



**PROVINCE OF NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR
HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

Second Session
Fiftieth General Assembly

**Proceedings of the Standing Committee on
Government Services**

April 18, 2024 - Issue 12

Department of Labrador Affairs

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Assembly
Honourable Derek Bennett, MHA

GOVERNMENT SERVICES COMMITTEE

Department of Labrador Affairs

Chair: Lucy Stoyles, MHA

Vice-Chair: Loyola O'Driscoll, MHA

Members: Joedy Wall, MHA
Perry Trimper, MHA
Sherry Gambin-Walsh, MHA
Scott Reid, MHA
Lela Evans

Clerk of the Committee: Kimberley Hammond (A)

Appearing:

Department of Labrador Affairs

Hon. Lisa Dempster, MHA, Minister

Jason Higgins, Deputy Minister

Sheree Snow, Assistant Deputy Minister, Medical Transportation Assistance Program

Michelle Watkins, Assistant Deputy Minister, Labrador Affairs

Nicole Abbott, Department Controller

Trevor Miller, Manager of Finance

Allan Bock, Director of Communications

Kelly White, Executive Assistant

Also Present

Hon. Steve Crocker, MHA, Minister of Tourism, Culture, Arts and Recreation

Hon. Gerry Byrne, MHA, Minister of Immigration, Population Growth and Skills

Hon. Krista Lynn Howell, MHA, Minister of Education

Lloyd Parrott, MHA

Colby Greeley, Official Opposition Caucus

Steven Kent, Third Party Caucus

Annie McCarthy, Government Members' Caucus

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Steve Crocker, MHA for Carbonear - Trinity - Bay de Verde, substitutes for Scott Reid, MHA for St. George's - Humber.

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Gerry Byrne, MHA for Corner Brook, substitutes for Perry Trimper, MHA for Lake Melville.

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Krista Lynn Howell, MHA for St. Barbe - L'Anse aux Meadows, substitutes for Sherry Gambin-Walsh, MHA for Placentia - St. Mary's.

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Lloyd Parrott, MHA for Terra Nova, substitutes for Joedy Wall, MHA for Cape St. Francis.

The Committee met at 6 p.m. in the House of Assembly Chamber.

CHAIR (Stoyles): Good evening, folks, and welcome to our Estimates. This evening we will be doing Labrador Affairs.

First, I'm going to do the people who are substituting: for MHA Wall, we have MHA Parrott; for MHA Trimper, we have MHA Byrne; for MHA Gambin-Walsh, we have MHA Krista Lynn Howell; and for MHA Reid, we have MHA Crocker. Those are the substitutions for this evening.

The next thing on our agenda is we have to elect a Vice-Chair this evening. I'm going to call for nominations from the floor three times, so I call for nominations.

L. PARROTT: I'll nominate the MHA for Ferryland.

CHAIR: All right. The Member for Ferryland is nominated.

Are there any further nominations?

Are there any further nominations?

Nominations ceased, congratulations.

We need to do a vote.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

Okay, so we're moving forward. I hope we move this quickly for the rest of the evening.

We're going to get everybody to identify themselves in a couple of minutes. So, when we start, we ask everybody to raise their hand when they're going to speak and, every time you speak, we would like for you to identify yourself so we know who you are every time you're speaking, and the tally light will be on before you speak.

Please don't make any adjustments to your chairs, and the water cooler is right behind me and the bathrooms are just outside the door. I think now we can start with the proceedings and if we decide to take a break, we will go halfway where we'll chat about it and make a decision at halfway mark through the thing.

I'm going to ask everybody now to start to identify themselves. Can we start with MHA Byrne?

G. BYRNE: Gerald Francis Byrne, otherwise known as Gerry.

L. PARROTT: MHA Lloyd Parrott.

C. GREELEY: Colby Greeley, Office of the Official Opposition.

L. EVANS: MHA Lela Evans.

S. KENT: Steven Kent, NDP Caucus.

L. O'DRISCOLL: Loyola O'Driscoll, MHA for Ferryland.

K. HOWELL: Krista Howell, MHA, St. Barbe - L'Anse aux Meadows.

A. MCCARTHY: Annie McCarthy, Government Members' Office.

S. CROCKER: Steve Crocker, MHA, Carbonear - Trinity - Bay de Verde.

L. DEMPSTER: Lisa Dempster, MHA, Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

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

N. ABBOTT: Nicole Abbott, Departmental Controller.

T. MILLER: Trevor Miller, Manager of Finance.

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

M. WATKINS: Michelle Watkins, Assistant Deputy Minister of Labrador Affairs.

A. BOCK: Allan Bock, Director of Communications.

K. WHITE: Kelly White, Executive Assistant to Minister Dempster.

CHAIR: Thank you, Kelly.

All right, Minister, I'll ask you to do opening remarks.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you.

Good evening, everyone. Hopefully we won't be too long, but we'll take all the time that you need, I say to my colleagues questioning me. But like we usually do in Estimates, I'm just going to take a couple of minutes to deliver a few introductory remarks.

We all do agree, I know, that Estimates is an important part of the budget process and I want to thank the Members of the Government Services Committee for your

work in scrutinizing the budget expenditures, in this case, of '24-'25.

I'm happy to be joined tonight by my team from Labrador Affairs and hopefully, between us all, we can answer all of your questions. Should we not have the information readily available, we will commit to getting it to you in a timely manner, and I'll just take a moment to tell you a little bit about Labrador Affairs.

The vision of the Department Labrador Affairs is of a strong, sustainable and vibrant Labrador where all people have the opportunity to prosper and contribute to their communities, region and 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 in the delivery of provincial government programs and services.

One year ago, some of you might remember, Labrador Affairs became a stand-alone department. All functions and programs previously administered by the Labrador Affairs Secretariat were brought within the jurisdiction of the Department of Labrador Affairs. Three or four of those include Labrador Transportation Grooming Subsidy, Labrador Aboriginal Nutritional and Artistic Assistance Program, Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy program, and School Sports NL Labrador travel program, the Labrador Winter Games and the annual operating grant for the Combined Councils of Labrador.

In addition, Labrador Affairs has the responsibility for the Medical Transportation and Assistance Programs. Medical Transportation Assistance Programs were

transferred to Labrador Affairs from the Department of Health and Community Services, and I should say that it's actually two programs.

So the Medical Transportation Assistance Program, which any resident of the province can apply to, it's not income tested, but also the Medical Transportation Program for income support clients, which is probably about 20,000 people, so it's a big variance in the two very specific programs and who they serve.

Since April '23, Labrador Affairs undertook a thorough assessment of the Medical Transportation Assistance Programs and consulted with key stakeholders to examine whether changes could better assist patients and escorts who have to travel from rural and remote areas to larger centres to access specialized health care centres.

You'll recall that budget '23 allotted an additional \$1 million to fund enhancements that could be made to the programs. In May 2023, Labrador's financial assistance rates toward eligible travel expenses to access specialized insured medical services were expanded to include all residents of the Labrador-Grenfell Health Zone, so that means all of Labrador and a portion of the Great Northern Peninsula.

In September 2023, the Premier and I announced enhancements to the Labrador West Health Centre. A new in-province flight voucher program was established in partnership with PAL Airlines. Residents of the Labrador-Grenfell Health Zone who have to fly to a larger centre within the province to access specialized, insured medical services can now apply to MTAP for a fast-track, upfront flight voucher. The voucher program offers patients and escorts in the Labrador-Grenfell Health Zone \$1,000 in total upfront towards their first eligible airfare cost, plus an assistance rate of 75 per cent towards any additional airfare cost exceeding \$1,000. The 75 per cent enhanced assistance rate toward eligible

airfare cost also extends to patients and escorts in the Labrador-Grenfell Health Zone who travel out of province to access specialized, insured medical services. These changes support a commitment from the provincial government to help ease the financial burden on travel for medical services.

In January of this year we – myself – announced additional improvements. A new 85 per cent flight assistance rate for Labrador-Grenfell residents travelling in and out of province with airfare cost greater than \$8,000 in a 12-month period. We also eliminated the \$400 deductible for residents of the Island health zones who travel for medical appointments out of the province; an increase in assistance for residents of Island health zones who travel out of province by air.

This change means that all residents of the province are entitled to the same airfare assistance rates when they must travel out of province to access specialized, insured medical services. The extra financial help for patients and their escorts, if applicable, is offered upfront or after travel is complete.

Basically, what it consists of, just to reiterate, is a \$1,000 in total, which can be applied toward the cost of first eligible flights; 75 per cent towards additional eligible airfare costs between \$1,000 and \$8,000; an 85 per cent towards costs greater than \$8,000 accumulated over a 12-month period; an increase in the claimable per diem rate for purchased accommodation to \$150 per night in province and \$175 per night out of province; an increase in the private vehicle mileage rate from 20 cents to 25 cents per kilometre for patients who drive more than 4,000 kilometres during a 12-month period. Those enhancements have certainly resulted in a greater uptake in MTAP from all areas of the province.

The latest stats that I have just from when we announced it in September, the Premier and I in Lab West, is a total of 657 voucher

applications have been approved and utilized since the program was launched in September. MTAP processed 20 per cent more claims in '23-'24, over the previous year, and assisted 30 per cent more patients in '23-'24, over the previous year.

Due to a significant uptake in program awareness and usage, *Budget 2024* allotted an additional \$700,000 to support the increased demand for assistance. So it was the \$1 million last year and now another \$700,000.

I'm almost done.

Safer snowmobile travel: Labrador Affairs achieved a significant accomplishment in 2023 with \$3.2 million in one-time funding for the Labrador Transportation Grooming Subsidy program to enhance safe snowmobile travel for residents of Labrador's isolated communities, and just to break that \$3.2 million down for you, we purchased new grooming machines for Rigolet, Postville and Black Tickle; we purchased trail markers and new infrastructure such as grooming garages and rest shelters in a number of communities.

In *Budget 2023*, the program's operating budget was increased from \$471,000 annually to \$611,000. The additional funding supports went for things like wage increases for staff hired by service providers; it was to help offset the higher fuel cost and costs associated with administering required activities, such as trail marking, grooming and weekly ice thickness checks.

We also partnered with SmartICE this year. Service providers supported by local traditional and Indigenous knowledge advised that weather conditions in the North are changing. As a result of global warming, sea ice is thinning and late in forming and is oftentimes prone to breakup.

SmartICE is augmenting Indigenous knowledge of safe ice travel with advanced monitoring technology. As a community-based, work-integrated social enterprise, SmartICE also supports Indigenous culture, intergenerational teaching and community building and creating sustainable employment. The information which SmartICE is gathering is helping communities and residents in Northern Labrador, and Black Tickle under sort of the same program, make more informed decisions before travelling on sea ice so they can avoid dangerous or hazardous areas.

The Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy: More than \$800,000 is allocated for the Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy, which provides air travel support to Labrador athletes aged 18 and under, Special Olympics and sport organizations to participate in provincial competitions, development camps, Indigenous games and junior varsity sport school athletes. Considering increased travel costs, we were able to increase the subsidy this year for sports travel teams.

Two more points: We signed a memorandum of understanding with the Government of Nunavut, myself and the Premier with their Premier and Deputy Premier, last February in Ottawa. The Department of Labrador Affairs is collaborating with the Government of Nunavut on advancing the MOU that was signed in 2023. I was pleased myself to be in Nunavut last September to support efforts in the collaboration and partnership with the Government of Nunavut. 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.

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 underway.

Labrador Winter Games: Preparations are underway for the next Winter Games and *Budget 2024* allocated \$700,000, an increase of \$250,000 to move forward with the games.

A couple of other budget highlights: More than \$30 million to build the new integrated Health, Housing and Supportive Services Hub in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. The new facility will provide integrated support, treatment and services all in one place.

Approximately \$18 million is part of the Provincial Roads Plan for road rehabilitation and paving in Labrador. Looking ahead there are many exciting developments which include the pre-feasibility study that is looking at what would be involved in building a road to the North Coast, the construction of a new school in Cartwright, events celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Labrador flag and new housing developments in Labrador West and the North Coast.

So I've just touched on some of the highlights to give you a flavour of some of the things the department is working on and thank you for listening. That was a little longer than I normally go.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister.

A few other housekeeping items before we get started. I do not see an independent Member here this evening, but I just wanted to get an agreement if one does show up that everybody is in agreement that they will get 10 minutes at the end or throughout, a total of 10 minutes. Is that agreeable?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Carried.

I am going to ask for a motion for the previous minutes, if there are errors or omission in the previous minutes.

I'm going to call for a motion for the previous minutes.

First, we need a mover.

L. PARROTT: So moved.

CHAIR: MHA Parrott.

A seconder?

L. O'DRISCOLL: Seconded.

CHAIR: MHA O'Driscoll.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, minutes adopted as circulated.

CHAIR: Okay.

I ask the Clerk to call the first subheadings, please.

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

CHAIR: So 1.1.01 – MHA Parrott.

L. PARROTT: I'd just like to thank the minister for her opening remarks and I'm sure I'll have something at the end, but I'd like to thank everyone in the department for the time that was put into preparation to come here, and I guess we'll get on with some questions. I'll start off with some general questions.

Can we get a copy of the minister's briefing binder?

L. DEMPSTER: Absolutely.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

Are there any errors in the published Estimates book that you're aware of?

L. DEMPSTER: None that I am aware of, no.

L. PARROTT: What locations are your staff located at now and how many at each location?

L. DEMPSTER: With the Medical Transportation Assistance Program and ISMT moving in under us, we have 16 in here?

S. SNOW: Nope.

So we have 48 that are at Regatta Plaza and, myself, I'm located here in the East Block.

L. DEMPSTER: And, in addition to that, we have 10 staff at the Labrador Affairs office in Happy Valley-Goose Bay.

L. PARROTT: How many people in total are employed in the whole department together?

L. DEMPSTER: I can't find my paper, sorry.

L. PARROTT: That's okay.

L. DEMPSTER: Fifty-nine in total.

L. PARROTT: How many retirements occurred in the last year?

L. DEMPSTER: One.

L. PARROTT: One total?

L. DEMPSTER: Yes.

L. PARROTT: Vacancies not filled in the department currently?

L. DEMPSTER: We have six, but one of the six is seasonal and we are in the middle of recruitment for a couple of others, just moving through.

L. PARROTT: Have any positions been eliminated and, if so, what are they and how many?

They can't hear you shake your head.

L. DEMPSTER: That's right. Thank you for reminding me. I know we've all had a long day. That's not recorded, is it, in *Hansard*, shaking my head?

So there has been no position eliminated and, actually, we've had an influx because we inherited the Medical Transportation Assistance Program in budget '23.

L. PARROTT: Any new hires in the last year?

L. DEMPSTER: Yes.

S. SNOW: For the medical transportation programs, we have hired nine.

L. PARROTT: How many contractual employees and short-term employees, seasonal, I guess?

L. DEMPSTER: Four.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

So there was a contract awarded in January 2023 regarding a prefeasibility study of a road in Northern Labrador. What is the status of that prefeasibility study?

L. DEMPSTER: So I don't want to speak for my colleague, the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, but at a high level, what I can tell you is there was a consultant that went out and done a piece of work and a draft has come back to the department. The

plan is that Transportation and Infrastructure will take that draft and do some further consultation with, in particular, Indigenous governments in that region. So it is moving along.

L. PARROTT: How many individual cases did MTAP handle last year?

L. DEMPSTER: MTAP: 1,474 claims?

S. SNOW: There was 8,794 claims for the MTAP program, and for the Income Support Medical Transportation program, we had 12,715.

L. PARROTT: Do you have any idea on what the total number of patients were? I would assume that patients used it multiple times.

L. DEMPSTER: We do, yeah, and we actually have it broken down by zones as well. The total was 4,360.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

How many requests for funding of transportation –?

L. DEMPSTER: Sorry, it's pretty dark here; it's hard to see my small print. It was 5,668 patients in the '23-'24. I was looking at the previous year. So that was up from 4,360 in the previous year.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

Do you feel that the uptake is a result of the higher fees or sicker people?

L. DEMPSTER: I think more people are now aware of the program and the enhancements that we've made where you can get 100 per cent of your first \$1,000 covered upfront. I mean, it really is incredible to have processed 657 vouchers just since we announced it last September, because we now have a very efficient – if you find out you need to go in two days, we

actually turn things around in 24 or 48 hours.

L. PARROTT: I guess a question that was brought up here this week, and near and dear to me – and I didn't know it was brought up until I seen it on Twitter today – amputees for travelling under MTAP, will they be covered going forward? Is that something the department is – like, do you review individual cases from a specialty standpoint, whether or not it's a necessity?

L. DEMPSTER: So I think, like any minister, a lot of things are just part of the process of departments but if there are very challenging files, it percolates up to the minister. There are, occasionally, challenging cases that come across my desk.

The Medical Transportation Assistance Program, which has been in place since 1998, is to help people from rural and remote areas who have to travel to access specialized services. So if you live in Labrador and you need to see a specialist, a doctor on the ground there will refer you, and we have to have that documentation. I know you understand why. Because we have to be very prudent with the fiscal purse in terms of transparency and accountability.

With the amputee case that you are mentioning, I'll just say, in general – and it's a high cost when you've got to travel from remote areas – if somebody is travelling, for example, to the Miller Centre, that's not considered a specialized service. So it would not rest under MTAP as the policies that are in place right now are formed but, quite possibly, in Health, there are special assistance grants and things like that. That's what I would do, is refer them there.

L. PARROTT: We'll agree to disagree on that one, I guess.

L. DEMPSTER: No, it's not about agreeing. I'm just saying, the program today, we fund people who are referred to access

specialized services, and we follow a list that is under MCP. So the Medical Care Program – we don't determine. We administer the program, but Health has a list of what's covered under the Medical Care Program for Newfoundland and Labrador. That's kind of the guide.

L. PARROTT: But sad that prosthetics aren't covered under MCP; therefore, MTAP wouldn't cover the travel, which doesn't make sense because it is a specialized service based on the fact that there's only one place in the province to get it done.

L. DEMPSTER: No, all I'm saying is if somebody is travelling and they're not referred to a specialist –

L. PARROTT: Yes, fair.

L. DEMPSTER: – then that's the limitations around this program.

L. PARROTT: Is there any money allocated for the purchase of a third medevac aircraft?

L. DEMPSTER: That would be a question for Transportation and Infrastructure.

What I can tell you is that as we continue to move forward implementing the recommendations in the Health Accord, one of the recommendations is around a provincial-wide road and air integrated service. So the things I've seen, it's going to be a much, much more improved service. There are some parameters around that. That's moving along and you will be hearing more in the not-too-distant future.

L. PARROTT: What is the current status of the support hub for Happy Valley-Goose Bay?

L. DEMPSTER: The status of the support hub?

L. PARROTT: Yeah.

L. DEMPSTER: That's being led by my colleague, the Minister of Housing.

Budget 2024 did commit \$30 million to build an integrated hub to provide treatment, support and wraparound services to the vulnerable population. A design is done. An architect has worked on that. There's lots of contact back and forth with Central Labrador. Housing folks are going up again next month to hold two more days of public consultation sessions just to have an opportunity to explain to people in the area that might have questions about what it is they're building and where it's going and the supports it's going to provide, et cetera.

L. PARROTT: Do we know what the annual contribution is going to be for the completion? I know \$30 million is allocated, but is it over a set period of time?

L. DEMPSTER: I wouldn't know that. That would be my colleague, the Minister of Housing, to answer that.

L. PARROTT: Do you have any idea of the timeline on completion?

M. WATKINS: Based on Housing's estimation, their goal is to let the tender in the fall of this year, so it's probably 18 months beyond that.

L. PARROTT: Okay, yeah.

Are there any consultations regarding the development of Gull Island taking place in Labrador now?

L. DEMPSTER: That wouldn't be for me to answer anything about Gull Island.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

There's \$3.7 million allocated in the budget to improve air access to the province, is any of that being spent specifically for Labrador air access? If so, do you know how?

L. DEMPSTER: You're not referring to MTAP and the program, you're talking about general overall?

L. PARROTT: No, I'm just talking about –

L. DEMPSTER: All I can tell you is I appreciate that the cost of air travel is very high and challenging and I know that when it comes to medical transportation assistance and people who have to travel to access specialize services, that is why this program is so heavily used. It's almost a \$6-million budget that were working with now.

L. PARROTT: I asked the question because Labrador West not Goose Bay, if you're a resident of Labrador West and you fly to Montreal, the maximum you pay is \$500 and the Quebec government actually subsidizes that.

L. DEMPSTER: Well, I had heard they did at one point, but that they no longer do it.

L. PARROTT: Yes, they absolutely do. I just flew my mom to Ottawa and I landed her in Montreal in order to do it. It's done because of Fermont. That's why it happens. Fermont is 27 kilometres away; residents of Fermont go to Labrador West to utilize the airport.

But I would argue from any standpoint when we look at people flying out of Labrador West, specifically, if it's a vacation or anything else, we're losing an incredible amount of revenue because of that. So I would suggest it's something to look into.

L. DEMPSTER: I can tell you since the road has gotten completed there's a huge amount of traffic that I see all the time on the ferry in the Labrador Straits because they're now driving out. But a lot of them, if it's vacation, they're taking their motor homes and everything as well.

L. PARROTT: Do you have any indication of what the timeline is for the deployment of the mobile crisis unit in Sheshatshiu is? It was announced in the budget.

L. DEMPSTER: Yeah, so it was just announced in the budget. We go through our 75 hours of budget debate and the budget has to pass and then I'm sure that my colleague in Health and Community Services will make it a priority.

L. PARROTT: There were more than 100 new Newfoundland and Labrador Housing units announced. How many of them will be built in Labrador West, do you know?

L. DEMPSTER: I don't have the number. That would be under Housing. I do know that our budget announced \$12 million in units for the North Coast of Labrador. Those units came in at a rough estimate draft at about a million dollars a unit, so that would be 12. I don't have the number for Lab West. That would be a question for Housing.

L. PARROTT: So when other departments are doing any kind of services in Labrador, do they consult with your department or do they just do it stand alone and you guys get the information after the fact?

L. DEMPSTER: No, no, I just don't want to answer for another minister. But whether it's Labrador Affairs or Indigenous Affairs, if there's work happening in Labrador then it definitely comes through our doors as well and we have input into it –

L. PARROTT: Fair answer, thank you very much.

L. DEMPSTER: – often providing guidance and support and local knowledge that maybe another department would not have.

L. PARROTT: Have you or anyone in the department been in any conversations regarding low-level flying at the base in Goose Bay again?

L. DEMPSTER: Speaking myself, I'm aware that there's some interest in coming back for low-level flying and we think that's a good thing, economically, for the region. But

we've been very clear that it has to be done in consultation with Indigenous people.

L. PARROTT: Would you have the statistics on unhoused individuals throughout Labrador, by region and total number?

L. DEMPSTER: I don't have it, but I do know, and even from my time as the Minister for Housing, that there is a pretty fluid list in every area of Newfoundland and Labrador. So there's a wait-list and there are some people that get priority. Like if it's a young mom fleeing domestic violence or something, she can be moved up the list. But it is always changing.

I know there's a lot of work happening right now in Housing, contracting to get some units that needed to be repaired up and ready to open and some money for new builds.

Minister Hutton could certainly provide some –

L. PARROTT: Do we have an idea how many people are in housing now? Some of the houses that have been deemed unfit, I know some of them are still occupied, do we have any idea what that number is?

L. DEMPSTER: I wouldn't know the number, no.

L. PARROTT: Any consideration being given to assist business owners in Labrador in countering the major costs of security due to the high rate in rising crime and their location in relation to –

L. DEMPSTER: My colleague in Industry, Energy and Technology – there is a whole suite of programs and things there to support businesses so there have been times in the past that – a very small number – we might have referred some businesses that have had related questions over to IET for specific supports.

I will say that we do have a great relationship, in particular, with the Labrador North Chamber of Commerce. They have a large membership and growing and doing some phenomenal work, so they're quite engaged and provide some really good services and supports to the business community as well.

CHAIR: Thank you, MHA Parrott. We will come back to you if you have further questions.

MHA Evans, you now have 10 minutes.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

I guess just to recap what the minister has said, a lot of these items relating to Labrador, my district, and Labrador as a whole, Indigenous Affairs and just an entire department, a lot of these questions I will direct towards the Department of Transportation, the Department of Health and the Department of Housing. I already directed questions to CSSD, Women and Gender Equality, Justice and also Indigenous Affairs.

I just want to put it on the record that because I am not asking these questions specifically to the minister, it doesn't mean that they're not going to be asked. I think the same thing can be said for my counterpart in the Official Opposition as well. So rather than to take the time out of the Estimates and take up your time, I will not be asking specific questions that the minister will not be able to answer.

I am sure that she is a strong advocate for Labrador issues when it comes to the other departments and how their decision-making and their work impacts people in Labrador.

So just moving forward now, have we started with the line items? Not the line items, the sections, have you read out the sections? I'm sorry, I was –

AN HON. MEMBER: Section 1.

L. EVANS: Yeah, it's just that a lot of times – I mean, I think this is my fourth Estimates this week, so anyway.

L. DEMPSTER: She called, MHA Evans, 1.1.01 in Executive Support.

L. EVANS: Okay.

I'm not sure if this one was answered, but 1.1.01, why did Transportation and Communications run over budget? I know it's a new department.

L. DEMPSTER: The \$8,500 difference was an increase reflected to anticipated higher travel costs, and really there was a number of staff that went to Nunavut last September and when you have a small budget, it doesn't take a lot to go over and that would have attributed.

L. EVANS: You said at the beginning we do have the option of asking some general questions, right? I was just wondering –

L. DEMPSTER: Can you speak up a little bit? You're low.

L. EVANS: Okay, is that better?

I am asking this, as a general question: The Department of Labrador Affairs interacts with the other departments. So has your department been involved with other departments, such as Finance or Environment and Climate Change, to ensure that all regions are included in incentive programs and rebate programs?

The reason why I ask is I've asked the question in the House of Assembly several times, where people in my region have been excluded specifically, where they've been actually written out of the eligibility of an incentive program from oil to electric. They've been excluded financially from participating in rebate programs, like the construction incentive that was introduced after COVID to sort of revitalize the construction industry.

L. DEMPSTER: So I can respond to that. I think if you were to ask my colleagues here tonight, somebody recently told me I was like a dog with a bone. I'm going to take it as a compliment.

But I am knocking on every single door and, sometimes, even still educating my colleagues on different things in Labrador, the topic of which you speak, because my communities are on diesel as well. It really doesn't sit good with me either and, even on the Island, my colleague for Burgeo - La Poile, he has a number of diesel.

So the whole thing with rebates is to get people off burning fossils and to reduce emissions, and we don't have that option. You will notice in the budget that there is a food and heat voucher that's going to be going to seniors – I think it's over 65 or 75 – and it's in the district for people who live in the District of Torngat and Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair. Those are the two rebate regions in Labrador that are on diesel and so if we get through the budget, then that'll be rolling out.

I guess you can guess who was lobbying for that.

L. EVANS: Yes. Thank you for that answer, Minister.

That's a really good initiative, but what I've come to experience, as I become an MHA, is a lot of the discrimination towards the Indigenous people in my district and the people in my district as a whole. A lot of it is directed towards Labradorians in general. There's a perception out there in the province that we are irresponsible when it comes to looking after ourselves, our houses and our abilities to conduct our lives at a certain level and, therein, lies the root of some discrimination that I faced.

Even though we gladly accept the voucher – and, Minister, you probably feel the same way, but, in actual fact, for us to get a voucher and the rest of the province not to

get something like that, it puts us in that category again where we're getting a handout. In actual fact, when you look at it, the province-wide incentives, the province-wide rebate where everybody in the province should be able to access, we've been excluded, as I just pointed out.

Unfortunately, this is going to be something, again, where we're going to be villainized. We're going to be marginalized. We're going to be cast down in the eyes of the general public. It's basically going to add to the negative stereotype that we have.

I'm not saying that as a criticism of your department and what you're doing, because I really appreciate it, and every single person in my district is going to know that your government and your department, Minister, provided that to try and level the playing field, to try and help us have the same level of opportunity for heating our houses, and that's a positive thing.

So I'm not being negative at all, but I'm just pointing out how sometimes people in the province perceive us. Minister, you travel in this province, and you say you're from Labrador, so you're exposed to the same things I'm exposed to a lot of time. My grandmother is an Inuit woman. She died this past year at the age of 105. She went to a residential school. She couldn't speak a word of English. When she went, she was wearing her sealskin boots. She raised her children and she was widowed early. I got to say, for us, to come from that, you know, and for me to be going to university and be in a classroom and people say, where are you from? I'm from Labrador. They automatically assume that I travelled to Labrador from the Island or elsewhere.

They automatically assume I'm a white person, and then the prejudice comes out of their mouth. The things that they said about my people, about my family, about the people in my communities – and I tell you, Minister, you know yourself, if they knew the difference, they wouldn't have spoke it,

because that kind of discrimination and racism is hidden. It's hidden but it's talked about, and it's based on misinformation.

We know the difference because we live in Labrador; we come from Labrador. We know we have educated people and we know the struggles that people come up with. So when I say I'm really grateful that we will be getting something to help with our food costs and our oil costs, don't you ever take what I said as something against you or against your department, what you're trying to do to try and level the playing field. But the rest of your government and the rest of the departments need to start trying to make sure that we're treated fairly.

With that, Minister, I'm down to my last minute, but I'll just ask another question now. Most of the questions on transportation, I'll save that for the Department of Transportation; but has Nunatsiavut Government requested to Labrador Affairs or the Department of Transportation, anyone in the government, a return of the freight boat to the North Coast from the Island?

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, MHA Evans.

I'll just go back for a moment to the heat pumps and the rebates. It frustrates me as well. I have tried to push this file a number of times. It's my understanding that the program within our provincial Environment and Climate Change, the monies came from the federal government, and they came with parameters and criteria attached to it from the federal level. That's my understanding, and it is because we're still on diesel.

Regarding the freight boat, I will ask you to direct that question to my colleague, but I'll also add that last September, myself and the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, we flew into Goose Bay and we took the *Kamutik* and we did the whole trip from Goose Bay right on up to Nain. We met with people in every community, Inuit Community Government and Nunatsiavut, if

they were there, like Minister Evans, that you would know, and then President Lampe at the end of the trip. In every community, folks had discussions around the boat, concerns ranged from the current service and how we could make improvements to that. Actually, a lot of the things that were really frustrating to the residents, we found out were not big fixes, like, why is there not a children's menu and things like that.

But in terms of bringing back the freight boat, the minister was pretty clear in every community: We signed onto a 15-year contract, we're in year three or year four. I want to hear how you feel that we can work with you to improve this service. That was the essence. I don't want to put words in this mouth, but I was with him, and you can also ask those questions of him when you go into the Estimates.

CHAIR: Thank you.

We're moving back now to MHA Parrott for 10 minutes.

L. PARROTT: So we'll go to 1.1.01.

CHAIR: Yeah.

L. PARROTT: Salaries increased from \$493,000 to \$503,000, despite having a \$10,300 under budget last year. Can you explain why that happened?

L. DEMPSTER: The increase in funds was allocated for a 2 per cent general salary increase.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

The Purchased Services budget, despite being under budget last year, have been more than doubled in the new budget.

L. DEMPSTER: That is pointing directly to hosting, is it, the –

M. WATKINS: Yes, because we are hosting the Northern Development Ministers' Forum

and embarked on the MOU with Nunavut, we had led some meetings with Nunavut and also with our northern jurisdictions across the country and that really escalated our budget.

L. DEMPSTER: Following the signing of the MOU that the Premier and I did in February to Ottawa, then we went to Nunavut. We now have a working group between Nunavut and Labrador Affairs. I think there have been a couple of meetings in Ottawa. We're well underway into hosting the Northern Development Ministers' Forum this coming fall. So you're going to see some one time increases here as we go through.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

Operating Accounts were \$620,000 over budget. Is there an explanation?

L. DEMPSTER: Which number, sorry?

L. PARROTT: Still 1.1.01.

L. DEMPSTER: Yeah, so last year we did travel. We went over in the number of conference costs and things like that, one time.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

So I can move on to line item 2, but I've got no more questions for that.

L. DEMPSTER: The Northern Lights Expo, those things that we pretty much – generic expo every year, Northern Lights every second year, et cetera.

CHAIR: MHA Evans, do you have any further questions on this section?

L. EVANS: I'll pass, thank you.

CHAIR: Okay.

L. EVANS: Just getting back to my previous question there, I'm sticking to the generals, I did ask did the Nunatsiavut Government –

the government, not the people – request the return of the freight boat. Did the Nunatsiavut Government approach the Department of Labrador Affairs requesting the department to advocate for a return of the freight boat?

L. DEMPSTER: Not to my knowledge. I have not seen any written correspondence or nothing.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

I'm going to try to speak louder, too, and I'm going to start to identify myself again.

The reason why I asked that question is the Innu of Natuashish, the Innu band council has been quite vocal in their desire to have a return of the freight service from the Island and they have written letters to the Premier, his office, your office, stating the fact. The Inuit community governments, the AngajukKâk from each Inuit community government, has stated verbally and also through email their desire to have a return of the freight boat.

While I got everyone in the room for Labrador Affairs, it is so important for you to realize that the freight boat from the Island is not only about the cost of food, it's not; it's about the cost of building materials, it's about the cost of accessing building materials and things like paint that are no longer sold in the stores because of the difficulty of getting them up to the stores now. It's about household goods, sofas, TVs, washers, dryers, refrigerators: all of those things.

What we have witnessed is not only has the price, if you can get it in the North Coast communities, significantly increased over cost increases all across the province, but what we've seen is a lack of availability of things that were available before. Your ability to go down to the store in your community and buy what you need for your day-to-day life. That is having a big impact

on our communities and it is not only about cost.

Now, if we had been joined to the Trans-Labrador Highway and we could drive over to Lab West, I think probably what would happen is, if we were connected by road, we would have a Canadian Tire in Goose Bay. We probably would have a Walmart in Goose Bay because of the demand.

I also want to say, and I'll say to my colleagues here as well – they already know this – is one of the things that has been said to me, as the MHA for Torngat Mountains – and this is budget related because it goes to the cost of living and how can you help people in Labrador – it's been said that the removal of the freight boat from Northern Labrador has benefited only the businesses in Goose Bay, not the people in Goose Bay, the businesses. It seriously hurt the people on the North Coast and it seriously hurt the businesses on the North Coast. That's the message that resonates.

If you want, I mean, I have petitions, but I can even get letters from leaders in our communities to state that to you again. Anyway, it's so important for us to be able to afford the cost of living. You know yourself because most of you are very familiar with Labrador and especially Northern Labrador, the costs of have gone up significantly over the cost of everything that we've seen in the province because of COVID.

Anyway, that's all I had for section 1. I do have a lot of questions for the other sections.

L. DEMPSTER: Chair, if I could just respond to that.

CHAIR: Please.

L. DEMPSTER: Just a couple of things.

I do want to say that Minister Abbott and myself have travelled up the North Coast twice and actually went through grocery

stores, looked at the cost of things. There is a Nutrition North program, \$132-million program, federally. I've been in Ottawa a couple of times advocating for additional items to be added to that and vouchers for going out on the land and things like that.

Following the trip – I think as the MHA it's important for you to know – we did write the Nunatsiavut Government and offer to work with them around the food insecurity piece and we did follow up a few months later and send a subsequent letter.

I can appreciate with the cost of living at a high and people are struggling, I do know that when we've had these conversations with the communities, in particular, that you represent, we did explain that it is almost 100 per cent subsidy with freight and things like that. The freight rates got reduced by about 40 per cent from what it was before this one vessel came on.

I just wanted to share that with you, but you're probably already aware of that.

CHAIR: Thank you.

Seeing there are no further questions, I ask the Clerk to recall the subheading.

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 headings, please.

CLERK: 2.1.01 to 2.1.02 inclusive, Labrador Affairs.

CHAIR: Thank you.

I recognize MHA Parrott – 15 minutes.

L. PARROTT: On 2.1.01, despite having been under budget, Salaries are increasing from \$618,800 to \$631,200. Can you explain why?

L. DEMPSTER: That's again from the 2 per cent general salary increase.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

Purchased Services over budget by \$4,000 last year and it's increasing from \$9,500 to \$110,800 this year.

L. DEMPSTER: We've set aside \$100,000 to host the 2024 Northern Development Ministers Forum.

L. PARROTT: Property, Furnishings and Equipment was over budget by \$5,000 last year. Any indication why?

L. DEMPSTER: So there were some broken chairs and things like that in the boardroom in Happy Valley-Goose Bay – rough shape, almost a safety issue if you ask me. They were ordered, but in the end, I don't think that went ahead? It wasn't spent? No.

L. PARROTT: The Operating Accounts budget is increasing by \$100,000 this year, despite being under budget last year. Can you explain why?

L. DEMPSTER: That's directly linked to the one-time forum that we're hosting.

L. PARROTT: Same pot of money?

L. DEMPSTER: Yes.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

Grants and Subsidies being cut by more than half – the line item is losing \$2.5 million.

L. DEMPSTER: So it's not cut. Last year, we were very successful in going to Treasury Board and *Budget 2023* included \$3.2 million; it was one-time funding. I mentioned in my opening comments that we bought – Labrador Affairs is responsible for grooming and maintaining over 700 kilometres of trail in all of Northern Labrador – that's their winter highway – and in my district, Black Tickle and Norman Bay.

So we purchased new groomers for Rigolet, Postville, Black Tickle, a number of grooming garages, grooming shelters, trail markers and a partnership with SmartICE. All of that was a one-time funding, except what we were hearing when we visited the North Coast, clearly, with the cost of things gone up, the base amount of funding that we had set aside for trail support, \$471,000, wasn't enough. So we did increase the base to \$611,000 overall.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

Could you tell me what stakeholders currently avail of grants and subsidies from the department?

L. DEMPSTER: Yeah, sure.

Grants and Subsidies: We have the Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy, Combined Councils of Labrador, Labrador Aboriginal Nutritional and Artistic Assistance Program, Labrador Winter Games and the Labrador Transportation Grooming Subsidy. Then we have a small amount every year, very small, community-based funding, \$7,500.

Sometimes it varies where we put that. Last year we used the \$7,500, partnered with the Friendship Centre in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, and they used it for a school snacks program that went over really, really well.

L. PARROTT: So any stakeholders or programs expected to lose their grants or subsidies this year?

L. DEMPSTER: No.

L. PARROTT: So line item 2.1.02?

L. DEMPSTER: Yeah.

L. PARROTT: Under the budget last year, Salaries increased from \$2,500,000 to \$2,856,000. Can you explain?

L. DEMPSTER: Salaries?

L. PARROTT: Yeah.

L. DEMPSTER: So we are on to Medical Transportation.

L. PARROTT: It is, yeah.

L. DEMPSTER: So there was a decrease due to employee turnover and the time required to backfill some of the positions. You're referencing the \$164,000, right?

L. PARROTT: No, I'm referencing a \$356,000 increase.

L. DEMPSTER: Oh, the increase.

Yeah, so \$50,000 pertains to a 2 per cent general salary increase and \$305,500 was reallocated from Health and Community Services to fund five client service officer positions.

So in *Budget 2023* – this program was housed in the massive Department of Health and it took a little bit of back and forth, I'll be honest, between us and Health to get it right-sized. So the ADM came and the staff came and then, you'll see down through, a few extra pieces that came along. That \$305,000 gave us another five positions. Trying to right-size, trying to get processing time decreased and things like that – extra staff.

L. PARROTT: Transportation and Communications was over budget last year by \$23,400. Is there an explanation?

L. DEMPSTER: So that was cost for telecommunications for the MTAP and mail, and it was higher than we had budgeted for.

L. PARROTT: So that's for set up of an office, basically, I guess?

L. DEMPSTER: No, just people calling in and leaving messages – the whole system of people calling in to ask about claims and things like that. A call-recording system.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

Transportation and Communications budget increasing from \$17,500 to \$80,600.

L. DEMPSTER: So that increase was a reallocation again from Health and Community Services to provide anticipated operating funding for the mail and the telecommunications requirement. Some of the figures, I mean, we inherited – no, sorry, I'm talking about something else. But that's what it's for, the voice recording and –

L. PARROTT: Supplies went over budget by \$9,200 last year.

L. DEMPSTER: Just general office supplies that were higher than budgeted.

We didn't have the allocated money from Health at that time. We were kind of using what we had.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

There is a massive increase this year from \$500 to \$23,700. That's an increase of 47 times. Is there –?

L. DEMPSTER: The increase was a reallocation from Health and Community Services to provide the anticipated operating funding for the general office

supplies. It's reasonable. We have a program now with an extra 50 staff.

L. PARROTT: So the previous number, \$9,200, how many months would that be based on? Because it's still a large increase base over that?

S. SNOW: That was based on amounts starting in about October.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

Purchased Services are over budget by \$1,200 last year and is now increased from \$3,500 to \$12,300. Is there an explanation?

L. DEMPSTER: It's the same reason. Those are all tied to the program coming in and trying to right-size it.

L. PARROTT: Same idea, okay.

Property, Furnishings and Equipment was not budgeted at all last year, you had an expenditure of \$5,300 and it's now into the budget with a \$5,500 line item.

L. DEMPSTER: It was the same. Cost for ergonomic-related requirements were higher than budgeted.

L. PARROTT: Operating Accounts went over budget by \$42,500 and it's increased from \$21,000 to \$122,100. That's a substantial increase, five times.

L. DEMPSTER: That's the subtotal, the summary of all the bits and pieces that you asked about.

L. PARROTT: Okay.

Allowances and Assistance were under budget by \$339,000. Any explanation for that?

L. DEMPSTER: A notable amount, yes. I referenced at the beginning that the Medical Transportation Assistance Program is basically open to all 526,000 residents of

the province. The ISMT, the Income Support, is about 20,000 people that use the program, because people that might be right here in the city have their bus passes and it's a little bit different, whereas if you live further out, you rely on the program.

The demand for that program, I'm quickly finding out – I've only had it for a year – the demand base varies from year to year, depending upon a client's health issues, the number of appointments they might need to attend, and it wasn't as high a demand. Perhaps next year it might be double that. No other explanation.

L. PARROTT: Yeah, I'm good.

CHAIR: Thank you.

MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

MHA Evans, Torngat Mountains.

Minister, what initiatives are your department directly involved in that are working to help advocate for artists to market their products and expand business opportunities, and also private sector investment in Labrador?

Are there any specific initiatives that you're involved with?

L. DEMPSTER: I'm aware of some things happening in other departments, but I wouldn't really want to speak because my department is not leading. But just this year, as the 75th anniversary of our union with Canada, you will have seen a number of different incentives and programs that have been publicly advertised that artists can apply for.

L. EVANS: Thank you for your answer.

Actually, I wasn't going to ask you specifically, but I just thought I might in case

there was something that you were working on or advocating for.

What is the total budget for the provincial travel subsidy for sports? Are there plans to expand the program to allow athletes to travel more effectively, efficiently to and from Labrador? Also, how many people used the program last year?

L. DEMPSTER: So the school sports and the Labrador sport travel combined is \$830,000. We did increase that program last year by \$100,000 and we had more uptake this year, that's a very positive thing. I know you and I both are very passionate about helping our young people get out and participate in provincial competitions et cetera.

We had 87 individual subsidies and 59 team subsidies that would have travelled from Labrador out.

L. EVANS: Yes, thank you for that answer.

Mining companies have been asking for more electricity – that's something that you hear from the Member for Lab West – to support and potentially expand their operations in Labrador. So what has your department done to advance this issue? I know it's under the Department of Energy, but in terms of your advocacy, anything you can specifically point to?

L. DEMPSTER: Well I can tell you that part of our job is certainly to make our colleagues aware, and they are very, very aware. In February, some key stakeholders in Labrador West, in particular, where this is a pressing issue, held a summit and there was a very big contingent there from the province, including the Premier, the Minister of Industry, Energy and Technology, myself, Housing and a number of our staff that are here around me and behind me today. Hydro was there, the CEO of Hydro NL.

I do know that conversations are happening. They're happening with industry players.

We recognize the need that more power is needed if they are to grow and I think what it comes down to now – and I don't want to speak for that department – it's working out the cost and who pays for what and things like that.

So those conversations are happening and it's a very active file.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

Quite a few of my questions have already been asked by my colleague with the Official Opposition so I don't have to ask a lot of the questions.

You did cover some initiatives there with the food voucher program for the North Coast. I was wondering about the Nutrition North subsidy. There are a lot of complaints since they changed the way the subsidy was put on for food and how it's managed. You've been up in my district; you've seen evidence of gouging and you probably seen posts on social media that showed a lot of issues. We've also seen investigative reports from CBC that have produced evidence that stores across Canada, not specifically from my district, have been actually charging for the subsidy but not putting it on to the food.

Minister, the issue with the Nutrition North subsidy is it's only on the transportation cost, the freight cost of the food, and the problem is, the food gets put on the plane in Goose Bay, it gets put on the boat in Goose Bay and the problem is the cost of food, of getting it to Goose Bay or purchasing it in Goose Bay is really costly for businesses.

Therefore, is there any work being done to look at the overall transportation of the food before it gets to Goose Bay and maybe if we could have that subsidized it would actually help us out with the loss of the freight boat from the Island.

L. DEMPSTER: So we're certainly aware of the concerns. As I mentioned, we walked

through many of the retail and one of the things that really concerned us also was when we met with folks, Rigolet comes to mind in particular, it was in the middle of the summer and even though the boat was coming every week, the business there was still flying in, not taking advantage of being able to bring in, in bulk at a cheaper rate.

We did observe a number of things and that is why when we came back we really wanted to partner with Nunatsiavut Government and try and see if we could not get the residents of that area to a better place when it came to food variety, food cost and things like that. We have reached out and we're certainly really willing to work with them if they so want to respond and invite us to the table to do that.

One of the mysteries, I think, MHA Evans, is we were given a number of examples where – I'm going to use a chicken because everybody talks about a chicken. But if a chicken is, let's say, \$12 in Goose Bay and we subsidize, the provincial government subsidize the freight by almost 100 per cent, why is that chicken maybe \$30 when it gets to a community? So those are some of the questions that we have as well, because I know the cost of living is really high. I'm there a couple of times a year and I know that it's a challenge for people. We're willing to reach out and partner and do what we can to try and combat some of that.

L. EVANS: Yes, Minister, thank you for that answer.

I actually could provide additional information for that answer. A lot of times it's small businesses in Northern Labrador have to purchase things from wholesalers on the Island, similar as businesses in Goose Bay, but the problem is the population in Goose Bay is servicing Southern Labrador and Northern Labrador residents who come buy, especially Southern Labrador who come up and buy things and drive it back. But also the population of Goose Bay is in the

thousands, as opposed to a small community that maybe 400.

So really, if you're selling a thousand chicken legs, you can mark that up by five cents if you're going to sell 1,000. But if you're only selling maybe 50 chicken legs, you've got to mark it up more than, say, five cents or 10 cents.

Therefore, supply and demand are also factoring in, and that's why it's so important to have the cost of the freight subsidized. We don't expect to have low food costs; we don't even expect to have them high. We expect them to be extremely high, but what we're seeing now is it's beyond extremely high. Unfortunately, it's probably only the people on the North Coast who are listening to this who can understand what I just said. But it is a problem.

I'm not going to ask you the question there about the Quebec regional air subsidies that I raised in the House of Assembly, because I'm going to ask the Department of Transportation, but I would ask you to help advocate for some sort of air transportation subsidy, as I've been raising in the House, through the petitions and through Question Period.

My next question is: Has there been any progress made in reducing the transient and homeless populations in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, by moving them into shelter and providing new supports? Are you reducing the transient and homeless population?

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you for that question.

I'll just go back. One of the things that I forgot to mention – you may be aware and I'm sure the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure would share this statistic with you. It doesn't apply to everyone – I know that you represent people that live from cheque to cheque, so it maybe doesn't apply to them. But the number of people on

the North Coast taking their vehicles out and bringing it back filled with food and their trucks filled with freight and things, when we sat down in the communities and had meetings, we did hear that, as a very positive thing, that for the first time they're able to go out to the Island, perhaps, or to Goose Bay, and load up and come back. We do have statistics on the vehicles and passengers and freight numbers that have gone up year over year.

So that's a positive, but I know it doesn't cover 100 per cent. It's like the same thing with the people I represent in Southern Labrador; some have the ability to go out and then even perhaps bring home bulk fuel and things like that. But I know that some of the lower income don't.

Regarding the transient population in Central Labrador, there is a tremendous amount of resources and time going into that file. The Premier's eyes are on that file all the time, and we want to help move those people to a better place. In terms of the number of people on the ground, it kind of really varies.

From my time in Housing, we have a partnership with the Nunatsiavut Government and they run the shelter there. Then, as the number of people needing access to shelter grew, we were using another facility there, locally, you would be aware, the Lab Inn, because we didn't want people turned away who needed those supports. Sometimes the numbers have been higher and sometimes they've been lower. We've done a point-in-time count.

I'm just going to turn over to Michelle to speak to that for a moment.

M. WATKINS: Yes, this year, we really increased outreach efforts. When I say we, it's collective with the community and the support organizations that support the vulnerable population. So outreach has been a real successful thing. We've come

together as a community in trying to connect them to supports.

One of the activities is a point-in-time count to kind of get a sense of how many people are representing as homeless at any given time. We've conducted two – one last summer and one last fall. Now that the snow has left Happy Valley-Goose Bay, we plan to do another one in probably May, I would suspect, so that we have a good handle.

But yes, as the minister said, numbers vary.

CHAIR: Thank you.

So, MHA Evans, do you still need some more time? Do you have more questions?

L. EVANS: Yes, I do.

CHAIR: Okay.

MHA Parrott.

L. PARROTT: I have a little statement, I guess, really. In my previous life in the military, I worked as a recruiting officer and I spent nine years with search and rescue. I was born and raised in Labrador West, so it's an interesting perspective to have a minister and two MHAs from Labrador actually asking these questions tonight.

Each small community in Labrador represents different issues and problems, and I think we're all very aware of that. I mean, if you go to Northern Labrador, Kuujuaq or Saglek and different areas, or you go to Labrador West, everything is quite unique and different and the work that you and your department does is very important and very difficult. I understand that the issues are diverse and broad. I recently had my nephew just get posted to Goose Bay as an RCMP officer. So I'll get another entirely unique perspective from what conversations are with him.

So I'd just like to thank you for your openness tonight and what you brought to the table and the work that was done by your department coming in. I appreciate what you do. I just strongly encourage you to lobby as hard as you possibly can, and I have no doubt that you do that. So thank you and (inaudible) –

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, MHA Parrott.

Only when you were speaking did I realize that we've got the South Coast, Labrador West and the North here because I know that Labrador West, you're proud to call that your home. I was born and raised in my lifetime on the coast. I grew up isolated, and everyone around me were people that were from the outside. Our teachers came in, our nurses came in and our elected officials were never local.

So it comes, for me, with a great deal of pride but also, because I know the issues, I feel the weight of the responsibility, and I certainly do my best to make sure that my colleagues are aware of the challenges and work with me to try and find solutions.

Thank you. I appreciate your comments.

L. PARROTT: Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you.

MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

Just to add or, I guess, provide clarity to the minister's comments about the increase in people being able to get on the boat and take their vehicles into Goose Bay and go shopping, fill it up and then get back on the boat and go to their communities.

I just want to clarify for people who are listening in, who may not understand the geography of the North Coast, because that sounds ideal. Like say, for example, Bell Island, you get on the boat, you come over,

you shop in St. John's and you go home. If you did that in Nain, you would get on the boat and then you would actually travel into Goose Bay, but you wouldn't be able to return home with your vehicle full of food or supplies for almost a week. You'd have to take a week off work to go in and fill up. You'd probably have to do it on your time off, like your vacation.

This is not something that most communities, with the exception of Rigolet, which is really close and can avail of the extra ferry that goes into Black Tickle – most of the people have to lose three to four to five days. So it is a planned thing that they probably would be doing once throughout the entire summer. You'd have to have a vehicle that you would be able to take with you. So it's not really something that can supplement a large part of your access to food.

Then, also, the boat hasn't been running until late June. So if you're going to be doing this, it would only be during the very short season of the summertime. So, like, the end of June, you may be able to do that. Most families who have a vehicle that can afford the time off would be doing that once or twice during the season. Then you run into the problem of being able to actually book a passage for you and your vehicle.

So I'm just clarifying, Minister, and it's not a criticism of anything you said, but it's just putting in perspective of listeners who really don't understand the geography of Northern Labrador. If somebody listened to that answer and they would say, okay, they can take their boat. Because, most places here on the Island, you have year-round access to ferries.

One of the things that I mentioned, too, is that when you look at ferry travel from communities, it is usually from an island to the mainland. I keep talking and I talked about it a lot when I first got elected because people didn't really know that all of my communities are land-based

communities. They're not on islands. Black Tickle in the minister's district is on an island. So the only reason why we have to rely on the ferry in the summertime is because we don't have access to the Trans-Labrador Highway. So just adding clarification to that.

I just wanted to move on with the questions now. Last year, Minister, it was mentioned in Estimates that Indigenous leaders sent flights to Happy Valley-Goose Bay to try and bring some of their homeless people home. So the Indigenous leaders actually sent flights to Goose Bay to pick up members in their community and bring them home.

Whose initiative was this and who pays for this initiative? Also, when the person arrives back in their home community, are there any added supports for them to help deal with their needs and their issues so that they don't actually end up back in Lake Melville again?

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you MHA Evans for the questions.

So some of that might be able to be transferred over to the Indigenous Affairs Estimates, which is happening next week, but I will answer.

Aircrafts have been sent into Central Labrador to bring membership home on a number of occasions and that was an incentive taken by the leadership in those communities. So if it was Nunatsiavut Government, I imagine it was them and if it was Innu Nation, they would have covered that cost. As leadership in their community, recognizing that some of their people were struggling, they put mechanisms in place whereby those people could go back to their home communities.

Because what we were dealing with, we talk about homeless, but many of the people that are in Central Labrador are not homeless, they're transient. As you would know, they have homes back in their home

communities and sometimes due to addictions and trauma and things like that and they're coming from dry communities. This is what they're leadership have told us.

We've had many, many meetings. They've really gone above and beyond. As you know, even a mayor in a community can't control their residents, but some of these leaders have gone above and beyond to try and provide supports for their people to get back.

I do know that they have a number of areas, programs and supports, that they offer within their communities through social workers and medical people and things like that. No different than Nunatsiavut, that you would be quite familiar with. Even in your hometown, there are different large buildings with a lot of different levels of support and services. I don't know if I've thoroughly answered that.

L. EVANS: Thank you. You made a good try. I certainly won't fault you for trying.

I know, because, technically, I had a note there to ask the Department of Health and I forgot about the Indigenous Affairs component. Actually, a lot of the questions, Minister, that I had relating to Labrador and my district sort of falls under the Department of Health. Like some public health questions about harm reduction efforts, the action team in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, the community needs assessment conducted for the action team, all of these things, there are good questions there. But, of course, your office, your department now is tasked with advocating, but, more importantly, it would be under Indigenous Affairs. I'll save those questions for the Department of Health.

L. DEMPSTER: I will say that we're quite involved with Health in a lot of that. Sometimes it's tripartite meetings. I'm in Health with the Health Minister and it's Ottawa and sometimes it's the Indigenous groups together. Sometimes it's bilateral

meetings where myself and the Health Minister will be meeting with NG or with the Innu Nation or whatever, especially if it's pertaining to Indigenous, I'm usually in partnership with the Health Minister there.

L. EVANS: Yeah.

So, like I said, I do have specific questions about many issues, but I'll save them for the Department of Health.

Initially, when I was talking about the departments, I think I forgot to mention the Department of Education because that's another department there that has a lot of different issues that's specific to Labrador and different regions of Labrador: Southern Labrador, Lab West. The geography, the isolation, the access, everything is different, and Northern Labrador is totally different. But I'll save those questions for the different departments.

Just looking at 2.1.02, Medical Transportation, I've got a general question here about MTAP. Last year in the Estimates, you mentioned that the work was progressing on the review of MTAP and that it would be a long process. So would you just like to provide us with a brief update now that a year has passed?

L. DEMPSTER: So the Medical Transportation Assistance Program, it is a provincial program open to all residents of the province who have to travel to access specialized services. It came under the purview of Labrador Affairs in *Budget 2023*. It came with an addition of \$1 million. We did take a deep dive to see where we could allocate that \$1 million, where we would get the best bang for our buck and that the end-user, the patient on the ground would – we would be helping ease the burden for people who needed to use the program.

We talk with MHAs, all of the MHAs offices, if you're very far outside the overpass this is something you get calls about all the time, people who have to travel. So I went

through in my opening remarks a number of the enhancements that we made as a result of that, including a flight voucher program where folks who need to travel can now get the first 100 per cent of the first \$1,000 upfront so they're not putting it on their credit card and waiting a couple of months to be reimbursed. We did increase the daily meal per diem. We increased the overnight hotel costs for in province and out of province. Some of the percentage that you were eligible for, the 100 per cent of your first \$1,000 and then it's 75 per cent, up to \$8,000. Then we actually added the benefit of where, after someone spends \$8,000 in a year in the program, they'll get 85 per cent subsidy. So that's something that we didn't have there before.

On the Island with the high cost of gas, high cost of living, folks who needed to travel on the Island used to have a 400-kilometre deductible for out of province and we eliminated that so that from the first kilometre they would be eligible to claim that back. Also, people who use private accommodations, that's something that wasn't in the program and something that I strongly advocated for when I was an Opposition MHA actually. So that's there as well.

CHAIR: Thank you.

We'll go back to MHA Parrott. Did you have anything further?

L. PARROTT: No, I'm good now.

CHAIR: MHA Evans, do you have any further questions?

L. EVANS: Yes, I do.

CHAIR: Go right ahead.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

Just looking at 2.1.02, Medical Transportation Programs, I know there's been a lot of work done, especially recently,

and I know that your department has taken the program inside the department, but I was wondering: Will this department consider revising the MTAP to reimburse patients 100 per cent of the travel costs, medical travel costs?

L. DEMPSTER: Yes, the program came under Labrador Affairs with *Budget 2023* and some folks might wonder, why did a provincial program come under Labrador Affairs? I think, even though provincially we're only 6 per cent of the population, we do use the program 5½ times more than our residents on the Island. That's for obvious reasons; we live far from specialized services.

When the program came in, it came with an additional \$1 million. We invested that. Before we got through the year, we had expended another \$700,000. So it's an increase of almost \$2 million. I think the total cost is now around \$5.5 million just for MTAP, and the ISMT is \$6.4 million. So it's \$11 million or \$12 million right now.

What I can say, MHA Evans, is we are constantly reviewing, evaluating, looking to see what extra money that we might need to better help the user of the program.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Minister.

I know it costs a lot for people to travel for medical. I know it cost the province a lot to even fund the Medical Transportation Assistance Program. And we've seen recent improvements, that's really good. But, Minister, now that the provincial health authority is all under one and there's no Labrador-Grenfell health authority, no Eastern, Western, Central health authorities, are there any thoughts to increasing and improving the medical health services out of Labrador?

We've seen where we've had a major hospital, a major health centre for Labrador on the Northern Peninsula, St. Anthony. People still have to fly to St. Anthony. Now,

a lot of the resources, health supports, are in St. John's. You still have to fly. And we see that they're starting to use a lot of the facilities in Western. A lot of my friends and relatives now are flying down to Corner Brook-Deer Lake region, flying in to Deer Lake, going over to Corner Brook, to get a lot the testing done and procedures.

We wouldn't have to pay so much for medical travel if we had those resources at home in Labrador. If you could fly into Goose Bay or travel over to Lab West, we wouldn't have to spend so much to get to our health care.

Minister, this is budget, this is Estimates and this is related to how the government spends its money for health care. Because I tell you, if the province is investing in health care in Labrador, putting the services and supports in Labrador, then people are not out of pocket when they have to travel. If somebody needs to have a surgery or to see a specialist and it's in St. John's, they're out of -pocket.

But if they could go to Goose Bay, more than likely, if they're out of pocket, it's very little. So, in actual fact, you would reduce the burden of cost for people to be able to look after their own health and have access to quality health care if we had more resources in Labrador.

You're a proud Labradorian, and my colleague to my left grew up in Labrador. One of the things that we should be doing is we should be questioning why the resources are not there for Labrador. They're there for Central. They're there for Western. They're there for Eastern but most of our health care, really, was on the Northern Peninsula.

I was just wondering, is your department advocating for more resources to be put in to Labrador to have their own medical supports?

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, MHA, for the question, and it's broad and I'll just try to provide a brief answer. It is really important. I think there's nothing more important than the health supports in our communities.

One of the things that we grapple with, in Labrador, is we're a very small population spread over a large, large land mass so it's very hard – even if we had a state-of-the-art facility, would we be able to entice specialists to work there? We know that, as we emerge from a global pandemic, not just across the country but the globe, we were sort of building from the ground up and every day it's a part of discussion here in the House of Assembly.

In the Health Accord, which is kind of our road map now guiding us – Dr. Pat Parfrey and Sister Elizabeth Davis did an incredible amount of work there. They looked at models of health care down through different places like the United States and beyond, that even virtual care is working. I know people don't like change, and I'm somebody who doesn't like change either and, especially health care, it scares you.

I had an experience in my own constituency, Christmastime, in my little health centre in Forteau, where we had a doctor, virtual care – we did have continuity. He was from Ontario and he provided the virtual care for a three-week period while our one and only doctor took a break. People were worried about that, and it actually worked out well. When I was on the ground, I heard good feedback. People said, you know, so-and-so was in there and it went well.

In terms of diversion and things like that, I do want to say, MHA Evans, all around the province, we've struggled with health care and diversion has happened. Like, people in Baie Verte, that area, were travelling further than my people were in Southern Labrador for health services. So I think what we have to look at is, if we don't have the numbers,

how do we get the best service that we can?

Sometimes that may be virtual care; that may be a better air ambulance system. Those are all initiatives that we're really taking serious and that we're working on so that we can provide the best care as possible to the people of Labrador and the province.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Minister.

I think you already answered this question about the department increasing the caps for reimbursement of expenses. You already answered that one. I think I'll go in and listen to the record as opposed to having to put you through that again.

How will the extra allowances and assistance money be allotted. Will there be any new initiatives? Will a higher percentage of travel costs be covered, or is this just accounting for inflation?

Now, some of that you touched on, but if you wanted to –

L. DEMPSTER: Are you asking specifically about MTAP?

L. EVANS: Yes, the travel allowance and assistance, the money being allocated –

L. DEMPSTER: Yes, we took the first one million and we allocated it, and you will see it – I think I gave a really thorough overview in my opening remarks –

L. EVANS: Yeah, you did.

L. DEMPSTER: – of the allocation into meals, per diems, hotels and also in terms of the percentage. Once you go over a certain amount, you get an increased percentage. All of that is there. I don't know how much information is in the binder, but we have binders here to share, and we're happy to answer your questions any time for the more specific ones.

L. EVANS: No, that's really good and I kind of threw that out there just in case there was something that you didn't cover. Because it's really difficult when you have a colleague who's asking questions that are similar but not exactly the same ones you're asking. A lot of times we were trying to weed through our questions that you've already answered, and I do appreciate the effort you're putting in here tonight.

I did have a question about your department and the role it plays in advocating for Labrador. One of the things I'll mention, I did ask a question earlier about mining in Lab West. They really need more energy to be able to expand a lot of their operations, and that's something my colleague from Lab West has been advocating for and dealing with the Minister of Energy.

I was just wondering about the role of Labrador Affairs in its advocacy role because that's the reason why the department has been created. Also, Minister, relating to dust studies in Lab West, we're still waiting for those. I could use examples from my district but I'll use my colleagues from Lab West for those dust studies. It's so important for the community and also the need for more energy to be able to expand.

In an economy now where we're trying to encourage investments from businesses and companies, I was just wondering how would your department, which is a new department, increase your advocacy say, for example, using those as two examples, sort of like to justify having a stand-alone Department of Labrador Affairs?

L. DEMPSTER: That's a broad kind of statement again. I think the energy question I answered earlier. If you go back to *Hansard*, I went into some detail about the energy needs and working with the bigger IOC, Tacora and those people. It sort of now comes down to who covers the cost and how much and things like that.

In terms of me advocating for Labrador, I do that all the time. We're speaking about mining. This year in the budget you would have seen increased supports for mineral exploration, geoscience, which I'm very passionate about. I know this is all close to you as well, because if we can get in and do the geoscience then it makes it more feasible for other companies to come in, et cetera.

We take that role pretty serious. It's a small but mighty shop and every single day we touch almost every department in government, I would say.

CHAIR: MHA Evans do you have any further questions?

L. EVANS: Yes.

CHAIR: Okay, we'll put the time on again.

L. EVANS: I spoke broadly about the advocacy of Labrador Affairs, but it's my understanding that the purpose of Labrador Affairs having its own department is because of the unique region and the need for advocacy. So the whole justification of having a Department of Labrador Affairs is so you could increase your advocacy, that you could interact with other ministers on a ministerial level to sort of put the lens of Labrador at the forefront of any decision-making. The same with Women and Gender Equality, without that need for that lens, the department really has no justification to exist.

So I was just asking, say for example with Lab West, really, they have the ability to expand their operations to generate more revenue for the province, to actually have more employment just to expand the economy, not only for Lab West but for the entire province. Right now, we're seeing that the bottleneck is with energy. They need more energy to be able to actually feed in the expansion of the operations.

Looking at something about human health: the whole community is impacted by dust. Every year there are issues with dust. We have been promised dust studies. Every year it's the same thing. So what I was trying to ask is how does your department make a difference because you exist, for your department to exist, to advocate, to put the Labrador lens on it? So how would you put the Labrador lens on the day-to-day operations when you're dealing with the Minister of Energy? You've got my colleague from Lab West constantly asking on behalf of his constituents, on behalf of his businesses for more energy so we can expand.

Also, his constituents are concerned about their health. They're concerned about the quality of life. It impacts your car, your grass, your house, your clothes, everything – the dust. Also, it's a human factor in terms of people breathing it in, people with asthma, those sorts of things. So it's a good opportunity now to show how your department is earning its keep.

So that's the reason why I asked the question and that's what I was looking for, some sort of information about the role that Labrador Affairs, as a separate department, plays.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, MHA Evans.

You mention the word advocacy a lot. I think as MHAs, we do a lot of that, ensuring that our constituents have access to basic services.

In terms of the Department of Labrador Affairs, basically we're responsible for the development, the implementation and the administration of provincial policies and programs from a Labrador and rural, remote perspective.

I'm administering a provincial program, MTAP, and what I bring to that is my own experience and understanding for more than a decade of representing a rural

constituency, so I can understand the geographical challenges of travelling for health care, et cetera.

That's, kind of, in a nutshell, what the mandate of the Labrador Affairs is. We are unique. We are far from services. There is a reason why we have an Office of the Labrador Affairs and we don't have an office of the Burin Peninsula.

In terms of the dust, we are aware of the concern. We've been up there. We've had meetings with the companies. I'm going to let the ADM for Labrador Affairs speak to that.

Before I do, I want to say that NL Hydro is the body in this province that is legislatively responsible for power. I do know that NL Hydro is working closely on this energy matter and when the Minister of Industry, Energy and Technology was in Lab West just a month or so ago, I do know that he was speaking and meeting with those bigger businesses and corporations on the same matter to bring them up to date.

I don't know if you want to speak to the dust.

M. WATKINS: Regarding the dust, that continues to be an issue and we continue to work and communicate with Environment and Climate Change on that, and they do provide us updates. They monitor it based on their regulatory regime. I just wanted to share that with you.

I would make a note, Minister, on the energy. As you referenced, it is under Hydro, but Labrador Affairs is very much engaged. We are at a table with, for example, a mining company, along with NL Hydro and IET that's working towards looking for increased power. So they're working diligently and we have the opportunity to be at that table.

L. EVANS: Thank you for your answer.

Just for clarification purposes, I did the budget Estimates for Environment and Climate Change and I asked the minister because this has been ongoing. We've been bringing this question forward every year and the dust studies haven't been done.

That's, I guess, one of the reasons why I raised it with you as well because normally I would just deal with the department, but, anyway, thank for your answer.

I think we're at the end of it, Chair.

CHAIR: Okay.

Seeing no more questions, I ask the Clerk to call the subheading, please.

CLERK: 2.1.01 to 2.1.02 inclusive, Labrador Affairs.

CHAIR: Shall 2.1.01 to 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.'

Carried.

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

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

Carried.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

Meeting adjourned.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

On motion, the Committee adjourned.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

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

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister, and your department. I will get you to say a few closing remarks.

First, I wanted to remind everybody that the next meeting is scheduled for Friday, which is tomorrow, at 1 o'clock, and that's going to be Digital Government and Services NL.

Minister, I ask you if you'd like to have some closing remarks.

L. DEMPSTER: I'll just say thank you. It's a really important process and we have to be transparent with the taxpayers' purse. I appreciate the respectful nature of the questions from both of my colleagues.

CHAIR: Thank you.

I want to express thank you to the Clerk and all those attending, especially the staff for their time and patience this evening.

I ask for a mover now to adjourn the meeting.

S. CROCKER: So moved.

CHAIR: MHA Crocker and MHA Evans.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'