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Department of Labrador Affairs

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Honourable Derek Bennett, MHA

GOVERNMENT SERVICES COMMITTEE

Department of Labrador Affairs

Chair: Lucy Stoyles, MHA

Vice-Chair: Lin Paddock, MHA

Members: Joedy Wall, MHA
Perry Trimper, MHA
Sherry Gambin-Walsh, MHA
Jamie Korab, MHA
James Dinn, MHA

Clerk of the Committee: Jennifer Peckham (A)

Appearing:

Department of Labrador Affairs

Lisa Dempster, Minister
Jason Higgins, Deputy Minister
Sheree Snow, Assistant Deputy Minister
Nicole Abbott, Departmental Controller
Victoria Barbour, Director of Communications
Franca Smith, Director
Trevor Miller, Manager of Finance
Randy Simms, Executive Assistant to the Minister

Also Present

Hon. Andrew Parsons, MHA, Minister of Industry, Energy and Technology
Hon. Paul Pike, MHA, Minister of Children, Seniors and Social Development
John Abbott, MHA
Jordan Brown, MHA
Lela Evans, MHA
Jack Norman, Government Members' Caucus
Ashley Politi, Official Opposition Caucus
Scott Fleming, Third Party Caucus

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Andrew Parsons, MHA for Burgeo - La Poile, substitutes for Sherry Gambin-Walsh, MHA for Placentia - St. Mary's.

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Paul Pike, MHA for Burin - Grand Bank, substitutes Jamie Korab, MHA for Waterford Valley.

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Jordan Brown, MHA for Labrador West, substitutes for Jim Dinn, MHA for St. John's Centre.

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, John Abbott, MHA for St. John's East - Quidi Vidi, substitutes for Perry Trimper, MHA for Lake Melville.

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Lela Evans, MHA for Torngat Mountains, substitutes for Joedy Wall, MHA for Cape St. Francis.

The Committee met at 9 a.m. in the House of Assembly Chamber.

CHAIR (Stoyles): Good morning, everybody, and welcome.

We're in Estimates again this morning and we're doing the Department of Labrador Affairs. I want to thank everybody for coming.

First, I'm going to start with the substitutes. For MHA Wall, we have MHA Evans. For MHA Trimper, we have MHA Abbott. For MHA Sherry Gambin-Walsh, we have Minister Parsons. For MHA Dinn, we have MHA Brown and for MHA Korab, we have Minister Pike.

A few housekeeping items before we get started. We ask everybody to wave and wait for the light to come on before you speak. We would like for you to identify yourself every single time for recording purposes and do not adjust your chairs, as other people will be sitting in them in their own place again this afternoon. Of course, the water coolers are to my right and left if anybody would like some water.

Before I ask the Committee to introduce themselves, I would like to ask for the previous minutes to be approved. I'm going to ask for a mover.

MHA Evans; seconded by MHA Abbott.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Motion carried.

On motion, minutes adopted as circulated.

CHAIR: Now I'm going to ask everybody to introduce themselves, starting off with MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: MHA Evans, District of Torngat Mountains, Critic for Labrador Affairs.

A. POLITI: Ashley Politi, Opposition staff.

L. PADDOCK: Lin Paddock, Member for Baie Verte - Green Bay, Opposition Finance Critic.

J. BROWN: Jordan Brown, MHA for Labrador West.

S. FLEMING: Scott Fleming, Researcher, Third Party Caucus.

J. ABBOTT: John Abbott, St. John's East - Quidi Vidi.

A. PARSONS: Andrew Parsons, Burgeo - La Poile.

J. NORMAN: Jack Norman, Government Members' Office.

CHAIR: Minister.

L. DEMPSTER: Lisa Dempster, Minister of Labrador Affairs.

J. HIGGINS: Jason Higgins, Deputy Minister, Labrador Affairs.

N. ABBOTT: Nicole Abbott, Departmental Controller.

T. MILLER: Trevor Miller, Manager of Finance.

CHAIR: Don't forget to wave your hand to get the light on.

S. SNOW: Sheree Snow, Assistant Deputy Minister for Medical Transportation Assistance Program.

F. SMITH: Franca Smith, Director of Labrador Affairs.

R. SIMMS: Randy Simms, Minister Dempster's EA.

V. BARBOUR: Victoria Barber, Director of Communications, Labrador Affairs.

CHAIR: We thank you all.

I'm going to ask the Clerk to call the first round of numbers before I ask the minister to speak.

CLERK (Peckham): 1.1.01, Executive and Support Services.

CHAIR: 1.1.01.

Minister, would you like to bring some opening remarks?

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

Good morning, everyone.

I will just do a brief little three or four minute run-through of an overview of the department before we get into the subheadings. Not a lot of subheadings. Generally, in Estimates, the questions come elsewhere.

So the vision of the Department of Labrador Affairs is of a strong sustainable and vibrant Labrador where all people have the opportunity to prosper and contribute to their communities, regions and the province.

Under its mandate, the department is responsible for the development, implementation and administration of provincial policies and programs from a Labrador and rural, remote perspective.

Specifically, the department is entrusted with advancing the social and economic development of Labrador by ensuring the unique perspectives are considered in the formation of government policy and are in the delivery of provincial government programs and services.

So many of you here will recall that, two years ago, Labrador Affairs became a stand-alone department. All functions and programs previously administered by Labrador Affairs Secretariat were brought within the jurisdiction of Labrador Affairs.

I'll just mention some of them: the Labrador Transportation Grooming Subsidy, Labrador Aboriginal Nutritional and Artistic Assistance Program, Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy Program and School Sports NL Labrador travel program, Labrador Winter Games, which happens every three years since 1983 is also housed there.

In addition to that, we brought in an extra 50-ish staff with the Medical Transportation Assistance Program and the Medical Transportation Supports program. Some of you might recall that as the Income Support side. The name just recently changed and we now use the acronym MeTS for the Income Support side.

Budget highlights in 2025: In addition to \$684,000 in ongoing funding to assist residents with travel to access medical services not available close to home, *Budget 2025* invests a further \$988,000 to increase the mileage assistance rate and to

develop a third party partnership to help lower income residents; \$750,00 for the organization and development of the 2026 Labrador Winter Games; \$430,000 is allocated for the Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy, which provides air travel support to Labrador athletes age 18 and under; \$400,000 to School Sports NL to support travel for Labrador students to participate in school-organized sporting events; \$611,000 to support and maintain safe winter access for isolated communities; and, I don't have it in front of me, but we are continuing with the coastal supplement for the North Coast and the South Coast that we brought in in budget '24.

I have a whole lot of things here that we're doing under medical transportation, but I think I'll leave it, and as we go, I may get to share that as you ask the questions, but certainly we continue to increase that program. Budget '23, it came under Labrador Affairs, we added an extra million dollars. In budget '24, we had a shortfall of three-quarters of a million, so it increased to almost an extra \$2 million. This year, we have added another just about \$1 million, as I mentioned earlier. We're seeing a big rise in MTAP claims. Risen by another 8 per cent in 2024-25, building on a 20 per cent increase from last year's budget. I think claims have gone from maybe 657 to around 1,200.

Safer snowmobile trail – I'm looking across at my critic who's more than familiar with our snowmobile trail, and I'm sure that the MHA for Lab West is as well, so I can answer those questions as they come up, along with the Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy.

I will share another really, really important job, I guess, and work that we do within Labrador Affairs that's become really more important, I would say, than ever before is the work we do around the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework. Working with other northern ministers, this year we will be hosting the Northern Development Ministers

Forum in Happy Valley-Goose Bay looking to be end of May. And we're doing increasing work around Arctic sovereignty, as we see what's happening all around us, the unrest geopolitically and things like that, so we would be front and centre on that.

I'm going to clue up there and just allow time for questions and maybe come back to that. I will say, reading Estimates from last year, I noticed that MHA Parrott had made a comment that, at the end, he grew up in Lab West, and then there was the MHA for Torngat Mountains and me, and it was nice to see three Labrador folk in the House. We have three Labrador people, so lots of familiarity with the challenges here this morning. And if Lake Melville was chairing, we'd have 100 per cent of Labrador here this morning involved in Estimates.

Anyway, thank you, Chair, for your time and now we can go back to the –

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

So we're going to start with questions. The first round of questions will be 15 minutes and then following that, it'll be 10 minutes on every round.

MHA Evans you can start.

L. EVANS: Yes, thank you.

A lot of the items relating to Labrador, my district, Torngat Mountains and Labrador as a whole, will be directed towards the other departments. Like in the previous Estimates, some of the questions we came forward with to the Minister of Labrador Affairs had to be deferred to the other departments. So I'm not going to actually take up a lot of time asking those questions that could be better suited for other departments.

However, during these budget Estimates, it's important to have the minister and the supporting staff here to question the role of Aboriginal Affairs, what they play in the

advocacy, because the whole point of the formation of Labrador Affairs was to ensure that the issues in Labrador didn't fall through the cracks because of the unique issues, geography, location, logistics, those issues there.

So it's important for us to ask these questions and most of my questions will not be specific line items about a particular budget Estimate being up a little bit more or down from previous years. We also recognize that the Department of Labrador Affairs now is fairly new in this role as an established stand-alone department. There are budget Estimate fluctuations from year to year and you're sort of in a growing stage. Some of those items, like I said, I won't spend a lot of time on those because it takes up time.

I do appreciate everyone being here and I do appreciate the role that the minister and the deputy minister plays in the advocacy for Labrador.

Just looking at some of the general questions, now, that I have before we get into the line items. The Coastal Labrador Seniors' Food and Heating Supplement – the minister said, in her opening remarks, they would be continued for this year. I just wanted the minister to sort of reflect, in her advocacy role, how did she come or how did the government come to actually establish this supplement?

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you. I thank the Member for her question.

We spent months in budget prep. We probably start by November and led up, going through a lot of different things, and we recognize that the cost of living is very high right now, really, across the country for various reasons in provinces; but when you look at rural, remote and in particular isolated communities, we know the cost of living is higher. We know there are challenges around, as the Member would be familiar with, coastal communities in

Labrador not eligible for all programs across government.

Some of that is outside our control, like some of the rebates that other people in the province are entitled to, we would not be if we were on diesel-generated communities, and that is funding that came from the federal government with criteria attached to it in how we spend.

When we looked at different measures of the cost of living, we wanted to do something extra for the seniors in those communities, and my Cabinet colleagues supported that and I was happy to see that it continue.

I don't know if that answers your question.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Minister, and that does answer my question.

Because as we see in Labrador, especially in my district, the cost of food – and I've actually got documents showing the cost of food in Northern Labrador is significantly higher than in other regions of rural Newfoundland and Labrador. That's creating great hardship, so it's good to see that your department is aware of the cost.

We also look at the heating – the huge cost of heating. Now, in my district, people can't afford to purchase fuel for their furnaces and their stoves the way they used to. Before, you'd get a drum of oil delivered to your house or you'd deliver it yourself, 200 litres of stove oil.

People can't afford that anymore. So we see people walking down the road or on Ski-Doo now with a five-litre jerry can of stove oil. Can you imagine how long that's going to last in a furnace or a stove? It's creating a lot of hardship.

The reason why I bring it up is Labrador Affairs was created to ensure that the other departments like CSSD, Department of Finance is aware of the situations. So it's

important. For me, continuing this \$500 rebate is important for our seniors but we also have to look at the low-income families as well. We have to look at the people who can't haul wood or can't afford to haul wood.

Once this rebate is over, seniors are going to go back to the struggle, but \$500 is really not even helping them with the struggle. So I was just wondering, what other advocacy is Labrador Affairs doing to address the cost of heating your home and feeding your family?

L. DEMPSTER: I thank the Member for the questions. I'll try to touch on all that I've heard.

In terms of the \$500 ending, I'm not aware of it ending. That's a commitment that we made now, going forward, recognizing that change.

In general, I want to say, when you reference Labrador and Labrador's role, you are right on the mark. Sometimes I say, even to my colleagues, there's a reason we don't have an office of the Burin Peninsula, or there's a reason we don't have an office of Bonavista, but we do have a Department of Labrador Affairs, recognizing that our challenges are very, very unique. And if your home address is in Labrador, it can be really frustrating because you know that you live in an area that contributes a lot. We have challenges, not the least of which is brought on, perhaps, by being a really small population spread over a large land mass, et cetera.

I do want to say, and for the purpose of *Hansard* and things, that as the minister responsible, right now, for Labrador Affairs, we work with every single department across government. Any Cabinet paper that's going forward to Cabinet Committee and then later to Cabinet, we have a lens on that, and we talk about how that will positively or negatively affect Labrador.

The Nutrition North program, I think it's a \$132 million program federally – I have been to Ottawa on more than one occasion advertising for improvements, for additional items to be added. I know there is concern, in particular, in the Member's district because we don't see that often passed on to the consumer at the end of the day.

Myself and my colleague who's here this morning, St. John's East - Quidi Vidi, we walked through all of the grocery stores from Rigolet through Nain, and we did see first-hand the prices ourselves. We actually wrote the Nunatsiavut Government – we've written them on two occasions because we want to help them. We want to work with them to see what we can do – I know the Nutrition North program right now is under review, but in addition to that we have a lot of concerns around the Northern stores when the CEO is making \$3.6 million a year and your people are hurting and very real hardship.

I think I'll pause there – oh, on the diesel and the cost of heating the homes, the Minister of IET is here and we have sat down many times with him, with his executive team and there is actually three different levels of subsidy going into our isolated diesel communities because we recognize that it would be cost prohibitive to live there if we did not have that.

I don't have them in front of me, but I would be certainly happy to, if the Member would like to, just show you what the contributions are. One portion is being paid for by the ratepayers across the Island, one portion by Hydro and I believe there is a portion by the provincial government, but there are multiple levels of subsidy going in to just help offset some of the high cost of those diesel-generating stations.

Thank you, Chair.

CHAIR: Thank you.

MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Yes, to offset the cost – I know that right now the cost of electricity in Northern Labrador, if you go over that small 1,000-kilowatt hour life block, the cost of electricity is 21 cents a kilowatt hour. That's substantial.

So whatever you're doing is really not offsetting the cost to be able to heat your home in the winter months. Because most people will go above the life block, if they have any electric heat, and they will pay 21 cents a kilowatt hour. But it's good to see the advocacy at work.

My next question is: In November, the PC caucus brought forward a private Member's motion for a 20 per cent increase in the Newfoundland and Labrador Seniors' Benefit and also for it to be indexed. The Minister of Finance introduced an amendment at the time delaying this until *Budget 2025* because the rationale for that is that it wasn't actually budgeted.

We see now, in *Budget 2025*, that the Seniors' Benefit will be indexed but, of course, we won't get that 20 per cent increase to go on top of it to start off with the indexing. I was just wondering, was there any advocacy role that Labrador Affairs played in actually talking to the minister about the issue with her amendment?

Because I stood up in the House, as representing Northern Labrador, Labrador as a whole, and delaying it until the end of *Budget 2025*, until it was passed, would put the seniors through an extra four months of winter. Our motion was put forward in January. So you look at January, February, March, April, to when *Budget 2025* is passed and that's an extra four months for our seniors.

So I was just wondering, was there any advocacy role there that was played in talking to the minister about the issues, especially for Labrador?

CHAIR: The hon. the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

I'm reading Oprah's book now, *What I Know for Sure*. There are a lot of things I don't know for sure but what I know for sure is I do try my absolute best to advocate for, in particular, our seniors. It's going to sound lighthearted but when I say what I'm about to say, my staff around me will probably nod their head. Because if there's one thing that I think I will be remembered for when I turn in my swipe card from here for the last time will be that at the table, on a regular basis, no matter what incentives, initiatives, no matter what we're discussing, I always say, how will this impact Aunt Nellie and Uncle Joe? Aunt Nellie and Uncle Joe – have you heard me say that? Many times.

Everything we do and I guess, at the end of the day, we start with budget prep, there's tremendous, tremendous task – every department brings their needs. Over time and many, many meetings, it gets, as you saw this year's event with the budget that was brought in still running a deficit, a little bit higher than we would have liked and had to tuck some money away for uncertain times but certainly, it's not for lack of advocacy on me for sure.

CHAIR: MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Yes, thank you for that answer, Minister, because our seniors are very vulnerable in Labrador, especially in Northern Labrador and a 20 per cent increase, if it had taken place in January or even if it was going to take place at the end of the budget, would go a long way to helping people have to deal with the Labrador winters.

Just moving over to health with my general questions. It was raised in last year's Estimates the lack of capacity for X-ray equipment, lack of ability to X-ray patients who were seriously injured in the clinics in

Northern Labrador. I was just wondering, has there been any action on that?

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

I just want to pop back. I meant to share, when the Member was asking about the Seniors' Benefit, the \$10 million in the budget with initiatives under Seniors' Health and Well-being Plan. There's a number of grants and I know that the seniors that I represent on the South Coast are aware and they're calling my constituency office on a regular basis for things like the Aging Well at Home Grant, which can help with everything from snow clearing to getting groceries, et cetera; the Caregiver Benefit; financial assistance for food and heating; the coastal Labrador piece; and the increase to investments around home repair and home modification.

I just wanted to mention that because the Aging Well at Home Grant, in particular, is one that I've received a lot of feedback on from folks saying, even though it may seem small, these have also gone a long way for us as well.

Around the X-ray equipment, I can't answer that directly. We can certainly endeavour to find the answers because that is something that my colleague, the Minister of Health and Community Services, would be aware of. I can look to my folks to see if anybody – no, nobody would know about the X-ray equipment.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

Your time is up, MHA Evans.

We're going to move now to MHA Brown.

J. BROWN: Thank you, Chair.

Just a general first question. Currently, how many people are employed in the department, and how many vacancies are currently in the department right now?

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

In Labrador Affairs, we have 33 permanent staff, 27 temporary and 10 contractual. So it's about 62 positions that are funded, and we have two temporary vacancies and one contractual.

J. BROWN: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Chair.

So right now, out of those, how many are exclusive to MTAP?

L. DEMPSTER: We are actually fully staffed with MTAP. I'm quite pleased and proud of the work – I'm not saying MTAP's perfect, and I know that you have more than your share of heartburn with MTAP. When that program came under me in 2023, we had 16 vacancies, we had about \$3 million less than we have now, and we were about six months, sometimes, processing applications. Today, we are fully staffed. It's growing. The budget is growing. Unless there's something untoward or something I don't know, we are around 2½ weeks on processing time.

We had some hiccups around transitioning to a new system that was needed. We've also recently moved to Regatta Plaza because we now have the medical transportation and the MeTS, which is like the income support – I'm still stuck in old language a lot. So we've moved and we have 51 folks that are there. We did have some hiccups with the new system because of a lot of changes we made around the voucher program and increases to mileage and things like that.

J. BROWN: Perfect. Thank you, Minister.

Right now, how many departments have reached out to Labrador Affairs for consultation on a Labrador perspective or Labrador lens on programs that are being delivered to Labradorians? How many outside departments have reached out to your department to do that work?

L. DEMPSTER: I wasn't quite sure – you're a little bit low. The MHA for Torngat used to be low. I should have my ear pod in but now she's moved closer to me.

If you're wondering what departments we work with on Labrador matters, it is every single one on a regular basis – every one. Whether it's your mining issues in Lab West or the challenges with the cost of living in the North, all over, we work with every single department. There are two major Cabinet Committees that papers go through before it reaches Cabinet; there's a social policy and an economic policy. Most ministers sit on one or the other. I sit on both and multiple other Cabinet Committees just making sure that there is a Labrador lens on all of the work that we do.

J. BROWN: Okay. So no department has independently said, well, we're doing this; we want to make sure the program is delivered to correctly for anything – I know Cabinet is one thing but when they're working on, I guess, the basis of a program, no department actually reaches out and says we're looking for a Labrador perspective – no one comes to your department saying we need to make sure that this program actually fits Labrador?

L. DEMPSTER: Yeah, we do that on a regular basis.

J. BROWN: You do that on a regular basis, okay.

L. DEMPSTER: Yes.

J. BROWN: Perfect, thank you.

There was \$850 million announced for recruitment and retention of teachers and teaching assistants to fill the hard-to-fill locations. Did the Department of Education get input from your department on how that money can be spent for recruitment and retention of Labrador roles, given that they are the hardest to fill in the province?

L. DEMPSTER: Yes, we certainly do.

I chat with my colleague, the Education Minister, on a regular basis. In particular, like when I was heading up to the Summit, you're going to a place and you're thinking, you anticipate what you're going to be asked there. We constantly remind them of things that are very unique to places like Lab West, you contribute so much, their resources, but there's negative impacts, socially and economically, in your community because of that.

I don't have the list in front of me but the last time I spoke with the Education Minister would have been this winter. She outlined a number of incentives that are provided to that area. I feel like there was an issue with the union there that's unique and that matter got resolved as well but I would have to ask her to get that information because I don't want to misspeak here for *Hansard*.

J. BROWN: Yeah, no worries; I appreciate that.

We all are aware of the Quebec travel subsidy for their northern regions and stuff like that. And I know that I've spoken to you in the past about the departments.

What came out of the Labrador Affairs study into regional air travel in Labrador, and will there be any improvements or anything coming forward on improving regional air travel after your department's review of it?

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you for raising that. It was a growing issue that really, really escalated over the summer months and it was a difficult time, I think, for all of us. There's no doubt that we have an air access issue in Labrador with one airline there with a monopoly, I guess. What happened was they seem to not have enough aircraft for months. So people that desperately needed to travel for a period couldn't even get a flight. I think all MHAs in Labrador were dealing with that, and I was certainly dealing

with it at a really ramped-up level. Then we had an air affordability issue.

So there were a number of things that we did through the Department of Labrador Affairs, in addition to sitting down with the airline company, presenting to the competition bureau, working a lot with Goose Bay Airport Corporation who was also, in turn, working with Lab West.

They have received – I don't have the figures in front of me, but I've been speaking with TCAR on a number of occasions and, again, just as recent as last week, and they've given some money to the Goose Bay Airport Corporation, and I believe there is a second amount of money coming. And it's allowing them to look at possibly enticing another airline into the region. A part of the study that was done looked at where their may be space right now for additional routes, where there are gaps and things like that.

So that whole work is unfolding, and I don't know if TCAR Estimates have happened yet or not. I should, as the Government House Leader, but certainly we're continuing to push that. We know we heard when we were in Lab West in February that there had been some progress and some improvements and there were some cheaper fares that if booked well in advance could now be accessed.

Some of the issue with flight availability seems to be addressed. But I wouldn't be comfortable in saying that we're there where we need to be yet. So we continue to keep that file top of mind.

J. BROWN: Perfect. Thank you, Minister.

The announcement for the 10-bed addictions recovery centre that's gone to RFP, will Labrador Affairs also be reviewing that proposal to make sure that it's culturally relevant to Labrador, given its location and the reason for having it, to make sure that it

is culturally relevant to Labradorians' needs?

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

We're certainly a part of all those conversations that happen. We know the need is there and we endeavour, always, to look through the Indigenous and cultural lens, as well now with all of the work that we do. Even with the new school that's coming to Cartwright, there will be a beautiful cultural aspect to that like we've not seen with the other schools that we built.

So I am certainly aware of your housing needs. It's been a long road for you as the rep for that area, I know, and you've been a good advocate. There are proposals that are in the system now. There are commitments that have been made by provincial government. I know there are proposals in to the federal government and there are some commitments that we've made in this budget and we'll continue to try and move Lab West to a better place in regard to their housing needs. Because the one thing that I saw in spades from the Summit is that things are about to get much, much busier around the mining and we know that means an increase for housing.

It was refreshing for me to hear – I'm drawing a blank on his name; the new guy, tall guy – mining companies that stepped up on the panel that said we have a role to play as well. We cannot leave all of the funding gaps and deficits in those communities for the federal or provincial government or the municipal government to fix, but that they would be willing to invest as well.

So we'll continue to have a seat at that table and I'll continue to bring those concerns forward to the rest of my colleagues at the Cabinet table.

J. BROWN: I was talking about the –

CHAIR: MHA Brown, we will come back to you after MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Thank you, and I apologize for my coughing.

Just getting back to my previous question there about the lack of X-ray capacity for patients in Northern Labrador. The reason why I brought that up for as a Labrador issue is that the North Coast communities are totally isolated. They're not connected by roads. Also, we witness the lack of flights for patients being able to travel. We look at weather delays as well.

The reason why I brought it up last year was because we had patients who, some of them, were children who were seriously injured and weren't a priority for getting out on a flight. I had a mother call me with a six-year-old whose arm was visibly deformed. So it was high potential for a break.

I did ask the minister about any advancing on the X-ray capacity and no one in your department knows, so obviously there wasn't much follow-up there. I think issues that are raised during budget Estimates really should be taken back and looked at what advocacy your department can be doing on behalf of the people and coming back to us next year with answers or even during the sitting of the House regarding some of these issues.

Some of those issues regarding bone fractures were really serious. We've had one teenager with two breaks to her pelvis and she was forced to sit up on a medical aircraft to come out. The reason why I go into those details is for your staff it's very important for them to know it. It's very important for Labrador Affairs to advocate for all regions of Labrador and understand the issues.

Looking at the medical travel, I constantly raise the issue of patients not being able to get out to their medial appointments, for chemo treatments, for X-rays, for MRIs, to see surgeons, to actually have their surgery and then, of course, the issue of patients

being bumped when they're trying to get home.

Minister of Labrador Affairs, I know part of it is an Indigenous issue, but everybody who travels from Northern Labrador is not necessarily Indigenous. So this is an issue for your department. What advocacy have you done to address the serious gaps in medical access for their appointments? Because last June we were promised extra flights; we never got those extra flights. About two months ago, I was told by Labrador-Grenfell staff that there was no way they could deliver on that promise of extra flights because they were still under the old contract.

I was just wondering, Minister, in your capacity and with your staff, were you told the truth about this discrepancy, about what we were promised and what was available?

CHAIR: Minister.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

I know the Member raised the matter of flight challenges on the North Coast in the House. I did go and sit with – because normally, staff reach out and make me aware, say, Health is letting you know, if it's taking place somewhere in Labrador – obviously, I don't go looking; they're coming to me, as they should. The folks around me and the folks in Health, whatever department, if there are matters that I need to be aware of, that's a part of their job is to come to me and make me aware.

When you raised the matter in the House, I hadn't been aware. I went back to Grenfell, and they told me – because as you can appreciate, Health is a \$4 billion-plus entity, and we are now one health board, but we do have different zones. So all of Labrador and the Northern Peninsula is under the Labrador-Grenfell zone, and we have a COO for that area.

They did tell me that there were some challenges and that they had changed how folks were made aware, going to the airport and how folks would fly out because sometimes people would show up on the day off. And there was a number of really down in operations.

And I don't want to misspeak, and in terms of people missing very important appointments, at that time, I can only tell the Member – because I have to be honest, myself, on this side – at that time, when I answered in the House, and I know the Member posted a video clip and things, I was being very honest and sincere that what I was told by officials is that they were not aware, and I was just truly honestly passing on what I had been told. I know that was disheartening for the Member who had been working with Lab-Grenfell again and again and again to bring those matters forward.

What I also want to say to the Member, and I can't speak right off the cuff to what's in the contract – I've seen the contract before that, you know, goes through Public Procurement works through with Health and Community Services. I can endeavour to get that.

I also want to say that, in particular, in the area that you represent, the airline is more than 50 per cent owned by Nunatsiavut Government and Innu Nation. I don't know, because I know you carry a big lift, if they are aware that the airline that they own, that there's challenges with the people that they want the best service for. Because I do know, when you have these terrible circumstances like you just outlined specifically, that it's pretty tough when you're in an isolated area.

In Forteau, we have a road connection, but we've just had, recently, a number of scenarios, even with a road, where search and rescue have had to come in again and again. Just last week, a young woman with her thumb that was just completely taken off

and thanks to Search and Rescue and a fast trip to the Health Sciences, her thumb was able to be put back on, a businesswoman in my area.

So I can imagine with the distance and the isolation how much more important that is. All I can say to the Member is, if you are still having those challenges, I will arrange meetings with Health, with Lab-Grenfell and sit at the table with you to try to find solutions, because I very much can appreciate that if those challenges are continuing that they're real, they're important to you, that they matter and I will work with you to try to get things to a better place for the people you represent.

CHAIR: MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Minister, for your answer.

Just to clarify a couple of things, this is not Question Period. It sounds like anyone listening would think, okay, is this extended Question Period? It's not.

We get one chance at Estimates to talk about what's in the budget and to identify the needs and where the budget is not meeting the needs of the regions. That's why these questions are so important. It's important also where you have your staff here. The single issue, the single reason for Labrador Affairs was originally to be an advocate, to understand, to be able to work with different departments to make sure that those gaps are addressed, and to also talk about the social, geographic and uniqueness of Labrador and the different regions in Labrador. I'm not here to ask questions as in Question Period. I don't want anyone to misunderstand that.

Also, the airline is not responsible for patient travel; the Labrador-Grenfell region and the provincial health authority are responsible for patient travel in my district. They can't get in their cars and drive to Goose Bay or to St. John's. They cannot do that. What's

happening now is the constant bumping and we commonly call it the slang “bumping.” What that means is, not that you have reservations and you’re bumped off the flight, you have an appointment out in St. John’s, it could be for surgery or it could be pre-surgery or could be something to do with cancer, you have that appointment and the day you’re supposed to travel, you can’t travel. I’ve raised it many times.

For me, budget Estimates – I’ve gone through budget Estimates. I’ve been elected now six years. I go through the line questions but, in actual fact, with Labrador Affairs, and I’ve told my colleague who is here for the first time, the Labrador Affairs budget Estimates are different. It’s because I’m questioning your role as an advocate, advocacy, to understand. Then, to have the question last year about the X-ray and then for no one in your department to be able to relate to that, you need to take it back, these issues.

The Member of the Third Party asked questions about advocacy, yes, but like I say, for example patients being bumped off, not being able to get out to their appointments or are so afraid of being stuck in Goose Bay that they don’t go to their appointments and thus failing their health, and I raise it. I raise it with the Health staff. I raise it with the provincial health authority. I raise it with Labrador-Grenfell region.

So the role of advocacy for influencing how much money gets spent where, like say for example medical flights, obviously no one from the Health Department has reached out to your department. It’s a failing of them. They should be availing of your department to say: The MHA for Torngat is raising these issues, is there more we should be doing? What was in last year’s budget compared to this year’s budget? What do you need this year so patients can actually access health care? That’s a right in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

CHAIR: MHA Evans, your time is expired.

Minister, do you want to respond to that first?

L. DEMPSTER: Yes, if I could, please.

CHAIR: Go ahead.

L. DEMPSTER: I thank the Member.

The Member says we’re not in Question Period; we’re in Estimates. I reference those things because, as you said, when we come in to Labrador Affairs Estimates we don’t ever seem to get to the line-by-line, but we cover basically the entire provincial government. I do feel a need to acknowledge the good work that the people do at Labrador Affairs.

It’s not easy work. Many things with Labrador – I think it’s the best land but it’s also a very challenging land. The staff do stay on top of things pretty good in my mind. So I do want to toss a bouquet to the staff. As my grandmother would say, you can’t let perfect be the enemy of the good. They can be on top of the 99 but if there’s one they’re not right recalling here right now, I wouldn’t toss them out for that.

I also want to say in my final comment to the Member, on your concern about Health, the people you represent in Labrador and flights, I can only offer to convene a meeting at the highest table with you as I did last fall. I am available to work with you on that matter. I would very much be interested in trying to help you get the folks that you represent in those isolated communities to a better level of service than what they have now. That’s all I can do is offer.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

MHA Brown.

J. BROWN: Thank you.

Returning to my last question as well, I know you mentioned housing – which is great, thank you – but I was asking about

the 10-bed treatment centre, and I was making sure there is RFP gone out for that. I want to make sure that Labrador Affairs has been consulted about that and will they be reviewing the RFP for that addictions treatment centre to make sure it's culturally relevant for Labradorians?

CHAIR: Minister.

L. DEMPSTER: I know I have at my level but it's also important at the DM level, the ADM and the director, because it keeps everything flowing. Everybody's nodding that we've been consulted and had input into that. Sorry if I missed the boat.

J. BROWN: No worries. I appreciate that. Thank you.

I guess moving on to MTAP now. Is there still work progressing on reviewing MTAP and implementing the improvements required?

L. DEMPSTER: Absolutely, 100 per cent. Yeah.

J. BROWN: Perfect.

Is MTAP working toward a 100 per cent paid flight system? Will there still continue to be a copay for medical travel or are you working toward a 100 per cent paid travel for patients?

L. DEMPSTER: You're not talking about the voucher program.

J. BROWN: I'm talking about the voucher program.

L. DEMPSTER: Pardon me?

J. BROWN: I am talking about the voucher program.

L. DEMPSTER: So the voucher program, we continue with 100 per cent of the first \$1,000 upfront. Is that what —?

J. BROWN: I'm wondering if you're going to eliminate that and have it 100 per cent all the time paid.

L. DEMPSTER: Oh okay, I see what you mean, going forward beyond the first \$1,000?

J. BROWN: Yes, into the future.

L. DEMPSTER: Well, we are continually reviewing it. The ADM for the program is sitting behind me and sometimes I wonder, is she going to show up over in my building when we do our briefings because I'm continually pushing and pushing for more money and for more services.

We are always reviewing and always looking to try to find ways to improve. A lot of the feedback that you give me from the people that you represent is what I take forward to the bigger table. It's really, really valuable when you give me specific cases, because if I don't know about them, how can I advocate for more?

Recently, you had said I have a bunch of people with a certain scenario. I think you sent me six cases. So then that gets taken to the DM and the ADM, and then we look to see how we can make that service better.

J. BROWN: Perfect. Thank you.

I know there's a large increase of people requiring multiple trips monthly; I know I have diabetic eye injections, macular degeneration and there's a lot of these cases now popping up, especially it's common in seniors, is there any way to set up a program or anything to make their requests easier instead of having to fill out the same forms constantly for the same thing when they're given a year treatment?

There seem to be a lot of issues like that kind of stuff for people having to travel for service that are not available in Labrador, but there's people that have to make multiple trips a year. Another is cancer

patients that do have a pretty regular schedule of travelling out to St. John's. These patients seem to have a growing frustration of how they're filling out the forms and how they're working through the system, and it seems to be very bulky.

Is there any work to streamline the system for people, like, who have to go on the third Friday of every month or the fourth Friday of every month, because that's what we're seeing in our office and these people are growing very frustrated about how they're having to fill out the forms and wait. It seems to be a very red tape filled system.

L. DEMPSTER: We're certainly looking at those types of things.

When the program came under Labrador Affairs initially, there was two long, busy applications. I could try to picture, again, Aunt Nellie and Uncle Joe trying to manage that from their kitchen table. So we did take the two applications and we reduced them down to one. We put them online; I heard from folks in your area that trying to put a signature – you know, you can fill out online but then you've got to try and find a printer.

Those are all things that we are working through right now. We've had the conversation many times at our table; in particular, the exact scenario you just mentioned. If someone knows that they have to go the third Tuesday of every month for six months for treatment or something, how do we make that process better, because we are managing provincial taxpayers' dollars. We always have to have a certain level of accountability but we're trying to balance that and do a dance with, certainly, making it better for the people that we serve and often those are elderly and seniors and things like that.

Those conversations are happening right now. Even if we can get to a better place, which I'm hopeful we can, each trip that they would go, there would still need to be something to show that they went for that

appointment. We've tried with the voucher program – and I'm thinking in particular of your area. Some of your folks that you represent would have thousands of dollars tied up because maybe they were entitled to insurance and the insurance would only give them a little bit of money back.

So what we did with the voucher program was said forget insurance. Whatever they're entitled to, we'll sort that later. We'll give them 100 per cent of the first \$1,000 and then, if we find out they're entitled to a couple of hundred dollars, we'll manage that piece after.

The points that you raised today, we'll take away and we'll pull them from *Hansard* and we'll look at that to see how we can continue to make improvements there.

J. BROWN: Thank you, Minister.

Right now, another thing is, we're getting a lot of feedback from people applying for MTAP, that they're having difficulties, especially with specialists' offices. A lot of them don't understand MTAP and a lot of them are very difficult to get the correct notes, especially with the correct wording with medical escorts and things like that.

A lot of them, the specialists' offices we deal with, they get frustrated because we're calling saying, can you provide a letter? This person needs to travel out. They need to use MTAP. Has there been any work at MTAP to, I guess, send any information or education to some of these physicians or specialist offices so they understand what MTAP is and why people are applying for it?

We've had one doctor that just basically said, I don't care and refused to send a letter to the patient. Like they just actually said, we don't care. This is a growing thing we're seeing in our office. Has there been any work or anything from your office to make the health care system understand what MTAP is and why people are applying for it?

L. DEMPSTER: Well, if I went through the stats of how the use of the program have increased since it came under Labrador Affairs, there is a growing number of people who are, I would say, becoming familiar with the program. While Labrador is now almost 52 per cent of the entire program, just a 6 per cent population, simply because we live so far from specialized services. Even across the Island, in places like maybe Harbour Breton, they come in for an appointment and perhaps do their Costco run and different things and maybe not put in a claim but, with cost of living, more and more people are using it.

There are a couple of things that I'm aware of that we've done in-house, I'm not always close to the day-to-day operations, as you can appreciate, but one was we put a lot of things up on a website. We tried to make that as clear a language as possible. Another thing that I heard – and I say that because there are a lot of people who are on their tablets. It's how they connect with their children and grandchildren, we're seeing more older people who are able to do that then perhaps they could five years ago.

Another thing that I was aware of through my own constituency is folks would apply for MTAP reimbursement and be really, really frustrated if a month later they received an envelop or something back saying you're missing this and this. I was out on site – I'm pointing that way because it used to be Major's Path – now when the envelope comes into the office, we have someone who does a quick little look to see is everything there, just to try to save time.

Little things like that have been put in place. I don't know if you want to add to anything, Sheree, that I might have missed there.

CHAIR: Sheree Snow.

S. SNOW: The minister has alluded to and explained we have done a lot of changes in terms of information we provided on our

website. We've actually outlined a Q & A in regard to escort questions, things that people should be aware of when they go to their physician, and they may be referred out in terms of how they can actually have the paperwork and everything lined up. We've also provided an escort template which they can actually bring to their doctor's office or the doctor can actually look at online and from there write out the medical note right then and there.

We also have made some changes in terms of what we're accepting for medical escorts. A lot of the information that comes in, we're not necessarily going back and saying just because there's not enough information as to why. If the actual physician is saying a medical escort is required we're accepting that information as it is, because we understand it's very difficult for a lot of patients to be able to go back to a particular physician and ask: We need more additional information.

My manager, as well, has taken on a lot of duties that go above and beyond what his actual requirements are and reaching out to the actual physicians on behalf of many of our patients that apply to MTAP to ask those questions so we can get those particular answers, rather than having to put it back on the patient. So I think we have made leaps and bounds in terms of where we want to go, trying to make changes and trying to make things a lot easier for our patients.

Again, I know we talked about the voucher program. The actual application is a little over a page; half of that page is tombstone information. I know that a lot of patients don't want to have to be filling it out but, the amount of information that we're asking for, we've tried to reduce it. We tried to make it so much simpler and we're constantly reviewing it. We're getting feedback from a lot of people and we're trying to make changes.

There are many times I'm going back and asking people to update the website for additional information based on what's provided to us. We're always constantly reviewing. We're always making changes to make things better.

J. BROWN: Thank you so much.

CHAIR: Thank you.

We will come back to you, MHA Brown.

MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Yes, thank you.

I echo my colleague from the Third Party who mentioned about the red tape. That seems to be a common theme but I think he outlined what the problems we're encountering are.

I do recognize that there has been a lot of improvements since MTAP has come under Labrador Affairs; I think it's really important to acknowledge that. There's still a lot of work to be done in terms of the medical travel because, unfortunately, when patients are travelling for medical, they're not in good health. They already have a lot of stress and they also have a lot of issues to deal with. It would be really, really good if the forms and the application process was not a problem for them. It would be greatly appreciated.

The minister did mention in her comments about air travel, about some advocacy and looking for some competition out of the Happy Valley-Goose Bay region. Yes, that would actually go a long way because we did see those significant increases; 33 per cent increase for ticket prices out of Goose Bay and 47 per cent increase in ticket prices out of Lab West.

We did ask last year, and we'll ask again this year, is that Quebec does have subsidies for rural and remote areas in Quebec. Now, I know these programs end

but they usually start up again. I was just wondering, has Labrador Affairs been advocating for some sort of rebate or incentive for travel out of Labrador and also between the Labrador regions?

CHAIR: The hon. the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

Yes, seemingly, through the years, getting out of the province hasn't been the challenge for us but our challenge is the intra-travel. I was looking into the Quebec program just last night, actually, and it is still in place but changes to a percentage-based discount now rather than a set price.

I have advocated every which way to Sunday over the last year for something better for Labrador. As somebody who travels almost every weekend myself, I had six-day-a-week flight options in and out of Blanc Sablon when I started 12 years ago and we never rebounded past COVID beyond on three days. So I'm finding myself, every other weekend, I'm doing the three-hour flight to Goose and the 420-kilometre drive to the coast.

I'm getting to talk to lots of people. I've seen how much the air fare has gone up and that is why – and my director is sitting directly behind me. We've done a lot of work around presenting to the federal government. I actually had the federal minister in my boardroom here shortly after I was sworn into this new portfolio in July, advocating to him that the federal government has a huge role to play here. Because many of the taxes that contribute to the high cost of our air fare are taxes that are put on through Transport Canada, et cetera.

I think in Wabush the landing fee is \$750, I believe, some astronomical amount. I was pleased to see the work done by Rex Goudie and his team at the Goose Bay Airport Corp which fed into a lot of the things that we were able to use then for our

lobby efforts, like some of the figures that the Member just quoted.

We're not finished. They're doing a piece of work right now and we'll continue to stay on that because we know that the problems that we were concerned about there is not all resolved, for sure.

While I did say earlier the one airline had made a number of changes, I do want to mention that, and the then MP for Labrador went through some of that when we were in Lab West in February.

CHAIR: MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

I did notice one airline especially had done some work. I noticed that because I travel too, especially between Goose Bay and the Island portion.

With the Combined Councils of Labrador, a question on that now is, do you know their annual budget, and can you give me a break down of the budget and their travel expenses?

L. DEMPSTER: I'm looking for my note, but I think I should know it off the cuff.

Combined Councils was born out of necessity, I would say, from your neck of the woods, back over 50 years ago, somewhere around 50. I did have a note on that, but it's not right in front of me here. There's been a lot of good work, I believe, when Labrador looked a little differently than it does today.

Over the last number of years, as a deputy mayor in my own hometown for years and years, it was always a very big highlight to get to Goose Bay, to flesh out with fellow leadership across Labrador what our concerns were, to bring in ministers to answer the questions, et cetera, et cetera.

Over time, we saw a continual decrease, decrease, decrease, less and less and less participation, and I don't know if they held either meeting even coming out of COVID. We did put a fair bit of energy – and somebody around me may want to speak to the actual operation part. I know Franca, behind me, was quite involved.

The budget for Combined Councils was \$100,000 since I can remember, and then there was, for multiple years, inactivity – no activity, nothing happening. We wrote them. We offered a number of things. In March of '24, we just decided to formally discontinue if there was no interest in Combined Councils continuing. Although Labrador Affairs would certainly be there if there were individuals from across Labrador that were interested in continuing something like that. We made that very, very clear.

The last instalment of funding that I can think of to Combined Councils, the final piece was back in '22-'23. It was like a natural death that happened. It certainly wasn't lack of support of funding from Labrador Affairs and it certainly wasn't lack of support of the officials reaching out to the people that were serving on the executive there.

L. EVANS: I thank the minister for her comments on the Combined Councils of Labrador.

I will certainly be going back and talking to the ICGs in my district about that issue because we do have to have some sort of advocacy, not just for Labrador, but for the different regions. Combined Councils were very, very important back in the day. I know I grew up with a history of my family being very, very involved with it.

Moving on to the issues of global warming. As you know, global warming is actually – in my district now, we can't rely on winter, we can't rely on spring and we can't rely on the fall in terms of the normal conditions, and it's impacting our lives.

In 2024 Estimates, you acknowledged as a result of global warming, sea ice is thinning and late forming in Northern Labrador. Has there been any monies allocated in this budget to plan to move the snowmobile trails, which is our highway, to more land-based areas and for bridges to be installed so that we can continue to use the trails for travel?

CHAIR: Minister.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair, and I thank the Member for her question.

Very important file that we do work on here in Labrador Affairs and certainly aware that the changing conditions is having an impact. We've built a really good relationship – and when I say we, I'm saying the collective we, the staff at the office in Goose Bay in particular, with the AngajukKâk, and our partners in the Inuit community governments in those communities. We know that they have far more valuable knowledge and closer to the ground and just recently – a month ago, Franca? We had –

F. SMITH: March.

L. DEMPSTER: In March, we had all of the leadership from Torngat, from your district that was brought into Goose Bay and we had good, fulsome discussion around what the concerns are, many of the things that you just highlighted. You would recall that in last year's budget, I was successful in getting an extra \$3 million, I believe it was, and we bought three new groomers. Because the leadership that you represent was telling us we're not even getting enough ice to run our big heavy groomers anymore. So we did that and we got funding for a number of shelters.

Our actual annual operating budget, we increased that to \$611,000 recognizing higher fuel costs. We wanted to increase the wages for staff that was hired by the service providers. Some of the communities you represent, we had challenges with

keeping staff there. Obviously, we're competing with places like Voisey's Bay wages, so we were really pleased to do a partnership with SmartICE in Nain. I think your hometown was another area that we had some challenges.

Now that I am also the minister responsible for Climate Change, the synergies are there. So as we work to maintain the 750 kilometres of groomed trail, I'm also working with Northern ministers across Canada, a larger conversation. We're hosting the forum the end of May in Goose Bay with ministers from the Northern areas in Canada. I can't overstate how big the lens is on isolated communities, on Indigenous communities and how do we do a workaround with the impacts of climate change continuing to grow to ensure that places like Nunatsiavut, like the North Coast, like Natuashish continue to have that winter trails.

There are a lot of conversations happening around augmenting the Indigenous knowledge for safe ice travel, to the new technology, et cetera, et cetera. We will do our best to be there for those communities as that need continues to change and increase.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

We're going to move now to MHA Brown again.

J. BROWN: Thank you.

I guess just for a quick follow-up onto MTAP here. Right now, there is some access with that with health records. Is there any interest in MTAP moving into the ability that people wouldn't have to send letters or anything like that about their medical travel or anything like that?

If the health authorities moving towards a more digital-based system, is there any way that MTAP would also move in that same direction so that MTAP would know that

these patients have appointments outside of the region and that and this was more or less as simple as sending in a basic form or anything like that to get their travel instead of making, I guess, patients wait for letters in the mail and things like that?

Right now, my daughter has to go to St. John's every August to see an endocrinologist. We get our letter in the mail with our appointment, but we know it's coming. Some people are given appointments on a Monday and the letter actually shows up after they're back from their appointment, because sometimes it could be last minute or they got squeezed in somewhere with the MRI machine or anything like that.

Is there any way to move to a more digital-based appointment system so that way we don't have people fretting trying to get these papers and these letters to MTAP to cover their costs?

CHAIR: Minister.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

For clarity, are you referring to the letters that come from MTAP or the letters from the doctors, the various physicians.

J. BROWN: From the doctors, from the physicians and the booking clinic at the Health Sciences. It's all sent in the mail. They also refuse to email or fax these letters; they will only send it in the mail.

L. DEMPSTER: I can even speak as an MHA. There are a number of challenges that we've had, in particular with people I represent in dealing with St. Anthony, different doctors having different styles and it's a little bit challenging for us to overreach and, I guess, tell a physician how to run their practice or what to do.

You did mention this to me before and, you know, maybe we can send a letter out to all of the physicians to say, we would

encourage you to do this or something. I don't know if there's more that we can do because – I understand what you're saying. In 2025 and in places far away like Labrador, we shouldn't be depending on snail mail. I'm with you there, so if there is a way that we can take our creative collective minds and see if we can get to a better place, it's something we could look at.

J. BROWN: Absolutely, because we've had instances where we spoke with the booking office at the Health Sciences Centre and they say they only mail it out. They refuse to fax it or email and they say they only send it in the mail.

There are times where individuals, who would have absolutely been able to get a voucher, ended up having to pay for their ticket themselves because they had no letters or nothing. All they had was a phone call that they knew that the doctor made the booking and there was nothing that they could provide to MTAP to show that they were going. They ended taking the other route where they ended up putting it on their credit card or asking for someone to put it on their credit card for them to fly out, and then try to straighten it up when they get back. Like you said, in 2025 we should be able to be a bit more digital.

That would be my final question here on this section. Thank you.

CHAIR: You're done for this section?

All right, it's just about 10:30. We're going to take a break now for 10 minutes. We will come back in 10 minutes and start again through the morning session.

Thank you.

Recess

CHAIR: We're back to get started again.

So we're going to MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

I was waving my hand there, Chair.

Just going back to what the minister said that she's available to help advocate for some of the medical travel –

L. DEMPSTER: Can you say that again?

L. EVANS: Yes, just going back to the medical flights and the issues that I raised, the minister said she's available. I am setting up a meeting with the CEO of the provincial health authority, Health Services NL. I'll make sure that you're invited there, and I do appreciate you lending your voice to the advocacy for the patients. I just wanted to include that as well.

Just moving on now, in 2023 there was the MOU signed with Nunavut; our province signed that. Just looking at the MOU – and I'll quote from the last budget Estimates where the minister said: "The people of Newfoundland and Labrador and Nunavut have personal, cultural and social relationships. Both jurisdictions have strong Indigenous populations and share a like-minded approach to safe and sustainable Arctic development, focused on achieving mutual benefits for Northern and Indigenous communities."

So that seems to be the foundation for the MOU. I was wondering, when you're looking at this, the benefits – the word "benefits" is in there – does this relate to Canada, Newfoundland and Labrador, the military presence in the North, or does it also include benefits for actual Indigenous peoples living there like in terms of food, housing, travel, transportation, ability to hunt, fish, health care?

The MOU, can you just expand to say how it benefits the Indigenous peoples who are living there?

L. DEMPSTER: I'm not sure that how I referenced benefits might have been taken

in dollars, and that's not necessarily what I was referring to. We signed an MOU a couple of years ago with Nunavut recognizing – and it was signed between Newfoundland and Labrador and Nunavut, but the focus of our province is on the North, Labrador in particular, recognizing that the challenges that Nunavut faces, whether it's with search and rescue supports, transportation supports, travel, almost everything that we deal with across Labrador, Nunavut would be dealing with the same thing.

When I travelled to Iqaluit, and I met with multiple ministers while I was there, and whether it was social issues, mental health issues, housing, we were all dealing with the same things. So what we mean by benefit is, if we're working closely with someone who is walking the same road, sharing the same challenges, you don't always have to reinvent the wheel. We can learn from each other, and we've already done that to some degree.

We'll have people, hopefully, from Nunavut that attend our Northern Development Ministers Forum that's taking place in Goose Bay later in May. So it wasn't about actual benefit, and I know you referenced Indigenous groups. Torngat has their own government, Nunatsiavut, and they do their annual budget and things like that from Ottawa. Innu Nation with an agreement in principle and so forth, with the five groups around the province.

I wasn't referring to that, and I'm sorry if I made a comment – I don't know if that was misleading – but I think that's fair to say, we're talking about benefits and how we can benefit from the shared knowledge and challenges and things like that across the two northern regions.

CHAIR: MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: No, because like I said, it's in *Hansard* and one of the questions were asked and the information there about the

MOU, and it does say “focused on achieving mutual benefits for Northern and Indigenous communities,” which is why I asked the question.

I also bring attention to Natan Obed, the president of ITK, the largest Indigenous organization that represents all of the Inuit across Nunangat. He calls when he was looking at – just looking at the Arctic now and we’ve got the States, we’ve got Russia, we’ve got Canada, all, basically, kind of jockeying for position to ensure that our Arctic sovereignty is protected. Natan Obed, the president of ITK, says he’s calling for Inuit to be included, involved when it comes to plans to protect our Arctic sovereignty. He also calls for infrastructure investment and upgrades for Inuit communities.

So the reason why I’m bringing this up during budget Estimates is that I think it’s very important for Labrador Affairs in your role of advocacy to make sure that this MOU also highlights the gaps in services and infrastructure for Labrador, especially in Northern Labrador where we’ve been failed chronically by the lack of investment in infrastructure and we look at how its impacting our people.

Then I go on and also said here – and I’m quoting from last year’s Estimates, as well: “The department is also bolstering Northern and Arctic priorities at the regional and national level. I will say that this year, Labrador Affairs is hosting the Northern Development Ministers from across the country in Happy Valley-Goose Bay and planning for that is well under way.”

I’m quoting you, Minister, which is really good. It’s really good to see that there are opportunities to highlight where Nunavut and Northern Labrador, especially, share a lot of the similar issues. Can you just update us on what was discussed at the Northern Development Ministers conference?

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you.

So maybe I didn’t highlight that at my opening remarks, but you’re absolutely right. Everything is recorded in *Hansard* that we say, and we were moving full bore for the Northern Ministers Development Forum. It was supposed to be last September and then it was January. Because so many jurisdictions across the country were in a writ period, in particular those ministers who represented North that would come, we had to postpone the dates. I mean, we only rotate through every few years. So the Northern Ministers Development Forum did not happen.

I do want to say, even outside of any travel that I make to Nunavut, working with them on the MOU, we also meet at other places. In September or October, I attended the Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavík, Iceland. An incredible, very important conversation that we realized that we are in the middle of because of our location and things like that, so I’ve met multiple times with the Premier of Nunavut, who is an incredible individual. We last met in the fall, the Premier, P. J. Akeeagok and myself and his officials and my officials, while we were in Iceland and very much of the conversation was around the geopolitical unrest, Arctic sovereignty, some of our shared challenges and around benefits in terms of how we can work together on economic benefits. How we can work together to try and ensure protection for both of our regions.

There is a very big federal piece here in terms of Coast Guard ships and things like that. A little bit concerned about the lack of ships that are going to come in the next few years, but these are all things and sort of just a sampling of what we would be working with between Nunavut and Labrador on.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Minister, for your response.

I just go back to the quote again from *Hansard*, “The department is also bolstering

Northern and Arctic priorities at the regional and national level.”

The president of ITK has called for infrastructure investment and upgrades for Inuit communities because we can't be just about establishing sovereignty – oh, this belongs to Canada because the Inuit are there. We've had MPs from Nunavut who've actually gone out and did tours of their communities and were traumatized by the housing conditions up in Nunavut. In actual fact, we had the federal housing advocate come to communities in my district and she said that she has nightmares from what she's seen. I like saying it because it's a word I struggle to pronounce, abominable – I'm getting good at it now so it's not as funny, but she called the conditions in Northern Labrador abominable.

I would like to see, as the MHA for Torngat Mountains and as the critic for Labrador Affairs and a person who advocates for all of Labrador – and I'm sure the Member from the Third Party will agree with me – is these MOUs also benefit the Indigenous peoples. That's what the president of ITK is calling for, and he does say that Inuit have to be involved and included.

So my next question is: Has your department included and involved the two Indigenous groups of Northern Labrador, Nunatsiavut and the Innu Nation, with any of this discussion? Especially when it comes for the conference that has been rescheduled. You do have an opportunity now to include them so I was just wondering are they going to be invited as well?

CHAIR: Minister.

L. DEMPSTER: So a couple of things. When you mention the housing, we would be familiar with the housing challenges. That's why, as a provincial government, we put \$12 million into Nunatsiavut toward housing in the last budget and just last week, we put another \$3 million, so that's \$15 million.

I do want to say for the record that I've had multiple meetings with the federal MP who has told me that there is an inordinate amount of money set aside, put in place for housing on the North Coast. I do believe there's also been some challenges around timing of procurement. It's always a challenge getting contractors up there. I mean, I would encourage the Member to perhaps reach out. We're in a bit of a writ period but the former MP is still around because she did tell me, and I don't have a figure in front of me, but the federal government had committed significantly, recognizing and appreciating the housing challenges on the North Coast.

Regarding ITK, President Obed has never reached out to me since we started on this MOU process. I've not ever seen a piece of correspondence outlining concern or anything like that. I'm just saying that in case my staff saw something but most of it trickles up to me.

With regard to who we are working with across Labrador, recognizing the diversity of the three Indigenous groups, the industrial in the West and Lake Melville to Central and all of the different unique challenges there. We include everybody in the work that we are doing. When I referenced earlier the Inuit community government, the work that we are doing on maintaining the 750 kilometres of groomed trail, we work really closely with them. When we go north, we request meetings with the governments. We don't go into an area without letting them know that we're coming, et cetera. So certainly, from our part and where we sit, we work hard to develop and maintain a positive relationship.

I will say that, since I sat here in Estimates last year, I am not currently the provincial Minister Responsible for Indigenous Affairs. That would be my colleague, Minister Reid, who himself has also been to Nunavut and met with the Ministers there as well. When you're in these communities, whether it's Nunavut or whether it's Labrador in the

North, predominantly, we recognize that we are dealing with Indigenous peoples.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

Your time has expired.

MHA Brown, did you have any further questions?

J. BROWN: Nope, nothing for this subhead.

CHAIR: All right.

MHA Evans, do you have more questions for this round?

L. EVANS: Yes. Thank you.

Just going back and revisiting the minister's comments, the \$12 million for housing. I thought that was \$12 million announced in the budget but, in actual fact, it was going to be spread over several budget years. This year, \$3 million of the \$12 million was going to be spent. I did not see \$12 million spent in my district last year – I did not.

As for the \$3 million this year, it's earmarked for – and this is a budget issue, that's why I bring it up in Estimates. Since I got elected in 2019, there was houses vacant with Newfoundland and Labrador Housing in Nain and Hopedale, where we had a huge housing crisis, because the houses weren't maintained and repaired and put back into circulation. I drove around with somebody from the safe house in Nain, a strong woman advocate, looking at the houses. There was one house there that was vacant for 10 years that could have been used to house families in Newfoundland and Labrador Housing. I know that's directed towards Newfoundland and Labrador Housing but, as a Labrador advocate, it's been a huge issue that has been raised.

So the \$3 million that's going to be spent this year is going to be just to try to do some repairs for the chronic neglect, you know,

and I'm not going to apologize for how harsh my words sound, because if issues were addressed for Labrador, all of Labrador, in terms of medical transportation, in terms of housing, in terms of food cost – and it's not just my district that's suffering with the cost of food – if we weren't in such a crisis, my words wouldn't have to be so harsh.

I'd love to be able to sit here and thank you for all the work that's been done. That's not taking away from your advocacy. I'm not discouraging you from advocating, but I'm here and I said the same thing last year in Estimates. The whole point of Labrador Affairs was to advocate, to make sure the Minister of the Department of Finance understood the issues in Labrador when it comes to, not just infrastructure, but things like air ambulance.

When you look at the cost of being able to heat your house – the issues in CSSD has been contributed to the high cost for food and housing. A part of your role, a part of your budget that pays your salary is about making sure you advocate. I'm not taking away from your advocacy but the whole point of myself and the Member from the Third Party being here is to be able to raise these issues about what we see in the 2025 budget and what we raised in the 2024 budget is that we want to make sure the gaps are being addressed. Because the people in Labrador have the same rights to access supports and infrastructure and services as like the people on the Island.

That's so important to me, which is why I'm raising it. It's not because I'm a negative person. It's not because I like to pick out things to complain about. Where I can, I try to make sure that people are being recognized for the amount of work that they're doing. That's so important.

I also just want to go back to the prefeasibility study. Just looking at that now, we finally got approval. Money is allotted in the budget for the prefeasibility study that

was announced. The next year, the same amount was announced. The third year it was announced again. So I'm really, really glad that the work has been done. But I wonder, where is the report? I raised it in Question Period; I raised it during petitions.

With that money that was allotted in the budgets, where is the prefeasibility study now? Because every year that planning doesn't go ahead is a loss of another year of budget where money could be allocated to actually start some work.

So I was just wondering, where is the prefeasibility study? I know the minister is going to say we put it out to the Indigenous groups for comment and consultation, but that was about a year ago. I don't think any study in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador has been given to somebody or groups and had a whole year where they've taken it and we haven't heard back from it.

The reason why I'm bringing that up is because the people, the residents in Northern Labrador, want to see the report. Not just the Nunatsiavut Government and the Innu Nation, also people in Lake Melville region, Lab West, they're interested as well. Southern Labrador, the Member's district, they're interested in where the prefeasibility study is. Everybody in Labrador is interested in the ability to actually have improved transportation to Northern Labrador.

CHAIR: Minister, would you like to respond?

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

There are a whole bunch of things I want to unpack from the Member's comments. With housing, we know that the need is there. Going back a number of years when I was the provincial minister responsible for Housing, I was working with folks like, Tony Andersen, an incredible guy that I have a lot of respect for. Tony was a minister then, and Darryl Shiwak. Recognizing that there

are challenges often in getting contractors up in the North and things like that for Newfoundland and Labrador Housing.

They had asked us if we were willing to turn over some of the buildings and bring them up to spec and turn them over and then they would run them. We were certainly willing to have that partnership.

I also want to say, on the housing matter, just because the work isn't happening doesn't mean the money have been allocated. We have to work in partnership with the government up there. I feel, in this moment, I would be remised if I didn't acknowledge the really incredible work that Nunatsiavut Government does.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, we have one only Indigenous group that has self-government. I do follow things that happen with Nunatsiavut, and it was incredible just to see them pass their last budget for Torngat of over \$400 million. I'm not saying the issues that the Member isn't raising isn't real, but when I travel through all of those little tiny communities, I see incredible work that Nunatsiavut have done with beautiful buildings with health services, multiple layers of education services for their people, and we're seeing beautiful success stories coming out of the North and the fire halls and the recreation facilities and there are so many positive things. I'm having this conversation because of a couple of youth that recently approached me and talked about this, that there are positive things there. I did want to toss a bouquet.

In terms of the provincial government, even in light of self-government, we're still putting a lot of money in. It's not all neglect. CSSD is up there in every community. Justice often is in every community. We do spend \$18 million to provide the provincial ferry services, and I'm just touching on a couple of things there.

Around the prefeasibility study, there's nobody that wants to see that advance

more than me, but where it exactly is now, I cannot speak for the minister responsible for Transportation and Infrastructure. The answer that I got the last time is what the Member just referenced around it was with the Indigenous groups.

I don't know if the Member have spoken to Nunatsiavut Government or Innu Nation to see if they had sent back the prefeasibility. Because if they have added in their comments and feedback and sent it back, then it is on the provincial government now to advance.

Does anybody have an answer on that?

OFFICIAL: (Inaudible.)

L. DEMPSTER: Okay.

CHAIR: MHA Evans, you have more question?

L. EVANS: Yes, just a couple of more comments.

The reason why I just want to clarify about the money because there tends to be a lot of times where money is announced and then it's reannounced. So I just want to clarify it's going to be \$3 million for repair for nine units that's been in chronic neglect. I have been advocating and asking in the House of Assembly Newfoundland and Labrador Housing for a plan to ensure that when these repairs are made, they don't fall into chronic repair again. And that's the purpose of Estimates, to make sure that we do have a good maintenance program.

Also, I do know – it was told to me – that back last year, the year before, when the Federal Housing Advocate had gone up and saw the state of the houses, that the former minister of CSSD had gone up. There was an offer to Nunatsiavut that they would give them the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing units, but without the budget to repair them. They were in such disrepair that Nunatsiavut could not accept them

because they would be able to maintain them.

So these issues are the reality. That's the truth that's out there. For us, we just want to make sure that each budget that's announced, issues are brought forward. Then those issues don't end when we leave budget Estimates, that they're followed up on for the next year. It's so important.

I do want to highlight, as well, I do appreciate the advocacy of the minister in terms of the Labrador Games, increasing the budget, in terms of the School Sports NL, the travel subsidies for the students in Labrador and also for the athletes as well. So there are positive things; it's not all negative.

But in actual fact, health care, food, heating your house, really is where we are right now, and we have to focus on that.

Thank you.

CHAIR: Minister.

L. DEMPSTER: Just one quick comment I want to say to the Member as I endeavour to get an answer on the X-ray piece, I did have my folks run a scan through Estimates for the last two years, and we couldn't find a reference with regard to a question regarding X-ray in the record. Because I was drawing a blank.

L. EVANS: It's in *Hansard*.

L. DEMPSTER: It's in *Hansard*?

L. EVANS: It's in *Hansard* for the last budget Estimates, which is why I brought it up in this Estimates.

L. DEMPSTER: Okay, I did ask staff, and they didn't see it.

L. EVANS: And my colleague was the first one to raise it, and it was raised because of the serious incident that happened. We had

a young girl in Nain who had two pelvic fractures that was basically told by the nurse that she had to sit on a plane and go out with the regular passengers. We've had children who've had bone injuries, do you know what I mean? So there has been issues.

OFFICIAL: Yeah, it's –

L. EVANS: Yeah, and actually, I was looking at it and I questioned it because – in your role as advocacy for health, for housing, right?

L. DEMPSTER: I'm endeavoring to get – and I'm just saying I obviously didn't read it, but I was told they couldn't find it. I have already on break reached out and left a voicemail for the COO for Labrador-Grenfell. I'll tell you that myself.

CHAIR: Any further questions MHA Evans?

L. EVANS: We do have some line items.

CHAIR: That's the next set.

L. EVANS: Okay, the next set.

CHAIR: Are you finished with questions for this section?

L. EVANS: Yes, I think we are.

CHAIR: All right.

If you have no further questions, I'll ask the Clerk to recall the subheadings, please?

CLERK: 1.1.01, Executive and Support Services.

CHAIR: Shall 1.1.01 carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subhead 1.1.01 carried.

CHAIR: I ask the Clerk to call the next set of subheadings.

CLERK: 2.1.01 to 2.1.02 inclusive, Labrador Affairs.

CHAIR: Shall 2.1.01 to 2.1.02 carry?

We will start the next round of questions.

MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Just looking at 2.1.01, there were some cuts to Grants and Subsidies, that line item there. I was just wondering for clarification, was that resulting from the end of the 2024 Winter Games?

L. DEMPSTER: The Grants and Subsidies decrease, the grant for the Labrador Winter Games operating fund has been removed.

What happens with the Winter Games, held every three years, it used to be \$500,000 and, as you know, Premier Furey did commit to an extra \$250,000 last year. So we've got extra money to work with and that's hopefully to have some good work going out into regions, North Coast, South Coast, West, leading up to the games. That's well underway with the board that's in place and an individual hired. Then, there's always a \$50,000 holdback for getting the report done, the final audit and things like that by the board.

That's the difference that you're seeing there.

L. EVANS: Okay.

How much funding was dispersed via the Labrador Sports Travel and School Sport subsidy? How much was allocated for the upcoming budget?

L. DEMPSTER: Can you just ask that again, please?

L. EVANS: How much funding was disbursed through the Labrador Sports Travel and the School Sport subsidy? How much is allocated for the upcoming budget?

L. DEMPSTER: I do have it here.

The full amount of \$830,000 was disbursed. Our current budget is \$830,000; \$430,000 for application-based travel and \$400,000 for school sport.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Minister.

How many individuals, as well as teams, received subsidies for sports travel?

L. DEMPSTER: 195 individuals and 950 athletes in total that used our program.

L. EVANS: It was 950?

L. DEMPSTER: Yes.

L. EVANS: Is that for last year's budget?

L. DEMPSTER: Yeah.

L. EVANS: So that's a significant increase then?

OFFICIAL: Yes.

L. EVANS: Yes. Okay.

I was just wondering, too, how are the individuals and teams allotted the money? Like, in terms of applying, what's the criteria for who gets funding and who actually gets turned down for funding?

L. DEMPSTER: I'm going to let the director who deals with this directly into the Goose Bay office – because it's so important I don't want to miss anything.

F. SMITH: We're application based. Every team is eligible for one team subsidy.

Athletes can have four individual subsidies and then if they make a provincial team, they get an additional two subsidies. We don't turn down people unless they've gone past the subsidies.

L. EVANS: So anyone who is travelling for an event outside their community can apply for the travel subsidy?

F. SMITH: Absolutely, if they're under 18 or Special Olympians.

L. EVANS: Under 18 or Special Olympians. Okay, thank you.

So I think you already answered my next question, how many teams or athletes were denied funding; but you said nobody is denied funding unless they use up their –

F. SMITH: Unless they've used the program previously.

CHAIR: Just a reminder to state your name every time for recording purposes, just so they have it recorded correctly.

MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Just looking at the Happy Valley-Goose Bay Hub. The budget in 2024 committed \$30 million to the project, the timeline was basically for the tender to go out in the fall of 2024 and then completion would probably 18 months beyond that.

Can we just get a little update on those timelines?

L. DEMPSTER: I found my sport sheet so I'll just go back for a moment.

I do want to put on the record that one of the great things that we did with the Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy last year was recognizing that if you live, for example, on the South Coast, you get paid per kilometre to get to the nearest airport, but that there was a disadvantage with isolated communities on the North Coast, so we

made an enhancement where 100 per cent coverage of airfare is provided for athletes travelling from the six North Coast communities of Nain, Hopedale, Natuashish, Postville, Makkovik, Rigolet and, once they get to Goose Bay now, everybody is treated the same. So we've levelled the playing field, I guess, no pun intended.

We actually increased the hosting grant, because we were hearing that \$7,500 was a little bit insufficient, now to \$10,000. All athletes are provided 75 per cent airfare coverage from Goose Bay, Wabush and Blanc-Sablon airports and – the Member was asking about numbers – from April 2024 to March 31, 2025, the Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy issued 163 authorizations and supported approximately 950 individuals spanning all four Labrador districts in 14 sports: ball hockey, basketball, figure skating, hockey, judo, soccer, swimming, track and field, volleyball, cross-country running and cross-country skiing.

Regarding the housing hub that we are moving forward on, many meetings, it's been a monumental effort and a huge commitment from the Premier across many departments. That is moving on now too. I believe ground work will be starting very, very soon.

CHAIR: MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Okay. Thank you, Chair.

Just looking at what was in the last budget as well, there was the Sheshatshiu Mobile Crisis Unit. Can we just get a brief update on that? We asked the question last year in budget Estimates about the Sheshatshiu Mobile Crisis Unit and it was deferred to the Health department –

L. DEMPSTER: Health and Community Services.

L. EVANS: Yes.

I was just wondering, now, can you just provide us with an update – what you know in terms of your advocacy for the timelines for getting this?

L. DEMPSTER: I don't have an update. I would have to get it from Health and Community Services.

L. EVANS: That's all the questions for this section.

CHAIR: MHA Brown.

J. BROWN: Thank you.

The Member asked most of my questions for the same section there now. I believe I have everything covered right now in that. We're all good here.

CHAIR: Okay.

No further questions?

I ask the Clerk to recall the subheadings, please.

CLERK: 2.1.01 through 2.1.02 inclusive, Labrador Affairs.

CHAIR: Shall 2.1.01 through 2.1.02 inclusive carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subheads 2.1.01 through 2.1.02 carried.

CLERK: Total.

CHAIR: Shall the total carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

On motion, Department of Labrador Affairs, total heads, carried.

CHAIR: Shall I report the Estimates of the Department of Labrador Affairs carried?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, Estimates of the Department of Labrador Affairs carried without amendment.

CHAIR: All right, that concludes this portion of the Estimates.

I want to thank the department, the minister and all her staff for attending, especially the Clerk, Jenny. This is her first official time, on her own, doing the Estimates. So thank you very much.

I also want to mention that the next meeting is going to be tomorrow, April 10. Before we conclude, I'm going to ask Members if they'd like to conclude and say some closing remarks.

L. EVANS: We haven't done sections 2.1.02, Medical Transportation.

CHAIR: That's what we just did.

L. EVANS: We were on 2.1.01.

CHAIR: Yes, I called both sections. It's only two sections, 1.1.01 and then the next section I called was 2.1.01 to 2.1.02.

L. DEMPSTER: Chair, I'm happy to take some further questions. We do have three hours –

CHAIR: We can certainly take some further questions if you have any further questions. Both of them were included in the second round when I announced the subheads, but if you have any further questions, I'm sure the minister would be only happy to answer them.

L. EVANS: Yes, Chair, that mistake was on my part.

I think last year we did it by sections, Labrador Affairs and then the MTAP.

CHAIR: That's what I just called, but anyway go ahead, if you have any questions.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

Just looking at section 2.1.02, Medical Transportation Programs, has there been any consideration regarding the eligibility for amputees within MTAP for prosthetics? Last year, it was raised by my colleague actually, and there was some confusion on this topic. I remember it went back and forth between my colleague and the minister about the belief that due to the prosthetics not being covered by MCP, amputees would not be able access MTAP, even for the fitting for the prosthetics.

I was just wondering, would the minister be able to provide an update on that?

L. DEMPSTER: I don't think it was confusion but, certainly, what happened is there was a need and there is a need. The numbers around the province, I don't believe, are big but they're really, really important that we ensure that, where we need to, we can support people to access those very important, life-changing services.

With the Medical Transportation Program, the way that program is set up, since back in 1998, is it's for individuals to access specialized services, and those are outlined under MCP. The Member for Lab West had a scenario last year, had a constituent he

was advocating for, and we were having a barrier because they would not be coming to access specialized services. But we recognized there was a need; there was a high cost to getting here for those prosthetics. The Premier, himself, made a commitment here on the floor of the House that anybody with those challenges we would endeavour to help.

At that time, we referred back to Health and Community Services to help, but it's also something that we are now looking at under MTAP to see if it would better fit here. Because we recognize – I don't know if it was a gap but somewhere between the parameters of this program and the services in Health, people like the MHA for Lab West was having challenges finding answers to his scenario for his constituent.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

What I take away from that is that you are looking at ways for the travel to be included under MTAP. I think that was the problem last year, where it wasn't under MCP, they couldn't access through MTAP. So that's a positive thing.

How many requests were received under MTAP that were denied funding?

L. DEMPSTER: Any request that comes in, if someone is travelling to access specialized services, goes forth. We don't deny those. Like, last year, I went almost a million dollars over budget. Because if somebody meets the eligibility of the program and they are travelling to access specialized services, we do not deny.

I'll give you an example. You might have somebody that's going to a dentist or something like that, that might not qualify. But if there's a child that needs dental surgery, it might not even quite line up with the program, but we will make the effort to – I'm thinking about Central, where we did something. I shouldn't be giving specific cases here.

L. EVANS: I thank the minister for your answer there.

Looking at the Income Support Medical Travel, which is a different program than MTAP, what's the total amount of funding provided under ISMT?

L. DEMPSTER: Can you ask that question again?

L. EVANS: The Income Support Medical Travel, ISMT, what's the total amount of funding provided through this program for 2024-2025?

L. DEMPSTER: It is \$6.4 million. The requests that have come in under the Medical Transportation – MeTS, we're now calling it – exceed 12,000 for '24-'25. The requests have remained relatively stable year over year, but the program has observed an average increase of 6 per cent in cost-of-service delivery per request.

CHAIR: MHA Paddock.

L. PADDOCK: MTAP – just some quick overview questions on the program itself. How is that program communicated to residents?

L. DEMPSTER: Well, it's not a new program. It's been around since 1998, part of the universal health care. If somebody is seeking medical transportation and they do a quick google, all of the information will come up under Labrador Affairs.

I think most people that go to their physicians, that are being referred out, if someone says how do I do it, I'm sure because it's not new, it's been around for decades – I'm not meeting people who are not aware, and we continue to have a pretty big uptake in the program.

Since you represent Central, an Island portion of the province, I will reference a couple of the enhancements that I made to the program since it came under me. We

used to have a \$400 deductible on the Island and we actually removed that back in 2023 for residents of Island health zones travelling out of province for specialized care.

The assistance rates for Lab-Grenfell zone have been extended to include residents to Island health zones who need to travel out of province for specialized medical services and we provided enhancements to, for example, the overnight, we increased it to \$150 per night within the province and \$175 per night outside the province.

We increased the mileage reimbursement rate for private vehicle use from 20 cents to 25 cents for patients who drive over 4,000 kilometres. I'm probably not hitting it all but I just want to mention that because one of the things I've noticed, since the program came under me, is folks on the Island, in more rural parts, we're seeing a bigger uptake there as well.

L. PADDOCK: Right, and that comes back to my point with regard to how the program is communicated. I'm continuing to push this program every time I'm in a small community. We have a digital divide. Not a lot of the seniors are able to pick up and google; some of that is Internet and cellphone access in some of our rural communities, particularly when we're talking about marginalized population.

I would recommend that you go out again to every community in the province with just an overview of the program. I've even talked to town clerks who don't fully understand. I think this is an awareness gap that we could leverage with regard to further communicating the program. It is a great program, but we need to ensure that it is fully known across the province.

CHAIR: Minister, would you like to respond?

L. DEMPSTER: I would go a little further. It's been my experience that we have a lot

of fabulous programs across departments, across government, that it's always a challenge to get that information into every community on the ground.

Since the program, Medical Transportation, have been under me and since we've made enhancements right across the board, one thing that we never really talk about in Estimates is the increasing number of out-of-province patients – transplant recipients. I deal a lot with that. I just had a young woman from my own district who waited a long time for a transplant and, sadly, when she got flown out, the organ she needed was not a match.

So I have had a number of MHAs ask me to travel to their regions and we've sat with municipalities and I've talked, at some length, about the enhancements, about the program and things like that.

Where we can get the information out, we do try our best. Your point is well taken.

CHAIR: MHA Paddock.

L. PADDOCK: Thank you.

So next question is with regard to processing, and I want to compliment the Member for Labrador West with regard to his questions on that. He took some of what I wanted to ask. There is a continued challenge for numbers of seniors in processing their claims. My office helps a good number.

Have you had any engagement with MTAP and with the Seniors' Advocate with regard to how we continue to refine the program, to probably look at it in a way, keep it simple with regard to processing?

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

Absolutely. We meet with the Seniors' Advocate on a regular basis. Various portfolios that I've held, she's been in my boardroom. She has a mandate. I think it's

really important that we have the Seniors' Advocate. She's out and about in the province, hears different concerns and she certainly is on the ball with the things that she hears, whatever department they fall in, she brings them back.

When she does her report, she includes the things that she's heard like, in particular, what you've referenced around medical transportation. Then, often, we're happy to be able to go back to her and say, yes, we continue to review the program and, where possible, make improvements. These are some of the matters that you've raised before, that we are now able to address.

So we've had ongoing correspondence and things like that. One of the things we did do as a result – like I would say, predominantly seniors questioning and things like that – is we put together a fact sheet to try and make it easier for people to get answers to some of the questions that they had.

CHAIR: MHA Paddock.

L. PADDOCK: Then, with regard to program review, it was indicated that there's a regular review that is conducted. Does the program, I guess, go through a more formalized review, and if so, how often and who participates?

L. DEMPSTER: I can only speak to, with clarity, the program came under me in budget '23, with some extra funding at that time, and we did a very deep dive in-house in the program to see where we could best stretch that money, where we would get the best return, where we would have the best impact for folks on the ground, for the user.

In addition to that, I spoke to it a number of times here in the House. I invited every MHA to come and sit with me because the 40 seats in here represent the 530,000 people in the province. If you're rural in particular, I know that you get a gamut of everything coming through your office. Because in the run of the day, I could write

a book on the things that I deal with in my own constituency office, which is a really super busy, active office.

So we gave MHAs an opportunity to come and sit down and bring the concerns forward, and all of that was considered as we move forward, making changes.

CHAIR: MHA Paddock, do you have any more questions?

L. PADDOCK: If I may, I guess, ask a question here since I've still got time on the clock with regard to advocacy, with regard to public policy on Labrador Affairs. It is a challenge with some public policy because for some public policy, it is much easier to execute and partake in an urban setting. In a rural setting, it becomes a challenge. In a remote area, it becomes a huge barrier with regard to accessing.

So I'm going to highlight a case in point, just to see where you are with regard to tracking. That is the rebate on personal property, so the personal property insurance. Easy to partake in an urban area, very much a challenge in a remote area for various reasons. Are you tracking, Labrador Affairs, participation in that rebate for Labrador residents?

CHAIR: Minister.

L. DEMPSTER: I can't speak directly to that, but I can tell you that Finance tracks everything with a fine-tooth comb. There's quite a large team there in Finance, and they would be tracking that.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

L. PADDOCK: Since there are still 30 seconds, one final.

I was at a conference a few years back and they were promoting Halifax as the gateway to the north, which really turned my stomach because I view Goose Bay as that Gateway to the North. I guess from an advocacy point

of view for Labrador Affairs, I'm just looking at what you're doing with regard to reminding all of Canada that Goose Bay is indeed the Gateway to the North?

CHAIR: Thank you.

Minister, did you want to respond?

L. DEMPSTER: I think I'm definitely with you on that, but I do think that we have different gateways to the north in Labrador, because over in Lab West there are lots of folks that are entering the province there, and in the South, as soon as you cross over the border in the Labrador Straits, you'll see a great big sign on a building that says gateway. Then, of course, Goose Bay would be the stepping-off ground if you're going up into the northern areas and some very beautiful tourism sites like we have in Torngat, down my way, Battle Harbour – lots of examples.

Tourism would be the lead on that promotion, but we are certainly advocating and we work closely with the chambers. We've got an incredible Labrador North Chamber in Happy Valley, we've got the chamber in Lab West that we sat with when we were there, me and my staff, and we often are working with Tourism, Culture, Arts and Recreation to talk about some of our unique challenges that we have around tourism, Indigenous tourism and things like that.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

Any further questions?

If no further questions, I just wanted it for the record that I did speak with the Clerk and we don't need to vote because we've already voted on both sections. That concludes the end of this session, but I will give everybody the opportunity for final remarks.

MHA Evans, would you like to have some closing remarks.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

I would like to thank you all for your time and, like I said, the questions are not a reflection on the amount of work that you've done. I don't want you to be discouraged by the questions that we've raised. The purpose of raising them is to ensure that Labrador Affairs is living up to its mandate and is being an advocate for, not only the geographical differences between the Island and Labrador, but also a lot of the social issues that are raised, that come up and that sometimes people struggle with because of the isolation and the remoteness. Labrador is very, very remote and we saw that during COVID.

So, I guess, the importance of your role can't be overstated here. I do want to recognize that. I don't want anyone to be discouraged by our comments, our questions and sometimes the harshness of the comments. It's only because it's a reflection of the huge gaps in services that a lot of people in Labrador face, and that's sort of like a reinforcement for Labrador Affairs.

Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you.

MHA Brown.

J. BROWN: Thank you.

I want to thank the minister and her staff over at Labrador Affairs for participating. It's always great to have you down to do this. It takes a lot of work, and I know it's a very interesting office because half is in Labrador and half is down here, so it takes a bit of wrangling.

I really want to appreciate you and I thank you, everyone, for participating.

CHAIR: Minister, closing remarks.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank both the Member for Torngat and the Member for Labrador West for their respectful nature in the line of questioning.

On motion, the Committee adjourned.

I understand that we have unique challenges. I was on a flight to Labrador on Friday and I was dealing with people on the ferry that were worried about the polar bear that was also on the ferry being transported, even though he was heavily sedated and we had lots of conservation officers and we had lots of things in place. I share it because we deal with circumstances that I guarantee you my colleagues on the Avalon are not dealing with, just all in the run of a day.

I think in closing, I just want to say I am here and I am always available and willing to sit down. I respect the role of opposition. I was there for two years myself back in the day but I think a lot of times, when we put our collective shoulders to the wheel on some of our really unique challenges, we can sort of make progress and maybe get to a solution a little quicker.

So I just always want to put that out there; I'm here, I'm willing to work with any of you folk across Labrador and thank you very much.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

Now I'm going to ask for a mover to adjourn.

A. PARSONS: So moved.

CHAIR: Moved by Minister Parsons, seconded by MHA Brown.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

Have a good day everybody.