, how does Manitoba, how does the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure audit and investigate infractions when it comes to commercial truck driving, training schools? And how does that—what's the—what would the division within the department be called, how many people are employed within that division, how many audits are taken out or are undertaken on an annual basis?

You know, if the minister could talk, give us a picture, perhaps, if she would, of what the department does to ensure that, you know, that truckers are following a law, that truck-driving schools are in compliance and adhering to the highest standards of safety and professional conduct. And I think it's perhaps a broad question, but I'm just asking the minister to tell us and paint a picture perhaps of what it is that her department does on this front.

### Introduction of Guests

**The Chairperson:** While the minister confers with her staff, I'll just direct all honourable members to the gallery where we have our Friday public tour guests joining us in the gallery.

So, welcome to the Committee of Supply in the Chamber.

\* \* \*

**MLA Naylor:** I'm very close to having answers to the last question, but maybe by the time I'm done speaking about the trucking industry I will fully have the timelines that the member's asked about.

So just—I will talk about the work we do around truck safety, and that is part of my department. But I do want to clarify that training schools do not fall under the jurisdiction of my department.

So I do believe that is part of the BMTJC, if I got the acronym right, Business, Mining, Trade and Job Creation. There's been work together with MPI through the Department of Justice on training schools,

but I can't really elaborate on that as it doesn't fall under MTI.

The part that does fall under MTI is the inspections and the enforcement, and so I will take a minute to talk about how we are improving road safety through the Motor Carrier Enforcement Officer division. We have a total of 52 positions in that division, 41 of whom—well, we have four officers training right now. As soon as they're done their training, we will have 41 inspectors, like, officer—Motor Carrier Enforcement officers who do the inspections.

Five years ago, there was only 20 enforcement officers in that department. So we've more than doubled that in the past five years, and I think that's really critical. The training has also become more specialized.

And there—you know, the—in terms of the work that they do, in—last year, there was 11,000 inspections of trucks throughout the province.

\* (12:00)

And also another piece of that truck safety and road safety is the national conversations that we're having. A number of provinces—including ours—we've been putting pressure on the federal government to have a national database.

One of the things that I was very concerned about as soon as I came into this job, it was—there was something that was kind of in the middle that had been happening under the previous government, and then I inherited, which was a couple of companies were shut down. They had their safety certificates revoked but were immediately able to set up shop and continue doing business, running out of a different province.

And so I think we can all agree, on every side of the House, that's really bad for Manitobans and—to know that companies that we've deemed not safe enough to be operating in Manitoba can just quickly move their operations to Alberta and continue to operate on our roads.

So we've done a lot of work with our with our provincial partners. You know, I've certainly had a number of conversations on this issue with my counterpart in Alberta as well as Saskatchewan, and we are—we're all putting pressure on the federal government to have greater harmonization in terms of safety across the province.

So I feel like this—and oh, and I should also mention again with the motor—the Manitoba Trucking Association shares these values, so they're also deeply involved in wanting to make sure highways are safer and make sure that people behind the wheel of a massive vehicle are trained properly and are following all the rules of both the road and their industry in terms of their hours of service and fatigue and all of those types of things that we're working on. So that's the answer to the most recent question.

In terms of the previous question, Highway 32—there is a surface rehabilitation project from 1.9 kilometres south of Highway 14 to the US border that is planned, and sections of the shoulder. So the member brought up the shoulder, specifically. Sections of the shoulder will be considered and built in as part of that project when that happens. I can't give a precise timeline, but that is in the plan.

In terms of Highway 201, my understanding is that is a part of the trade and commerce corridor. And I'm just trying to get a date that was for the design phase—okay, so we're looking at design for that upgrade in twenty—starting in 2027.

**Mr. Guenter:** I thank the minister for that update and I think my constituents will appreciate that as well, so—with regard to those projects.

And, you know, it's good to hear the minister talking about the need for a national approach to trucker safety. You know, she—the minister brings up the fact that trucking companies with multiple infractions that are shut down in one province can then just basically immediately reopen shop under a different business number, perhaps in a different province, and continue with the same dangerous behaviour.

So that's a concern, and I do—I fully support a national approach to this and, of course, encourage the minister and her department to continue those conversations with their national counterparts.

However, I know we're under a time constraint here, and I just will pass over to—the floor to my colleague and friend from La Vérendrye, who has a few questions also.

**Mr. Konrad Narth (La Vérendrye):** The last question from my colleague from Borderland will be a good segue into my first question.

And I appreciate the opportunity to ask some specific questions of the minister. In the last couple of years that I was the critic, I didn't feel it was appropriate to take time to ask more constituency-relevant questions. So glad to have the opportunity today.

So I'd like to start off with Highway 201 and the reconstruction and RTAC upgrade project from Highway 59 to 302 through the community of Vita. This is something that I had passionately worked on in my—during my time on municipal council for the RM of Stuartburn. It was truly a collaborative approach that was taken to showcase to the Province at that time, the importance of this project for the economic benefit of that far southeast corner of the province.

The town of Vita is truly the hub of that far southeast region, providing the essential services—as the essential service businesses as well as the hospital and school. Along with that, a growing manufacturing business that has really been held back over the last decade as a result of not being able to access an unrestricted highway. That manufacturing business brings millions of dollars into the province of Manitoba from across our country.

Their products are shipped from coast to coast and come out of the small community of Vita. Along with that, the 201 portion is an economic connection corridor between Highway 75 and Highway No. 12 and provides commodity transportation throughout that region.

So the project was committed to under the previous government in 2022 with a timeline of completion 2025-2026. It's something that I've brought forward as the MLA, together with the concerned municipalities that have been in support of this, the chamber of commerce, as well as Sunrise Corner Economic Development corporation. And this is something that is at the forefront of importance for that region.

In the five-year capital investment plan that this minister's brought forward this year, we see that it's listed there, but we've seen the elimination of timelines from that report. So there's no longer a date that's associated with the completion of that project, and we see that it has jumped in cost from \$27 million to \$34 million.

So just like to have the minister clarify for the committee today and for the people of southeast Manitoba that that project is still on schedule to be completed. And if the minister could update committee today as to when the projected completion date of that project will be.

\* (12:10)

**MLA Naylor:** So the surface reconstruction project on Highway 201 that the member is referring to, that's just over 20 kilometres, and the design work is done

on that project. It is being upgraded to RTAC standards and the tender for construction is going out soon.

**Mr. Narth:** Thank you to the minister for providing that update since the last capital plan had come out. I know there's been questions as to if the timeline is still going to be upheld, so I'm glad to hear the minister confirming that we should see the work start shortly.

The next question that I have is in regards to speed zones, and I've had this discussion off the record with the minister on a couple occasions as well as formally have written letters. I've spoken to communities that I represent that have engaged in communication with the department about the change of speed limits or zones—moving zones. This is primarily the concern around communities that are growing.

I represent one of the fastest growing regions in the province. Southeast Manitoba, you know, has municipalities—two fastest growing municipalities in Manitoba, La Broquerie and Hanover. And within those municipalities, communities are actually growing the boundaries faster than they're able to get the department to change the speed zones.

This is something that's been ongoing, you know, long-lasting concern for communities, and it's out-lived governments in the past as well. So I had brought forward, last fall, Bill 222, which was born out of a resolution from the Association of Manitoba Municipalities with an extensive list of municipalities across the province, in fact, gaining unanimous support at the AMM convention to give more authority to municipalities in changing where their speed zones start and end.

And, unfortunately, the government had spoke out that piece of legislation and spoke negatively to it, which I know that words were put on the record for the justification to that, but my question is more specific, but I'll also include the broad aspect to it, is to—if the minister is doing anything to more rapidly respond to these requests from municipalities and communities.

And then, specifically, PR 210 through the community of Marchand. This is something that has gotten media attention across the province. That's a community that's growing and along with that has a campground, Twisted Root campground, which nearly attracts 1,000 people each week, so heavy traffic through that community on a Friday afternoon, as expected.

The community has spoken out about the placement of where speed zones start. The reduced speed

zone starts after the turnoff to this busy campground and it starts within town limits, within the limits of the sidewalk.

So we have children—families walking to and from the campground along a sidewalk on a very busy highway that has a 100-kilometre-an-hour speed zone. This has, rightfully so, created outcry by families within that community and it's a simple answer. The request was made by the municipality. The request was made by the community themselves to move the speed zone, but it's a prime example of the backlog in response to speed zone changes within growing communities of Manitoba.

So I'd just—I'd like some clarification from the minister. In a broad sense, what's being done to more rapidly respond to these concerns, and specifically Highway 210 in the community of Marchand—if there's been anything done because the community, as well as the municipality, have yet to get a clear response from the department.

**MLA Naylor:** Actually, I'm really happy for the opportunity to talk a little bit about speed limits and speed zones, rather, in municipalities. So this is a complex issue in terms of, you know, I don't—I hope that the member opposite doesn't think that it's a good idea to have a patchwork of speed zones across the province on provincial infrastructure.

It—without involvement from the Province, it—there would be a lot of unpredictability and a lack of information available to travellers about what they could expect on speed zones across the province and across the infrastructure that is owned and maintained by the Province.

However, having said that, the review of speed bump zones and the timely response to municipalities is very important to me. And I just want to give a little bit of history on this issue.

\* (12:20)

Back, like, prior to 2019, the practice of setting speed limits was split between MTI and the Highway Traffic Board. MTI was responsible for setting—for decisions on setting speed limits on provincial roads, and the Highway Traffic Board was responsible for reviewing recommendations and setting speed limits on provincial truck highways.

Under the previous government, they cancelled the Highway Traffic Board. At the same time that they laid—like, basically got rid of a lot of positions and underfilled positions in MTI so that by the time that

I became the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, the backlog in this area was years, literally years, anywhere from two to five years, depending on what—you know, the types of requests and the type of work that was involved in reviewing it.

So, you know, every time I would meet with municipalities, and I'd encourage them to put in their requests, because there's a very easy process. Municipalities simply need to pass a resolution and submit their request. But, of course, that would lead to frustration when the backlog that was created by the PC government, you know, even as the department worked at it, it's hard to catch up a backlog. We—you know, it continued around at the same pace as they tried to be responsive.

So we worked really hard on coming together, coming up with a solution. There is now a dedicated team of engineers in the department. We made a commitment to clear this backlog within this year, and so that team came together just a few months ago and have already cleared over 30 per cent of the backlog.

It doesn't mean that every municipality will be happy with the answer, but there's basically three responses that will go to municipalities: either their request will be approved or their request could be denied, but they will have it explained to them why; and in many cases additional information is required. So the engineers are reviewing each of these for all the safety considerations and technical considerations. It has been a really incredible process of getting through the backlog since February. I believe that—I mean, there was at least 144 different reviews that, as far as I can remember, that they were looking at, starting just a few months ago.

So we will have—you know, I think municipalities that are waiting, and I've been able to communicate this directly with a number of municipalities, that if they're still in the backlog, we will be clearing that in the year ahead. I've been able to encourage municipalities who are simply now asking for the first time about a review that they can confidently pursue the process that's in place, knowing that it will be looked at in a timely manner.

So I hope that that answers the member's question.

**Mr. Narth:** I'd like to thank the minister for responding to that, and I'll pass that message along to the municipalities that have been struggling to get a response now for two and a half years.

The—another concern that I have is around the D20 drain, provincial drain, and the Tourond Creek

that has effected some very large-scale flooding for the fastest growing city in Manitoba, which is Steinbach, and together with the RM of Hanover. It's gotten media attention, the flooding that was caused for two falls in a row as a result of the lack of maintenance.

But I'd like to pass over my time to the member for Spruce Woods and encourage the minister and her department to look into some of those southeast Manitoba sizable flooding concerns that still exist.

So with that, I'd like to pass my time to the member for Spruce Woods.

**Mrs. Colleen Robbins (Spruce Woods):** So I'd like to ask the minister: My predecessor, Grant Jackson, asked several times during his time as the MLA for Spruce Woods, on Highway No. 2 to Deleau, and it wasn't until the Spruce Woods by-election came out that you came and seen it and realized that Grant was right all along and decided to announce it was going to be done with many, many other million dollars of work. And the only work or progress that I've seen so far has been the bridge that you announced that was actually already built by the previous PC government.

I am wondering, do you have a timeline and when No. 2 is going to be fixed, as I'm even getting complaints from out-of-province travellers saying this is the worst highway they have ever travelled and very dangerous. So it is something that needs to be 'expedited' and I'd like to know your timeline.

**The Chairperson:** While the minister is conferring with her staff, I'll just remind all members that comments should come through the Chair, not directly to members opposite.

**MLA Naylor:** I appreciate the member bringing up Grant Jackson who used to be a member of this House. I really miss when he was a staffer because he wrote the best questions.

But back to this project, I will say that this project is—the design work is happening this year with construction in 2027 and it's just important to point out that projects get moved up in our plans any—you know, because of the amount of—because we go out and review the roadways and see—

**The Chairperson:** Order.

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

#### IN SESSION

**The Deputy Speaker (Tyler Blashko):** The hour being 12:30 p.m., this House is adjourned and stands adjourned until Monday at 1:30 p.m.

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA**

**Friday, May 8, 2026**

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