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

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Department of Labrador Affairs

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Honourable Paul Lane, MHA

GOVERNMENT SERVICES COMMITTEE

Department of Labrador Affairs

Chair: Jeff Dwyer, MHA

Members: Riley Balsom, MHA
Jim McKenna, MHA
Mark Butt, MHA
Lucy Stoyles, MHA
Sheilagh O'Leary, MHA
Jamie Korab, MHA

Clerk of the Committee: Emily Gushue (A)

Appearing:

Department of Labrador Affairs

Hon. Lela Evans, Minister

Jason Higgins, Deputy Minister

Sheree Snow, Assistant Deputy Minister, Medical Transportation Assistance Program

Michelle Watkins, Assistant Deputy Minister, Labrador Affairs

Nicole Abbott, Departmental Controller

Victoria Barbour, Director of Communications

Allison Corcoran, Manager of Finance

Krista Dalton, Media Relations Manager

Andrew MacDonald, Executive Assistant

Bradley Russell, Special Advisor

Also Present

Lisa Dempster, MHA

Bettina Ford, MHA

Jim Dinn, MHA

Angelica Hill, Official Opposition Caucus

Meghan Parsons, Official Opposition Caucus

Steven Kent, Third Party Caucus

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Lisa Dempster, MHA for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair, substitutes for Lucy Stoyles, MHA for Mount Pearl.

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Bettina Ford, MHA for Gander, substitutes for Jamie Korab, MHA for Waterford Valley.

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Jim Dinn, MHA for St. John's Centre, substitutes for Sheilagh O'Leary, MHA for St. John's East - Quidi Vidi.

The Committee met at 9:02 a.m. in the House of Assembly Chamber.

CHAIR (Dwyer): Okay, folks, we'll call the meeting to order.

First of all, I'll do the substitutions. Substituting for our Committee Member for Mount Pearl North, Lucy Stoyles, is Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair, Lisa Dempster. For St. John's East - Quidi Vidi, Sheilagh O'Leary is being substituted by St. John's Centre MHA James Dinn. Waterford Valley, Jamie Korab, is being substituted by Gander MHA Bettina Ford.

We'll do a break, usually it's about halfway through, so we'll aim for 10:30 a.m. for a 10-minute break. Does that suit everyone? If it doesn't, you're going to have to deal with it. No, I'm just joking.

So just some housekeeping items, when you're asked to speak, you just wave your hand over your light or your microphone and that way Broadcast will recognize you. Just wait for the tally light to come on. There's a little red light that will come on in front of you. Once that light is on, that means your mic is hot. So then you just state your name and your position each time you speak so that it can be used for transcription.

I don't usually say the next one because it's pretty miniscule, but don't make adjustments to the chairs. I sat in Jamie's chair for a couple of days in a row and I

adjusted it both times and I texted him and said, how is your adjustments? So you can adjust the chairs, I think. I want you to be comfortable.

So the water coolers are located – I feel like an airplane attendant. Water coolers, there are two here and two there. Our Page, Riley, is here. She will help us out throughout the day if we need anything. There are no unaffiliated MHAs in attendance.

I now ask the Committee Members and the substitutions and caucus employees to introduce themselves starting in the front row closest to the Chair.

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

A. HILL: Angelica Hill, Director of Research, Official Opposition Office.

B. FORD: Bettina Ford, MHA for Gander.

M. PARSONS: Meghan Parsons, Opposition Staffer.

J. DINN: James Dinn, MHA for St. John's Centre.

S. KENT: Steven Kent, Researcher for the Third Party.

J. MCKENNA: Jim McKenna, MHA for Fogo Island - Cape Freels.

M. BUTT: Mark Butt, MHA for Lewisporte - Twillingate.

R. BALSOM: Riley Balsom, MHA for Carbonear - Trinity - Bay de Verde.

CHAIR: Okay.

We'll start here with the minister.

L. EVANS: Lela Evans, minister and MHA for Torngat Mountains.

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

N. ABBOTT: Nicole Abbott, Departmental Controller.

A. CORCORAN: Allison Corcoran, Manager.

V. BARBOUR: Victoria Barbour, Director of Communications.

S. SNOW: Sheree Snow, ADM of Medical Transportation Assistance Programs.

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

A. MACDONALD: Andrew MacDonald, EA to the minister.

K. DALTON: Krista Dalton, Media Relations Manager of Labrador Affairs.

CHAIR: That's great. Thank you very much.

Before we start the Estimates of the review process, the Committee will now consider the minutes of the previous meeting. If there are no errors or omissions, I ask for a mover for those minutes.

R. BALSOM: So moved.

CHAIR: The minutes are moved by the Member for Carbonear - Trinity - Bay de Verde.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Motion carried.

On motion, minutes adopted as circulated.

CHAIR: We'll now proceed with the Estimates and the review process. Once I ask the Clerk to call the first subhead

grouping for this head of expenditure, I will proceed to recognize the minister who will get 15 minutes for opening remarks. Then I will proceed to introduce the first responder from the Committee who will get 15 minutes for questions in the first round. After the first round, questions will proceed in rounds of 10 minutes each, alternating between Members of the Committee.

Now I ask the Clerk to call the first subhead.

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

CHAIR: 1.1.01, Executive and Support Services, shall the subhead carry?

I recognize the minister.

L. EVANS: For my opening remarks?

CHAIR: It goes to you now just for opening comments. You have 15 minutes to open.

L. EVANS: Sorry about that.

CHAIR: It's okay.

L. EVANS: Like I said, this is our first opportunity as government to participate in the Estimates from this side. I'm very excited and looking forward to the questions that you may have. I really appreciate the opportunity to do some introductory remarks.

Estimates is a very important part of the budget process. While I was in Opposition, it was a good opportunity to ask questions and get a lot of clarification, so I look forward to your questions.

I also want to thank the Members of the Government Services Committee for all the work in reviewing the budget and expenditures.

I'm pleased to have the member of the Labrador Affairs team here with me and we will do our best to answer the questions to

the best of our ability. Any other questions, we can take away and bring answers back to you. That's something that we can just go through during the Estimates process.

Labrador Affairs envisions a strong, sustainable and vibrant Labrador, where everyone has the opportunity to succeed and contribute to communities, the region and the province as a whole. That's something that we're very dedicated to. Myself growing up in Labrador and representing the Labrador District of Torngat Mountains for almost seven years now, it's something that I'm committed to.

We know about the distinct region and the unique challenges and also a lot of opportunities that brings. We recognize there are specific approaches we need to take to ensure these perspectives are reflected in government decision-making and in the delivery of programs and services.

One of the things that I've always said while I was in Opposition was that Labrador Affairs is specifically there to make sure government departments have the knowledge and the information to properly formulate policies and programs that do not exclude or create barriers for Labradorians. That is so important. Within the mandate, the department oversees the development, implementation and administration of provincial policies and programs with a focus on Labrador and other rural, remote regions. Like I say, we have an obligation to make sure the other departments are working with the knowledge of Labrador.

Our Premier told us when we first got sworn in, we are not to work in silos. Departments have to work together because when you work in silos, things are missed. That's so important for Labrador Affairs, making sure that we're having those conversations with Cabinet ministers and also all of caucus and every Member in Opposition that comes forward and asks us questions.

Labrador Affairs is responsible for supporting the advancement of Labrador's social and economic growth. Without those conversations and without the sharing of the proper, factual information, that's not going to happen and that's something that I recognize.

Joining this office, being sworn in as minister, I focus my efforts on meeting with stakeholders throughout Labrador to hear first-hand about the issues that matter most. Those conversations were in different ways, sometimes travelling to the region and having face-to-face meetings, but also by phone and virtual. That's one thing that we made ourselves available, too, is to be able to have those conversations because it's important. Ongoing meaningful engagement with stakeholders is essential to ensuring that policies and initiatives are formed by local perspectives and effectively address the unique needs of communities across Labrador. Labrador Affairs provides meaningful work to support stakeholders and advance its mandate.

I'd also like to introduce some of the budget highlights. *Budget 2026* invests \$3.7 million in 2026, and \$6.2 million annually thereafter, to move the Medical Transportation Assistance Program to 100 per cent coverage of eligible medical travel costs. That's one thing that we always talk about, and I know the Member across from me was minister for a while and she understands that MTAP is about eligible medical costs and that's what we're actually expanding to 100 per cent.

That's something that we all need to work together to make sure that people out there in the province recognize exactly what's being covered. So \$2.7 million was invested to extend the Labrador Air Access Program, pilot up to March 31, 2027, and to conduct a comprehensive review of affordability and service sustainability in Labrador to further understand the drivers that influence high costs.

That's very, very important because we recognize that air access, the Labrador Air Access Program pilot, only provided two subsidized tickets to residents and they had to be booked in advance and a lot of times people missed the window of when they wanted to travel. That's so important.

So for us, there is a lot of talk out there about the cost of travel. Why is travel so costly? No one really knows. I mean, there was a study done by the airport authority in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, the Goose Bay Airport authority, and it showed that in actual fact from 2029 onward, five years, the cost of passenger travel increased 47 per cent and out of Goose Bay, I think, it was 33 per cent; compared to 9.1 national average. So we know there's something wrong and everyone talks about it, oh, it's gouging; the cost of doing business is so expensive in Labrador.

This investment is going to actually address that. We're going to actually have facts that everybody in Labrador can point to. Is there gouging or is it just the cost of doing business up in Labrador? What drives those costs? What can we do to bring those costs down? Because do you know something? If it's not gouging and people are saying it's gouging, it's not fair to the airlines, but if the prices are too high, it should not be that high, and then that has to be out there as well. That's what this study is for. It's so important. The best thing we can do for Labradorians is give them the facts and the facts will drive the prices down if they're unreasonably high.

Additional funding: \$500,000, practically, to support and maintain safe winter trails to access Labrador isolated communities. It's so, so important.

I'll just expand now because I still have a lot of time on the clock. The Department of Labrador Affairs, through the Medical Transportation Assistance grants, administers the medical transportation

supports, MeTS program, and the Medical Transportation Assistance Program, MTAP.

It's so important for people to hear who's going to be asking questions, to understand the different programs. I know some of you are new. MeTS is a needs-based, means-tested program that covers 100 per cent of upfront eligible travel costs for patients accessing MCP-insured medical services. Overall, MeTS experienced a 4.8 per cent decrease in completed requests year over year, and that's driven by fewer requests from income support clients, partly offset by a modest increase among home support and financial benefit clients. The average cost per completed request decreased by 2.7 per cent, largely due to limited accommodation availability during the summer and leading into the Canada Games, that's what resulted in more clients using private accommodations.

MTAP is a separate program from MeTS. MTAP, which is not income tested, largely provides post-travel assistance to patients who are not eligible for MeTS and must travel to access specialized MCP-insured medical services unavailable in their area of residence.

MTAP continues to experience a growing demand for medical transportation. In 2026, MTAP issued 1,616 flight vouchers for Labrador-Grenfell Zone patients travelling to the Island for care, that's up from 1,253 the previous year. This 29 per cent increase highlights the critical role MTAP plays in supporting access to care for Labrador residents.

MTAP processes 12,744 claims for 7,382 patients representing a 24 per cent increase in claims and a 19 per cent increase in patients year over year. The total number of medical travel trips increased to 39,654, that's compared to 34,955 in 2024-25, reflecting overall program utilization. Out-of-province medical travel increased by 18 per cent, indicating a growing reliance on specialized care not available within the

province. Total MTAP expenditure exceeded the \$6.1 million-budget allotted, reflecting high demand and increased utilization, which is a positive thing.

This year's budget invests \$3.7 million in 2026 and \$6.2 million annual, thereafter, to move MTAP to 100 per cent coverage of eligible medical travel costs. This also includes funding for five additional positions to support implementation. That's five additional new positions in addition to the staff to help ensure a smooth transition as demand for the program increases.

Last year's budget included a \$1-million investment to continue enhancements to MTAP. This funding supported a higher private vehicle mileage rate, increasing reimbursement from 20 cents a kilometre to 25 cents a kilometre, that was a positive thing, and the launch of the Hope Air pilot partnership.

To support continuity for patients and build on early success, the province recently signed an agreement to continue Hope Air pilot partnership through to March 31, 2027, to enhance medical travel and financial assistance, and we're very pleased with that partnership. The partnership will help those who must travel to access specialized insured medical services unavailable in their community. The Hope Air partnership provides advanced financial support for eligible low- to moderate-income residents earning \$70,000 or less annually.

Hope Air arranges and pays for travel upfront, removing the need for patients to pay out of pocket before care. Eligible residents may receive up to 100 per cent coverage of their travel costs, helping ensure timely access to medically necessary care. Since September, 277 Hope Air claims for 209 passengers were processed. Patients were processed at a cost of \$359,277, and that's with 58 per cent of the claims originating from Labrador.

Labrador Air Access Program Pilot, the original pilot was launched August 29, 2025, and the pilot provided reduced airfare on a fixed number of tickets and that was, too, for eligible residents. The pilot uptake was low and does not truly address air affordability issues, and that's actually from a lot of the comments that we received back. The department received a lot of feedback on the program and some problems accessing the program and, basically, we saw that there was low uptake.

Key statistics for the 2025-26 fiscal year included 1,380 flights; 1,216 authorizations, serving 1,032 residents, with an overall uptake of 29 per cent. Like I said, that's not overly high for something that will help people travel with the subsidized tickets. Government has determined that it's important to extend the pilot while conducting a thorough review of contributing factors for air affordability in Labrador.

So that's something that we're going to continue on, but we're going to investigate the drivers of the high prices of the airfare for Labradorians.

I'll continue on, Chair, when I have more time. I'm going to talk, also, and do some summaries of the safer snowmobile travel, Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy, Labrador Winter Games, the Arctic and Northern Policy, Labrador Aboriginal Nutritional and Artistic Assistance Program. I'll do all that when I do have the time because we do have several hours here, Chair.

Thank you so much.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

I now turn to the first responder and you have 15 minutes as well to open. I turn it over to the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you very much.

Good morning, Minister, to you and the team. I look forward to going through for the next – I think we have about three hours of questions. It is a very, very important process when you think about democracy.

Is my mic on?

CLERK: Yes, it stays on for the back and forth questions.

CHAIR: When she asks questions, all you do is raise your hand and then, that way, it will go just back and forth, unlike Question Period where you have to wait.

L. EVANS: Everything is picked up, though, any movement of the paper. It's going to be a bit noisy.

L. DEMPSTER: Can we stop the clock if we have some technical issues? I don't want to lose my time; I have a lot of questions.

CLERK: (Inaudible) Broadcast can manage (inaudible).

L. EVANS: Okay.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, I appreciate that.

CHAIR: You're welcome.

L. DEMPSTER: The minister did outline a bunch of other things she wants to talk about. Most, I'd say 100 per cent of what you mentioned, Minister, I have questions on. So you'll get an opportunity as we go through. It's about 11 years since I've been over here asking questions. A little bit more experience now, all these years later. I think it was maybe spring of '15.

Two things that I noticed in a very big way reading through *Hansard* the last couple of nights, one was, Minister, you apologized in the last Estimates multiple times for your harsh words. I don't think I'll have to apologize today for my harsh words. It's an

important process and I'm going to be very, very respectful. I do have a lot of questions.

The other thing I noticed is that we covered every department, layers and layers and layers of issues. So I will ask today for the same latitude that I granted you in past Estimates as we move through this important process because all throughout *Hansard* you referenced the role of Labrador Affairs, and whether it was questions pertaining to the mines and energy or whatever. So all that's there.

So I am going to start with the line by line, and then as we move through, I'll ask my different questions that I'm hearing that are really important issues. The mundane one is – and I'll just need a nod – can we get a copy of the minister's binder after this?

L. EVANS: Yes, we'll provide you with a copy of the binder. Also for the Third Party as well, MHA Dinn.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you.

Two or three questions, Chair, on 1.1.01. You underspent in Salaries last year. Can you provide a reason for that?

L. EVANS: Okay, 1.1.01, Salaries. Yes, actually, there was a decrease of \$87,100, and that is savings reflected due to vacancies. In actual fact, the salaries of \$513,000 includes four positions: two assistant deputy ministers – that's one for Labrador Affairs and one for MTAP – a secretary to the deputy minister, and a media relations manager. All were permanent, except for the contractual media relations manager.

This position is also vacant, but recruitment is under way. No budget change over 2025-26, and of course, we have a variance of \$87,100. That's in savings in 2025-26 due to the vacancy.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Minister.

Can you clarify whether any political staff funded through this subhead are exclusively working for Labrador Affairs or whether they're also assisting in some of your other ministerial portfolios?

L. EVANS: No, under Labrador Affairs, we have no political staff and in actual fact –

L. DEMPSTER: Just your EA, is it?

L. EVANS: I do have an EA under Labrador Affairs.

J. HIGGINS: They all work for the department.

L. DEMPSTER: Okay.

I think what I heard is there is an EA, but other than that there's no –

L. EVANS: MHA Dempster, I actually referring to my deputy minister for that answer, because basically that's something that I think I know but I would rather have you have the actual facts from the deputy minister.

L. DEMPSTER: We did that lots when we were there; I'm good with that.

Can the minister confirm that there have been no without-cause terminations from the department last year?

L. EVANS: Yes, I can confirm.

L. DEMPSTER: Okay, that's good.

L. EVANS: There was none.

L. DEMPSTER: That's good.

I'll go with my random questions to use my time and I won't move to the next section, because my time will go to my colleague down the way there.

The Coastal Labrador supplement, I was happy to see that continue, Minister. I think

that's a positive. I did note in my reading of *Hansard* that you were saying it's \$500 but it's not enough.

I'm just wondering was there anything additional put in by your government?

L. EVANS: Do we have to be recognized?

CHAIR: No, you just wave your hand and say your name.

L. EVANS: Do I use my title as minister?

CLERK: (Inaudible.)

L. EVANS: I just want to make sure that I'm being recognized properly by *Hansard*.

CHAIR: When you wave your hand, just say Minister Evans.

L. EVANS: Okay, thank you.

CHAIR: You can just say MHA Dempster or the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Chair, I'm used to the Chair recognizing each speaker and it flows good.

L. EVANS: So am I.

CHAIR: We can do that, if you want.

L. DEMPSTER: It doesn't matter, if that works for the crowd downstairs.

L. EVANS: Actually, I'm used to that. That's the way we used to have it in the past.

CHAIR: That's the way we do it in Committee of the Whole and, if you prefer that, we can do that.

L. EVANS: Yes, so let's just do that.

CHAIR: Okay.

The Chair recognizes the minister.

L. EVANS: In actual fact, when I was in Opposition, you know for many years, I recognized the huge burden of cost – the cost of heating your house, whether it was electricity or the cost of fuel for your furnace, or the cost of gasoline and also the cost of food. All of these have to do with quality of life. So, for me, I wanted specific issues that impacts quality of life and impacts families and impacts our seniors to be worked on. So, for me, bringing in a \$500 cheque really doesn't get at the root of the huge costs. So, for me, that's the proper context.

Also, just addressing your opening statements, too, where you said I keep repeating that I had to apologize for my harsh words. I was apologizing because what it sounded like was really harsh, but it was out of frustration brought forward by my constituency in Northern Labrador, MHA Dempster. I do know that there's a lot of hardship for Southern Labrador as well, on the coast.

For me, as minister now, what I plan to do is work with the different departments on identifying why there's such huge costs for Labrador. Like, if you look at the price of gasoline on the Northern Peninsula, you take the ferry across and you're in Southern Labrador, in your district, MHA Dempster, and all of a sudden, the price of gas is higher. So, really, why is things more expensive in Labrador?

I've only been Minister of Labrador Affairs now for what, seven months, but that's basically going to be the driver for me, as Minister of Labrador Affairs, is ensuring that things that impact the quality of life for Labradorians are addressed. I'm not going to be able to do it in the first – probably not even in the first year, but we've already started doing some work but, more importantly, is engaging the other departments. That basically was the mandate of why this department was created.

So I hope that answers your question properly.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Minister.

I think there's nothing new right now, but you're going to work on things.

Maybe going forward, too, I might ask two or three things in one question as opposed to going question by question, I might get more out.

L. EVANS: Yeah, and I'd like to answer that, Chair.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the minister.

L. EVANS: In actual fact, we are bringing in changes, more importantly to recognize that a lot of these burdens for Labradorians need to be addressed and properly addressed by the different departments. Like say, for example, now with Transportation and Infrastructure, there are a lot of things being looked at in terms of accessibility.

The other thing is, for example, Newfoundland and Labrador Housing. I'm working closely with Minister Joedy Wall and he's already started looking at how can we actually repair and put a lot of those Newfoundland and Labrador Houses back into circulation that's needed.

For us, and I'm sure the Leader of the Third Party who's over there, attentively paying attention, is that we need to address quality of life for Labradorians and especially vulnerable people that are slipping through the cracks.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

When you've got a small population over a large land mass, yes, there are lots and lots of challenges.

The Aging Well at Home Grant is something we had committed to doubling, because it's amazing how seniors are struggling. When we did the Aging Well at Home Grant and we committed to doubling it, how much feedback there was on that.

Home care is another huge one. Minister, I asked questions, I think, yesterday on the home care that I'm hearing from all over the province, seniors, seniors with dementia that can only get maybe seven hours of care a week and it's a year to get in long-term care.

I'm just kind of rambling around on questions, but I do want to ask you, what is your understanding of where the Cartwright school is? In my walk last evening, I noticed Kenmount Terrace school looks well on its way to more than half done, which was announced long after. There's absolutely nothing done yet in Cartwright other than its mud and pug and some fencing.

I want you to know I met with the minister mid-January. There was a lot of concern around geotechnical work before the contract was ever let, but the bureaucracy in TI – and we met multiple times before the contract was actually awarded – assured us that everything would be good and everything would be fine. Now I have the contractor calling me on a regular basis saying he's owed money. He's not getting paid. His trailers are kind of sitting there on the dock all winter.

I'm really, really concerned because I know that you agree with me, we're not going to go back to the days of residential schooling and fly those kids out to go to school somewhere else. That's not progress in Indigenous Affairs. It's a big one for me, it's been ongoing, it's taken a long time to get there. A lot of people referenced the cost, why is it so high, but I do think that comes

down to a lot of things. What I'm hearing from contractors, things are way oversized by government and that's how we end up with that cost.

So I'm just going to ask the minister in the time I got left if she can speak to the Cartwright school, in her knowledge, and the Charlottetown plant. In October, the first week in October while the province was into an election period, the PUB made its final decision that they were not granting Hydro – approving their application to move forward with their regional facility. So now we're at a standstill.

Since October 2019, the plant burned. We're about to come into fish season where we've got the only shrimp processing facility. It also powers Pinsent's Arm, which got a plant out there. There are a lot of issues. Hydro wants to build a regional at a cost that's bloomed from \$70 million-and-something now to \$111 million, and the PUB is saying no.

Hydro is telling me the PUB treats people on the Island and Labrador different. I was told that as recent as yesterday. Newfoundland Power don't want to pay for this to heat the homes in five communities in Labrador, but the subsidy that the ratepayers on the Island are paying to offset for Labrador, I think, works out to be two or three cents on a Hydro bill, so it's pretty miniscule.

But I'm feeling like you heard me in a petition, when things are at a standstill, you normally call in the tactical team. But we're pretty desperate there. Seniors are worried about power going into winter. Mobile units are a temporary measure, meant to be, and we are now six years in with mobile units.

So just those two things, and then when you finish, we'll go then to my colleague down the way.

Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

Yes, to begin, you did mention long-term care. You mentioned concerns for the aging population and seniors. We do know, like, with the seniors, there has been a lot of advancement now with your government and also with my new government in advancing the Seniors' Benefit to make sure that it's actually helping seniors to be able to afford the essential things for life, such as being able to heat your house, being able to actually provide food. But, in actual fact, we need to bring the cost down for Labrador.

With long-term care, there's a lot of work being done now in terms of long-term care that's actually in the budget. I did talk to the Minister of Seniors many times about the need not only for long-term care, but also for personal care homes. Right now, the only personal care homes for all of Labrador-Grenfell Health is in Southern Labrador and on the Northern Peninsula. There is none for Central Labrador. There is none over in Labrador West or Northern Labrador. The Minister of Social Supports and Well-Being did identify some issues and the Minister of Seniors did identify some issues, basically how people are falling through the cracks.

After 10 years of your government, we're just coming in. We've only been in for seven months, but I've already identified that we need to do more to support seniors, first, living in their homes but also when they need extra care, like a personal care home or long-term care, that has to be available.

I'm really pleased with what's in the budget. That's going to go a long way now to actually increasing long-term care beds and transitional care beds because then our seniors are not going to be taking up the hospital beds in the hospital in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. That's not fair to them. It's not fair to any senior across the province

and we need to do more, and we are doing more.

You talked about the fish plants and at the heart of your comments was about the reliance on diesel – Southern Labrador communities being on diesel just the same as communities up in my district on diesel. I actually did have a meeting and one of the things that I said is we have to find solutions. We also need to understand where the PUB is coming from.

I was in Opposition for almost seven years and I found that the comments of the citizens, the comments of the MHAs and, in some part, it was actually said here in the House, the comments from the Cabinet ministers were falling on deaf ears with the PUB. We have to make sure the PUB is living up to its function, but we have to make sure that they're not keeping a policy in place that will make life unaffordable for people in our province and that regional differences are not addressed.

Labrador is a perfect example of that and, as minister, I'm certainly going to do my part to work with the PUB to make sure they understand that we actually have to be able to afford electricity. We also have to be able to afford fuel for our furnaces, but also fuel to be able to power our boats and power our Ski-Doos so we can hunt and fish. Also, for people who are connected by road, that they can actually afford to travel.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Leader of the Third Party and the Member for St. John's Centre.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the staff for joining us today and answering the questions we'll pose.

The minister noted that the price, if I heard her correctly, of airfare has increased by 47 per cent for Labrador. I think it's higher in certain spots and only 18 per cent on the Island. I'm just curious, I know when I was

travelling with the Teachers' Association, I had a choice of Air Canada or PAL. I'm just trying to think, when did Air Canada pull out? I think there are other airlines. When did they service that area, Labrador, and when did they pull out, other airlines?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

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

I just want to clarify the statements because this is going into *Hansard*. I did say that the national average increase for that five-year period the study was taken was 9.1 per cent, I think, and the increase in airfare out of Lab West, out of the Wabush Airport, increased 47 per cent. The increase out of the Happy Valley-Goose Bay Airport was 33 per cent.

We see that it's not transparent what's going on, and that's one of the reasons why we invested the money for a study to get to the facts, so we can actually have that information.

Regarding Air Canada pulling out, I think it was a couple of years ago. In actual fact, it's a little bit confusing because you can still book a ticket through Air Canada, but it's the PAL Airlines that they have a partnership with and it's the PAL Airlines that will fly you from St. John's to Halifax or from St. John's up to Labrador, or from Labrador to Halifax. The thing about it is it's just basically PAL Airlines now delivering the flights.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Member for St. John's Centre.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

That's my point in that – and I'm trying to remember at the time, I think the prices were competitive. I would say that competition probably kept the prices in line on both sides. My feeling is that since

there's a lack of a competition, and they have this whole source for the route that the prices have gone up.

So I'm assuming when this study is done, will there be the possibility then of looking at maybe bringing in competition? I think there are other airlines that service northern communities as well throughout Canada. Some of them I've been on; I've flown up to Nunavut and flown to the Northwest Territories on them as well.

There are other airlines that have, I guess, the expertise and the geography and so on and so forth. I'm just wondering if there has been any conversation with other airlines as well to offer that competition and put a downward pressure on the fares?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: You did mention that competition keeps the prices down. We know that when there is competition in the market that the prices are lower than when it's just one service provider. That applies to practically every industry, whether it's airlines or taxis or other services.

But I must say, when you're looking at other airlines, because you did raise that, other airlines, it is a private industry. The government is not involved in the airlines. There is a role for advocacy, that's something that I've said in Opposition and I'm sure you're saying the same thing.

We are scheduled now to have meetings with PAL and, also, Air Borealis because in my district there is only one airline as well and the prices are significantly higher. We're seeing a return ticket from Happy Valley-Goose Bay to the most northern community in my district probably about \$1,200 to \$1,400, and that's just between the community and Happy Valley-Goose Bay.

As I've mentioned before, we are not connected by road. We don't have the option. The Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair talked about the Cartwright school and we're not going to be flying kids out like residential schools in the past. In actual fact, we're very pleased that Cartwright is connected by road, but we certainly are not going back to those days. I just want to reassure the Member not to take my comments out of context.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for St. John's Centre.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

No, my point is that I think government does offer incentives to other industries and that maybe it's worthwhile to have those conversations with other companies, depending on how your conversations go with PAL Airlines as well.

Just a few general questions here. I think you talked about the number of people who were in Executive and Support Services, but I'm just wondering, overall, how many people are currently employed in the department? How many of those are in the MTAP program? How many positions are vacant? So the number of people employed, those involved with MTAP and any vacancies?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: We do have 66 employees; 38 of them are permanent, 27 are temporary and one contractual. Looking at the MTAP and MeTS, we've got 53 employees; 29 are permanent and 24 are temporary.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for St. John's Centre.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

Are there any vacancies?

L. EVANS: Yes, actually, in total for the department, we do have nine. We do have six under MTAP and MeTS, but five of those are new positions that we're recruiting for. That's basically to be able to do the work to help when we're transitioning to 100 per cent coverage for the MTAP costs.

J. DINN: Excellent, thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for St. John's Centre.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

I didn't want to tread on your toes.

CHAIR: You know the process, so I figured you were going to wave your hand. I was just testing the waters.

J. DINN: Thank you.

What has been the involvement of this department on issues regarding Arctic sovereignty, especially since the Northwest Passage could very well become ice free. We have a rather belligerent neighbour to the south who's probably looking at an opportunity to have input there, so on and so forth. So I'm just curious what your department has on that?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: At the beginning, you did talk a little bit about incentives for attracting other airlines. I just want to make sure that I'm on the record answering some of your questions. You did ask about incentives for other airlines, like how would we attract other airlines to compete, for example, we would have additional airlines to PAL flying between Labrador and the Island and between Labrador and within the Island.

The most important thing, MHA Dinn, is that this study that we're putting into place, the first one ever, a comprehensive study, will get at the root of the drivers of the cost

because doing business in Labrador can be quite expensive. So we're going to look at infrastructure. How much does it cost to bring in infrastructure to support planes? Are there fees?

I remember, I don't know how many years ago, when I was in Opposition, I asked the Liberal Minister of Transportation for a breakdown of landing fees in my district. It was a year and a half, no reply. Then the ministers changed, still no reply. This is with me going back and asking. Then another minister, and I think it was actually John Abbott, when he was minister, he did reply. He provided me with a reply saying that he's asked the department to look at this because I had been asking other ministers, but then, of course, no answer.

So I realize that we need to get the information. We need the facts about what are the drivers and then address them and see if there's anything that we can influence, as a government, to bring down some of these costs.

You talked about Arctic sovereignty. For me, I believe Arctic sovereignty is very, very important for us in Labrador as Canadians, but, also, I quote President Natan Obed of ITK saying: Arctic sovereignty cannot be just about sticking a flag – I'm paraphrasing, of course. This is more my interpretation of his words and the power that I felt from his words is that Arctic sovereignty can't be just erecting a flag and saying this is a part of Canada. It's a part of Canada because of the Labradorians, especially the Indigenous peoples that have a history there, that lived there.

So we have to make sure when we engage the federal government and National Defence about actually talking about Arctic sovereignty and Canadian sovereignty, we have to ensure that the people there have access to services and supports and infrastructure that the rest of Canada often takes for granted.

So, for me, as Minister of Labrador Affairs, as Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, that's one of the things that I've already started working on. We're arranging for meetings, but, also, we need to make sure that we have very positive relationships with the federal government and that we have very positive relationships with National Defence.

Working together, I'm sure that they're going to actually be able to help us a lot with some of these gaps we see. I'm looking forward to many years of positive relationships but making sure that they have all the information so that, when they're in our communities and in our province, they have a good understanding of who we are, what our needs are and what our culture sensitivities are in terms of, also, resources and services.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

I didn't move on to the MTAP and air access and things because I was waiting for you to call the subheads. Do we have to do that now before –?

CHAIR: We're going to call the subhead.

CLERK: We don't need to call the subhead until we vote –

L. DEMPSTER: At the end? Okay.

CHAIR: Until after the vote, on the first subhead, and then we'll go on to that. I wanted to give leeway to the conversation for the simple fact that one thing had something to do with the other. I'm sure that there will be more questions when it comes to MTAP and all that, but for right now I thought it was okay to –

L. DEMPSTER: It's a good flow we're having, yes.

CHAIR: I think so.

L. DEMPSTER: Okay, thank you.

CHAIR: The hon. Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: I do have some line by line questions but I'm going to jump right into the air access piece, because it is near and dear to my heart and, myself and the Labrador Affairs team, we spent a lot of months working on something. I agree with the minister when she says governments are not in the airline business; that's an actual fact. We shouldn't have to be.

In the 90s, when I had my children, we had two airlines and flights every day on the coast and it was a different world. Fast-forward to 13 years ago, when I started as an MHA, we had flight options six days a week out of Blanc-Sablon. Since COVID, we are down, in five years now, we only have flights Sunday, Tuesday and Friday.

In 2024, we saw things continue on a downward spiral with the airline – many, many sad stories. People couldn't move for work; they couldn't move for just nice, leisurely things. They couldn't move even for a funeral. If someone passed, they couldn't get a flight for five days. Myself, my former colleague from Lake Melville, we worked together, the MHA for Lab West, Jordan Brown, and we worked a lot with the airline and we did see – that was in the fall of '24, I went before the Competition Bureau, submitted a briefing to the transportation committee.

We did see some improvement but, in the last six or seven months, it is an all-time, new level of low. I spent 20 hours travelling back from the coast the other day. I was supposed to fly out Sunday and I drove from my home, south, and after multiple delays, it was cancelled. I drove back home for the night. I drove to Goose the next morning on a terrible road for 400 kilometres for a 2:30 flight. I got there and that was cancelled. I

got a flight 11:30 Monday night. What I saw from people from your district, my district, all over Labrador, Lab West, 2:30 in the morning, little old ladies being wheeled out in wheelchairs that had to be at the Health Sciences for 8 was nothing short of cruelty.

I had a rotational worker tell me of their last nine trips, they've been disrupted seven times. I had a pharmacist in Goose Bay tell me that of her last 16 trips, she's been disrupted 13 times. Most serious concerning – I did tell the Government House Leader this the other morning in a meeting because, as you know, the three leaders, we meet every morning on the fifth. I did tell Llyod, who says he's from Lab West, the biggest concern of all was the pharmacist came to me at the baggage belt the other morning and said the biggest issue – we've got a lot of issues with the one airline, but the biggest issue is we're not getting medication in now. That's the big problem. When you've got one airline to depend on, that's a really big problem.

I met with the executive, again, recently. I followed up with a letter with three simple questions. One of the things I wanted to know was a comparison – you've taken on all these extra Air Canada routes. What is the on-time performance on those routes you've taken on versus the almost non-existent service that we're now getting in Lab West and Goose Bay and Blanc-Sablon?

I do know, Minister, when we announced the Air Access Program and \$3.5 million – going back, I had to refresh my memory last night, the media articles, you were not happy at all with the program and you felt it wasn't good. Obviously, it was brand new. We were going to review it by the end of the year, but it really touched my heart when I saw the data. I only saw October, November – in four months, 1,000 people had availed of the program.

Two weeks before Christmas, when you've got 300 people – and to put this in context

for our colleagues in the room, Labrador is 26,000 people only and this program, and many people that the minister would represent, have insured health benefits. Provincially, we have a medical transportation. This program was not for the individual travelling for medical. It was not for the businessperson travelling for business. Many of our people are in long-term care. They're not travelling so when you peel all that away, I think the number of people using it is huge and it was something.

I'll support anything that's going to get us to a better place. I have not taken my foot off the pedal, I can tell you that, since I moved seats and I do know that Goose Bay Airport Corporation is still willing to put money on the table. I do know that meetings are still happening with other airlines.

I mean, it's a little bit unfortunate that the one that's there has kind of taken up the whole ecosystem and continues to expand, but we're paying a price, the average everyday traveller – no pun intended – not just paying a price with the doubling of airfares in the last few years, but we're paying a price in that we're almost to the point that we're held hostage. People are really, really, extremely frustrated. I think that we need to make it more attractive for new intrants to come in.

I want to make a couple of comments on the study that's being done. I think the time for study is long gone. We had InterVISTAS who did an air market study and an airfare analysis. They certainly showed us that, in Goose Bay, for example, we've got the lowest fees that you will find at any airport – the lowest – and the profit on flights was the highest out of Goose Bay.

The one airline that we're talking about, you know, they're a publicly traded company. You can check their profits quarter over quarter over quarter, and it's something I follow closely, and *all Newfoundland and Labrador* does a pretty

good job, if you read *all Newfoundland and Labrador*, which I'm a bit addicted to. It comes in 11:30 at night. They continue to report record profits for that airline.

I'm interested in knowing, given all of the work that has been done – your team around you can tell you the work. They can show you the things, that brief, the presentations that I've done, in print, virtual and still we're no further ahead.

I would like to know, who is going to do this study? Are there some expertise that are being called in to do the study? Is the study being done by our in-house team with Labrador Affairs? What is the cost of this study and what is the time frame? Because are desperate right now. I'm continuing to do what I can. I know, Minister, you've got challenges on the North Coast, and what frustrates me, you need help too.

That company on the North Coast is more than 50 per cent owned by the Indigenous government, the two Indigenous governments, so I'm not talking about that today. I'm talking about the one airline that we have that has the monopoly.

I'm just kind of looking to see, again, what's the time frame? Who's going to do it? What's going to be different than what was already done? I guess because people are hurting so bad now, they're wondering is this a year out? Is this two years out or whatever?

I have a little bit of time on the clock but in the interest of the whole morning, I'm just going to leave it there, Chair, and wait for the minister to respond.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

Just looking at some of the information, or some of the words that the Member for

Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair said, talking about the provincial airline service being at an all-time low. I know where she's coming from. She's probably getting the same complaints that I've been getting.

In actual fact, we saw erosion of services over the last few years, especially as the Member for the Third Party, the Leader, Jim Dinn, talked about we seen when it went to one airline. We know that; I understand that. Then the Member referred to 20 hours of travelling time and explained all the things she had to do because her flight was interrupted. We are seeing a high rate of interruptions with PAL. We're gone back to ask PAL why their flights are being interrupted? Also, it talks a lot about the hardship caused by unreliable travel.

If PAL is going to be the only airline and it's unreliable, even though government is not in the airline business, government has to intervene to actually try to get some action so either PAL will become more reliable or that we can attract another airline in, because we can't afford to have such unreliability.

The Member talked, and she was quite harsh in her words, about PAL and the unreliability. The Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair also referred to the unreliability is holding people hostage. To be quite honest, I'm sure that anyone who travels and actually has a flight interruption, which now is more frequent, we can understand why people would feel like that.

But for us, the study is also going to look into the flight interruptions. In actual fact, that study you referred to wouldn't have captured that. Is it mechanical? If it's mechanical, what's being done in terms of their overall mechanics, their operations for maintenance? If it's pilots, if their supply of pilots is making them vulnerable to flight interruptions, well, the responsibility comes back on them and the paying customer to ensure more reliability.

Also, the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair spoke about patients. When I'm flying back and forth, I encounter, not just patients, but a lot of times students. Students might be home on their break or might be home on the weekend and they're trying to fly back to their place of study and it's interrupted. It creates huge financial barriers.

One of the times I was interrupted, I was flying back from Labrador and we stopped in Deer Lake and then we flew on to St. John's. We were actually flying over the town, the airport, trying to land, when we were notified for the first time of a weather advisory. We were trying to land, we couldn't land because of bad weather, and PAL was actually sending us a weather advisory and people were saying to me: That's just them trying to cover off now so they won't have to pay for our accommodations if we get stuck somewhere. You can't be issuing a weather advisory when you're trying to land at your destination.

So there are a lot of things that go on, but one of the things we want to make sure is that everything is captured. In actual fact, the study you reference doesn't address the high cost of fuel that the airline may be facing. So we want to make sure that we're not giving any excuses to the airline to say that we were unfair or biased in the report. We want a report that's factual, that's up to date, that's current.

We also want some advice, and that's why we're hiring an expert. In actual fact, we are hiring an outside team to do the study, but they're going to be supported by a lot of the administration here that we have, not just Labrador Affairs, but Transportation and Infrastructure and some of the other departments, TCAR as well, because they already have a lot that information. So it was a way to bring down the overall cost, but to increase the efficiencies of information.

I believe that when this study is done, this is the study that we'll be able to reference for the next 10 years and we will actually have the truth. There is nothing worse than people feeling hard done by, but they don't have the facts to stand it up.

What I can talk about for facts is that patients are being seriously harmed by the unreliability of the provincial airline's schedules. We have a lot of patients who are stranded, who don't get out to their appointments or they can't get home. We can't continue to accept that. As Minister of Labrador Affairs and also Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, because a lot of the patients travelling back and forth are Indigenous as well, we can't allow that to continue.

So we're going to have the study done. This is not just another study to kick the can down the line. Anyone who knows me, I'm not about kicking the can down the line or down the road or whatever that saying is, to push off my responsibility. For me, people know that I am concerned about people in Labrador. I'm concerned about the gaps in services and infrastructure. I'm concerned about barriers to health. I'm concerned about high costs of heating your house to be able to provide warmth and comfort for you and your children and your seniors. For me, this study is nowhere near the excuse that was given in the past to kick the can further down the line.

Is that the right way, down the line? Down the road?

OFFICIAL: Down the road.

L. EVANS: Down the road.

I grew up in Makkovik so a lot of these sayings, I don't really embrace them.

CHAIR: Just in the way the conversation is going, it seems that we've moved kind of a little bit into the next subhead.

I'm just going to ask the people on the Committee, if there are no more questions for the Executive and Support Services, we can move on to the next subhead. I think that will encompass the conversation better, because it is Labrador Affairs and the Medical Transportation Programs.

If you're okay with that – or do you have questions about executive services?

J. DINN: I don't have any questions really on 1.1.01. They're more general questions but I do have more questions –

CHAIR: You can ask those in subhead 2, the more general questions.

J. DINN: Okay. That works for me.

CHAIR: That would be fine, I think.

J. DINN: Yes. Excellent.

L. EVANS: I have something.

CHAIR: Yes.

L. EVANS: Chair, before we go on, I'd like to be able to use the time to also finish my introduction, because I was going to headline some of the things and I never got a chance.

CHAIR: That are coming up in the next subhead?

L. EVANS: No, Chair, I think that the time for opening statements is at the beginning. Once you close it, I won't be able to continue on.

L. DEMPSTER: (Inaudible.)

CHAIR: Yes, if she has leave to finish her statement, it's up to the Committee.

L. EVANS: Okay, you can start the clock again?

L. DEMPSTER: I was just making the point that (inaudible).

CHAIR: We'll put 10 minutes on the clock and let the minister finish her opening statement. Is that okay with the Committee?

L. EVANS: Then we'll close that and move on to the next heading.

CHAIR: It will probably bring us to having a break at that point and then we'll move on to the next subhead.

L. EVANS: Yes, I am in.

CHAIR: Okay, go ahead.

The Chair recognizes the hon. Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

Like I said, I just wanted to continue with some of my summaries. Because a lot of times people don't listen to the full audio and it's important for them to get some of these statements.

I just want to talk a little bit about our safer snowmobile travel. We continue to support and administer the Labrador Transportation Grooming Subsidy program to enhance safe snowmobile travel for residents of Labrador's isolated communities. These are communities in Northern Labrador that are not connected by road. We also have trail services in some parts of Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair's District as well.

The total Labrador Transportation Grooming Subsidy – and the acronym is LTGS. I'm not a very big fan of acronyms so I might actually just read it out. The Labrador Transportation Grooming Subsidy program budget for 2025-26 is \$611,000. I'm pleased that our government was able to make a further investment in this program with a \$376,000 increase in the annual operating costs. Now the total is \$987,000 per year.

The 2025 grooming season was delivered with the support of service providers. Key expenditures include operational costs such as wages, equipment, maintenance, fuel, insurance, communication, electricity and trail supplies. Although the season experienced a delayed start, due to snow and ice conditions, it ended up being a very successful season for local travellers.

Since SmartICE expanded its trail markings and ice monitoring services with us, we're also looking at partnering with the Innu Nation. I think SmartICE is looking at partnering with Innu Nation. They were able to extend this coverage from Nain to Makkovik. Labrador Affairs maintains strong partnerships with local communities, organizations and also SmartICE to support ongoing operations and maintenance.

I do want to say that SmartICE is doing an incredible job of increasing the awareness of ice safety on sea ice for travellers and having them work with us actually gives us access to those resources. It's actually a much safer program. Just so people out there listening can understand that.

I also want to talk a little bit about the Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy. The Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy provides air travel support to Labrador athletes aged 18 and under, and also to Special Olympians and to sports organizations. Athletes participate in provincial competitions, in development camps, Indigenous games and junior varsity school athletics. The total budget for 2025-26 is \$830,000.

The program supported athletes and coaches from across Labrador participating in 17 sports and Special Olympics. A total of 1,105 athletes and coaches benefited, just up from 950 in previous years. This included 122 individuals from 79 teams, along with three hosting grants. We do understand the Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy does do a lot to increase access for athletes. The barrier for travel is quite high.

Labrador Winter Games was very, very successful this year. The department's operating budget allows for a total investment of \$750,000 for the Labrador Winter Games. The next Winter Games are scheduled for 2029, and I want to state that our government is committed to investing and continuing our support for the ongoing Labrador Winter Games.

The investment assists in covering the costs associated with organizing and delivering the games. The 2026 games, held in March, were incredible, successful. I was glad to see the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair not only attending the games but she also participated and it looked good on her. So congratulations to her.

CHAIR: Did you do the seal kick?

L. DEMPSTER: No, next time.

CHAIR: That was a record this year, right? Pretty cool.

L. EVANS: Like I said, it just states the spirit of the games. Anyone in any community can try out and have the opportunity to participate and it's not only about the athletes; it's about bringing Labrador together. Both myself and the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair, also Lake Melville and Lab West, we're all very committed to supporting that because of the community building it does for all of Labrador.

There are tremendous benefits to having Labrador run the games in Labrador, especially for isolated, rural communities. It gives them a chance to participate, come together and interact with others. The game supports the development of sport, bringing incredible pride and spirit to residents.

The concept of increased sport development in regions is important. The current board has always considered ways to implement the regional games in some areas. Chair, I just wanted to say, the board

was so incredible in organizing it because it brought so many communities together, organizing the volunteers and just making sure that the games were on schedule and that people had the supports and also that they had the knowledge of where the events were happening and any changes, it took huge effort. Hats off to the Happy Valley-Goose Bay region for stepping up for everything they did.

I entrust the 2029 board to consider regional sport development and participation to maximize the games moving forward. One prime example was the introduction of the torch relay for the 2026 games, that was quite a success. It was very, very popular.

The next thing I'll talk about now, Chair, because I'm getting down to under 3 minutes, is the Arctic and Northern Policy. The department represents the province on various Arctic and Northern Policy initiatives and participates in federal-provincial-territorial communities, like the Government of Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework and the Arctic Council Advisory Committee.

This is very, very important work. As global interest in the Arctic grows, Labrador's specific location is becoming more significant. The Leader of the Third Party who is with us today, MHA Jim Dinn, did talk about that and he had some questions about that, because I know that he is concerned about making sure that the investments are also supportive of the people of Labrador, not just the military benefits, Chair.

This evolving landscape positions Labrador as an essential contributor to Canada's northern agenda. Chair, for me as a minister, as the Minister of Labrador Affairs, I want to make sure that we have a voice at the table and, also, all the things like transportation and infrastructure, health, environmental impact, all of these things are adequately addressed, because we have to make sure that when there's investment in

National Defence, that the regions are supported. That's one of the things that I take seriously as my responsibility as Minister of Labrador Affairs.

Just moving on now to the Labrador Aboriginal Nutritional and Artistic Assistance Program. The Labrador Aboriginal Nutritional and Artistic Assistance Program is administered by Labrador Affairs and provides a total of \$50,000 to support nutritional and artistic initiatives. That's very, very important. It sounds kind of confusing, why would you have the two in, but, in actual fact, we need to make sure that there's proper investment and initiatives, Chair.

The Nunatsiavut Government, Innu Nation and NunatuKavut Community Council administers the funds and determines priorities, which include nutritional programs, community freezers, food banks and support for artists and artistic endeavors. Chair, that's very, very important because they're in the region, that's their people. They know what the needs are. So to have them administer it is so important.

Just looking at community-base grants, a total of \$107,500 in community-based grants were approved during the 2025 fiscal year to support a range of cultural, social, recreational and community well-being initiatives through Labrador. Some grant recipients included Them Days, cross-country ski groups and women's centre.

I also want to talk briefly about the Northern Development Ministers Forum. The Northern Development Ministers Forum advances the diverse and common interests of people living in Canada's North. Labrador Affairs represents the province on the forum and is currently the chair and the host. The forum was postponed several times due to timing of elections and limited ministerial participation. The forum is now scheduled for June in Ottawa.

CHAIR: Seeing now further questions, I now ask the Clerk to recall the first subhead.

CLERK: 1.1.01 Executive and Support Services.

CHAIR: Shall 1.1.01 Executive and Support Services carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subhead 1.1.01 carried.

CHAIR: Being close to the time that we scheduled a break, I think it's only pertinent that we would have that break.

Do you want to call the subhead before we go to break?

CLERK: Why don't we do that when we come back.

CHAIR: Yeah, why don't we just do that when we come back. When we come back, we'll call the second subhead.

We'll break now for 10 minutes, so if everybody can be back around 10:33 or 10:35, we should be good.

Thank you.

Recess

CHAIR: Order, please!

I'll now ask the Clerk to read the next subhead.

CLERK: 2.1.01 to 2.1.02 inclusive, Labrador Affairs.

CHAIR: Shall 2.1.01 to 2.1.02 inclusive, Labrador Affairs, carry?

I'll pass it to the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

Time is flying and we still have a lot of questions, so hopefully we can get through them.

Before I move to the line by line in 2.1, I'm going to go back to the Labrador air access study. I do have some questions around, for the minister, is there a terms of reference that had been done for that study? The minister did mention that they have hired or they're hiring; I'm not sure if that's an individual or a team. I would ask the minister if she can provide clarity around that.

The minister did reference that this study is going to give us information that could be helpful for the next 10 years. Like, the world is changing from day to day, and with the incredible investments under the Liberal Mark Carney government that's coming to 5 Wing, that's going to change. Hopefully the MOU, if it's not lost, is going to bring incredible changes in traffic.

I don't know if what we're doing now is going to help long term, but I also do want to offer to the team, when the minister talks about we don't know the reasons for the delays. Is it weather? Is it mechanical? That's readily available right now.

After I met with the executive, just recently, I have a two- or three-page letter that I'm happy to share. They would just tell you that it's weather, and then the weather delays the flight for a few hours and then the pilots time out and on and on it goes. What I experienced on Sunday, however, was, despite the huge fleet that they have now built up, there is no capacity. When one aircraft breaks down, there's no capacity. There's no other airline to get. When they

told me the full team was working on it, they gave an exhaustive look. Over two hours, there was nothing. That's a problem as well.

I'm just going to grab them. I had them; my letter here was on the phone.

I asked three really simple questions, for which I received no answer to date. One was on reliability. Is the expansion of the Air Canada agreement negatively impacting flight reliability from Labrador? Specifically, how does on-time performance for Labrador routes compare to those operated under Air Canada? Affordability: Why are flight costs from Labrador so high?

Reportedly, these routes have the highest yields in Atlantic Canada. yet PAL benefits from lucrative government and corporate contracts. I know the minister will agree with me there. They've got high load factors and they've got the lowest airport fees, and probably the most important question I asked was, what specific steps is that airline taking to improve reliability and affordability for flights serving Labrador?

I know from budget day on, people were reaching out to me saying we don't need another study. What's this going to provide? How much is it going to cost? The issues are now. So I am happy, Chair, to know that the minister is going to meet with PAL. I'm thinking that means she maybe hasn't met with PAL yet. I know she's been super busy. I did meet – I tried to get in the door very early days with the TCAR minister and when I asked the TCAR minister if she had met with PAL, because it really does fall in her wheelhouse, she said she met with Air Canada. I said: No, I'm asking, did you meet with PAL? She looked to her deputy and said, but Air Canada owns PAL, right? Then her executive had to provide clarity. No, Air Canada does not own PAL.

I don't know if she did end up meeting, I haven't asked that question but I know that the Minister of Labrador Affairs is much

more familiar with this, so I'm happy to see that she's got a meeting set up.

Minister, maybe if you can just answer a few more questions before I move into the subheading on the study, time frame, cost and who's being hired.

Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

Just referring to the study, you said it wasn't clear about if we have somebody hired or if we're going to be hiring? No, of course, we haven't. The budget has been approved and, of course, we have to actually make sure we're hiring the right team or the right person for the study. More importantly is that this is going to bring all the work together. We have to provide the facts to the people.

In actual fact, have having conversations with PAL is one thing, but actually having research to find out what's really impacting flights and flight costs, that's the most important thing that we need to do. So that's going to be a big part of the study, is getting the facts as to the cost drivers.

And people say, oh, we don't need another study. I used to say that when I was in Opposition too because – no, I mean, it's true, because a lot of times –

L. DEMPSTER: A lot easier over here.

L. EVANS: No, no, in actual fact, it's a lot easier over here when you're a minister because you can get the questions; you can get the answers. The problem is sometimes the ministers don't want to ask the questions because they don't want to have to make hard decisions and they don't want to have to take a stand that may be unpopular.

But, at the end of the day, we have to find out what's at the root of this. We have to bring past studies together, but we have to look at current situations. In actual fact, it has got to be fact-based. It has got to be fact-based because that's the only way that people will be able to accurately know what's at the root of these high prices.

Right now, the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair, you can say things and I'll tell you, as soon as you're finished saying them, somebody is going to be coming by and basically arguing with you and saying, well, that's not accurate, and telling you why.

So we need a relevant study that's produced that people can look at what are the cost drivers. Is there gouging, or is there insurmountable costs that's creating hardship for airlines to be able to deliver the service? That's very, very important.

Of course, just looking at incredible change, the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair talked about, yes, we have incredible change as that's coming in. We're looking at Gull Island. We're looking at a lot of industry. We're looking at a lot of the investments in Labrador, including the national defence and Arctic sovereignty.

But we've got to make sure that our communities are ready to be able to embrace investment. Also, we need to make sure that any stakeholders that's coming in that's going to interact with our communities, that they understand our needs, they understand the geography, they understand the cultural differences and they understand what respectful engagement is all about.

In actual fact, we're going to be making sure that this happens. The Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair actually said that she has a two- or three-page letter. I wish you'd actually share that with my department.

L. DEMPSTER: Yeah, I'll give it to you.

L. EVANS: We'd love to have that letter and be able to look at it.

You also talked about the fact that PAL has no capacity. They have all these planes but no capacity, especially when something happens that interrupts a flight, they have no capacity to be able to accommodate. I have witnessed that myself, where flights have been delayed.

Of course, we talked about the expansion of Air Canada and you talked a little bit also about affordability. With all that said, I was writing everything down so I could make sure I could answer your questions, but –

L. DEMPSTER: No, I've got a couple more.

L. EVANS: Yes. So, in actual fact, now you can actually get to your questions and then I'll answer your questions directly.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Perfect.

L. EVANS: In actual fact, Chair, I'm not just sure if the way we do the questions, maybe if the Member could ask a specific question and then give me a chance to respond? Sometimes, like I said, I'm writing things down, she's going on, and I'm afraid I'm going to miss something, so it would be really good if we could –

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

The reason I was doing that is that I'm finding that if I take a minute to ask a question, then my clock runs out on the answer to one because the minister does take some time to answer. That's what I was doing, so now I'm going to try to get

better. I'm asking a two-part question and then that'll be it for me from the Air Access.

Two things: the Air Access Program that the Liberal government put in place was \$3.5 million from September to the end March. Your government, Minister, just announced \$2.7 million, which is significantly less, so I am wondering is it the exact same program? How was that figured derived at? Did the team do some analysis and think we don't need \$3.5 million and that \$2.7 million is good? The most important question there is when will that be up and running?

I've received a lot of frustrating emails from people but Lab West was the biggest. When a man, woman and child have to spend \$4,500 return, people couldn't get out for Easter, the program cut off, seniors – I did receive a lot.

So just to recap, when will it be up and running, because right now I understand there is a gap? However, there still is an Air Access on the PAL website, I noticed when I checked the other day. Can you tell me how you got to the \$2.7 million, which is a significant cut from what we had done, and is it, other than that, the exact same program that the Liberal government put in place with no changes?

Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: In actual fact, we've approved \$2.7 million in funding and then, of course, we do have the additional \$300,000 for the study.

The Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair talks about the \$3.5 million that was put in place and our \$2.7 million is actually significantly less, so do you mind if I just call on the assistant deputy minister of Labrador Affairs. There was a reason why we put the \$2.7 million in. It's not a significant cut. I'm

not going to answer the question, I'll let her answer it.

M. WATKINS: Firstly, we had looked at \$3.5 million budgeted for a 12-month period for the regional access program, so, essentially, it ended up being \$2.5 million when we pro-rated it. The \$3.5 million was based on 12 months and, of course, we looked at maybe nine months when we pro-rated it, hence the \$2.5 million.

Moving forward, the \$2.7 million includes the \$300,000 for the review, so we have \$2.4 million left. Uptake, of course, we said was lower. We tried to rightsize based on our anticipated uptake moving forward.

Minister, would you like me to talk about anything further around if it's exact program?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: There's one thing I will add to that.

The Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair said you had a lot of concerns where people were saying, oh, the program was cut and what's this going to do for our access to those two tickets. Well, in actual fact, we put \$2.7 million in but, if we do go over, if the uptake increases, we will cover off the tickets. For people who are eligible for their two-per-year tickets, we will make sure that they get their eligible tickets. The way we're looking at the uptake and things like that, we're quite confident the \$2.7 million will suffice but, at the end of the day, if we underestimated, we will actually make sure that people who are eligible for the tickets will get their tickets.

People out there don't need to be concerned; they don't need to be coming to you and saying, this is a cut and erosion and all that, because this program is about making sure that Labradorians have access to two subsidized tickets a year. We're

going to make sure that people actually are able to access their tickets, so no worries about that. There won't be any cutting of services.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Leader of the Third Party.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

This goes back to MTAP – not MTAP so much, but air travel, I think the minister, early on, said that she had gone looking for the information on air travel, the reasons behind why it's so expensive, whether it was the landing fees or so on and so forth. I think she said that you could not find the cost information; that no one could tell her. I think that was how it would go, like the previous ministers, and there didn't seem to be a response to her request for a year and a half.

So since the minister has been in this office, is it that there was no information at all on this? The Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair seems to suggest that there were studies done, but I'm asking the minister, when she took office and probably went looking for this information, is she saying that no information existed or data existed as to explain why they were so costly?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Yes, Speaker – Chair. I keep calling you Speaker. I'm sorry about that, I apologize. I apologize in advance because I'll call you Speaker again.

CHAIR: It's interchangeable.

L. EVANS: Yes.

Chair, just to clarify, because this is *Hansard*, I want to make sure I answer the question, when I talked about not getting the answer and kept asking for the answers, I was talking about landing fees in my district. That was the question. Specifically, I wasn't

talking about the overall cost of air travel. I wasn't talking about that. I was specifically asking about the landing fees, asking over and over again for the answers.

The thing about it is the answers do lay in the Department of Transportation. They just, basically, weren't either taking the time to find the answer and provide it for me or they just weren't providing it for me. I hope that answers the Member's question.

J. DINN: Yes.

L. EVANS: In actual fact, the other stuff he was alluding to was, like, what are the drivers for costs. There is a lot of information out there, the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair refers to one study, but, in actual fact, the \$300,000 is going to be looking at the cost drivers and also coming up with some practical solutions that the government could support to help bring costs down.

At the end of the day, this will not be a report that sits on a shelf and is not acted upon. The advice and the information that comes out of this report, we are hoping that we will be able to use it to be able to actually identify the cost drivers and then take action to bring those costs down.

J. DINN: Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for St. John's Centre.

J. DINN: In her answer to my question regarding Arctic sovereignty, she said that people need access in Labrador; it's more than just simply planting a flag when it comes to that Arctic sovereignty. I would agree. People need access to services that other Canadians take for granted.

I guess from my point of view, what would be the practical actions – there may be two or three at the top – that would satisfy the minister and the people of her district and the people of Labrador that demonstrates a

serious commitment to Arctic sovereignty? What are some things, either from the federal and/or the provincial government?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: The very first thing that must be done in terms of the provincial government, and being the Minister of Labrador Affairs, is that looking at this huge investment in the billions of dollars that's announced, we have to work with the military and the federal government to find out what impact is that going to have, first, on the local region. If they're expanding that base, what's the population and who the population is going to be composed of that's going to move into our region and – that's outside of our own basic needs – what pressures is that going to put on? Say, for example, access to health care. Everyone that comes in and lives in that region is going to need access to health care, also housing supports and services. So, for us, it's what kind of impact is that going to have directly on the community?

Also, what is that going to mean for any kind of economic development and what's that economic development going to do or impact the communities? Because, right now, the military base in Happy Valley-Goose Bay is much smaller than it was back in the '60s, '70s and '80s. Basically, what they've done is they basically took a lot of services and the infrastructure out of the base and they went and invested in other places like Alberta, Cold Lake, and all this kind of stuff.

So, for us, it's if they're going to come back in and they're going to reinvest in supports and infrastructure for military, not us, we've got to see what impact that is going to have on the communities.

We're already having those conversations. I've already had this conversation with Labrador Affairs, also with Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation. I've also

reached out to Minister Joedy Wall with Social Supports and Well-Being. I've already talked to the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure. I already talked to the Minister of TCAR. Also, we're looking at talking to the minister and the deputy minister responsible for Seniors because, right now, Labrador, itself, has a lot of issues, a lot of barriers to services and supports and infrastructure.

Just looking at health; I'm the Minister of Health and I see Labrador, as well as the rest of the province, we're struggling. We're struggling. There has to be a lot of work to correct the erosion of health care and the vacancies for doctors and nurses. We have to invest in equipment and infrastructure.

In actual fact, Mr. Dinn, Leader of the Third Party, right now, I spent many minutes just talking about the impact that expansion of the military base is going to have, but you talked about it and I've talked about it, Arctic sovereignty also has to be about what does it mean to be Canadian. What services and infrastructure should we have access to as Canadians?

There should be more investment in the supports and services for Labrador. If you look at Northern Labrador, we're not even connected by road. Our aircraft is an 11-passenger aircraft. Medevac in Nain, you can't medevac somebody out of there at night, unless you get the Coast Guard involved or the military with the Voyageur helicopters.

These are things that I'm aware of. I've just taken government; I'm just now a minister, but one of the things I'm doing is I'm not sitting around blaming the Opposition who were in government for 10 years. We have to have the conversations, and I've already had the conversation. I'll tell you right now, a lot of work is being done, even though we've been government for eight months.

Also, if your party – because I know you're strong advocates, especially of vulnerable

groups, and you're big advocates for housing, infrastructure, for seniors and all that – at any time, want to engage me and my department for Labrador or Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation about concerns and you want to actually advocate, I would really, greatly appreciate it.

J. DINN: Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Member for St. John's Centre.

J. DINN: Thank you.

I know we've talked about the solutions for power to the Labrador communities and the coast and in the minister's district. We also know, though, that Labrador West needs plenty of green energy, and soon if it's going to continue to have mining up there. We also know, from a recent news article, that IOC is heading into some rough times, probably from years of high grading, so that's going to have an impact on their mining resources and other projects, like Kami, are going to need the power then to start up their operations if we're going to stabilize, let's say, Labrador West and, indeed, the economy of Labrador.

In your department, given the uncertainty around IOC and around the Churchill Falls MOU, is your department working with other departments to come up with a credible plan to get power to these districts, should the MOU fall through? If you have any credible plans or contingency plans to make sure that Labrador West and Labrador has the power it needs?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

Yes, your questions are really credible questions when you're concerned about energy shortfalls over in Lab West to be able to accommodate expansion. That's

been an issue that has been ongoing. It's been several years. I got elected in 2019, the same time MHA Jordan Brown got elected. From the very beginning, he was calling for increases in energy so the companies and IOC could actually expand. We know that there is an energy crunch.

Just to comment, too, you talk about Lab West, they need plenty of green energy. That's so important. You look at the Upper Churchill. The way the Upper Churchill was built, we thought, back in the day – we being Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, the common folk – this was a great investment. We thought it was the best thing ever because people got jobs. People were able to move away from the fishery and go in and get big jobs.

First off, actually, when it come to building up Churchill Falls, people went in cutting wood, cutting roads and actually had a stable income. Sometimes the first time they've had stable income in their lives and they thought it was the best thing, but what we saw as the dams got built and Churchill Falls got built and then, as the years went by and we saw changes and the price of electricity went up and, of course, we got stuck with very, very, very little.

Do you know something? If you go back in time and you walked around and you talked to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians and say, oh, wait a minute, this might be a bad deal. We've got to stop; we've got to look at exactly what does it mean. You would have been run out of town because people saw the jobs, they saw the money and they saw the employment that they needed for their families, to be able to support their families, to be able to have a better life. Because a lot of them were basically working seasonal work, either in the fishery or going off and working for the liner boats, as we call it in Labrador. A lot of Newfoundlanders came up to Labrador working on the liner boats, and then they'd go home. It's hard work.

So, for me, you can't fault people basically when they see something, they see as a good thing. Government has the responsibility to make sure that it's not just short-term benefits. For me, when I talk about the MOU, that's basically what I say. We need to make sure, the next 50 years, we're not going around falling into the same pattern of having the boom of the jobs and then not having the benefit of the project.

So, for us, that's very, very important. I don't think I said anything there that can be taken out of context, and it will be in *Hansard* so people can go back and look at it.

You speak to the Minister of Energy, and they all talk about the needs. They've been up to Lab West. They've actually met with stakeholders. They know; they know that the need is there. One thing, as we say, is that we are not against Gull Island. We see the Premier has spoken and the minister has spoken about the value of Gull Island. We are pro-development when it comes to Gull Island, responsible development.

But we also know those gaps exist, and what we're doing now is looking at how do we stabilize Lab West to make sure that we have the ability to actually plan responsibly when it comes to these developments that have been proposed.

J. DINN: Thank you.

CHAIR: Okay.

Just as a reminder to the Committee that the three hours will be up at 12:15, with the extra five minutes, you'll have a hard stop at 12:20.

I now recognize the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

I am worried we're going to run out of time because it's a really (inaudible) time. It's

kind of not a political time here to get our questions answered.

I said I wasn't going back, but I have to go back once more on the air access; because, next to health care, which is the number one issue I deal with, air access has been really, really huge for the people of Labrador for some time.

We had a program that we put in place, \$3.5 million. The new government is continuing the exact same program with less money but there is \$300,000 that's going to be spent on a study. I'll ask the minister, is there a time frame on that study? Is it the intent of the study to determine whether the provincial government will offer incentives to attract another airline, perhaps? So two questions, the time frame of the study, and is it the intent of the province to offer incentives?

From where I sit and my involvement over the last couple of years, I feel strongly that the information that the minister is referencing already exists. I feel strongly, and I have for some time, that competition is the answer. I will also say that once we can get to a better place with affordability, my next time is going to be spent on MTAP, and better rates will help MTAP and we'll be able to get more claims out because the high cost is impacting everybody, ultimately. You know, the businessperson who's travelling and paying themselves, their product then is more.

Those are my couple of questions that I have for the minister, and the one that I asked the last time, which wasn't answered is, is there a gap today? Can people apply today or do we have to wait until the budget passes? It'll be like July or August, so six months of this year – because I know the program, you couldn't book after the end of March.

Those are the three questions, Minister. Can you use the program now and, if not, when? Has there been any change and

improvement? I know the minister expressed a lot of discontent around people having to wait a month to apply and only two tickets. All of that seems like it's the exact same as what we put in place, but I'm just wondering about the intent of the study and when we can avail of those rates again in Labrador.

Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

Just to address what the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair said, the question that wasn't asked. When you're talking about being able to access the program, I don't think you asked that.

L. DEMPSTER: Oh yes, time frame.

L. EVANS: Time frame for the study, but you said that there was a question there about the access program. Could you just repeat that question?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: In my last line of questioning, I wondered when can people avail of the Air Access Program again, because people have not been able to book since the end of March?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Yes, there was a bit of a gap. Like I said, part of that was about budget. We had to get it in the budget. We're actually going to be resuming it now quite shortly.

OFFICIAL: Yes. We're negotiating with PAL now.

L. EVANS: Yes.

One of the things that we're looking at is just getting the contracts in place with PAL. One of the things that we are encountering, of course, is the price of the tickets is expected to go up higher again. That kind of feeds into the study. The cost keeps going up, going up, going up and people can't afford to fly now. Anyway, I'm not going to run down the clock talking about that, because we already talked about it, but we are negotiating with PAL now for the rates. People will be able to avail of their two tickets for this year.

But you were asking what are some changes and what are some improvements, well, one of the things is the program came out quite quickly and a lot of people didn't have a chance to use their two tickets. Say, for example, it came out in August – I think it was August when you did the announcement – and now there might be some teachers that are looking at, well, I'm going to use those tickets in the summer. There might have been some people now who have their kids in school and they say, okay, I want to travel in the summer. They didn't use their two tickets. They were holding off on it.

The thing about it is, what we've done for this program, people who didn't use their two tickets, they can still use those tickets and they can use this coming year's tickets as well. We want to be fair to everybody. So people now will be able to access the four tickets. If you use your two tickets because you travel, well that's good for you, but you'll also be able to book it for this upcoming year, your two tickets. We wanted to make sure that no one fell through the cracks. I think that's only fair. I don't think we needed to do that but I think it was important for Labradorians to get the full benefit.

The timelines of the study, we're looking at doing that this year. Right now we're actually engaging with potential businesses and individuals that offer that service, but I must say, to the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair, she's talking about stuff

that's already out there. A part of the role for this study is going to be taking the previous work and compiling it; compile it all under one study and see what's relevant today, if there's been changes and, also, what new information needs to be collected because of changes. It's going to be a comprehensive, relevant, current study that we can use to address the high costs.

I think you talked about improvements, making sure that people got access to their tickets, and one of the biggest complaints we've heard, the office has heard, the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair probably heard as well, I certainly heard, MHA Joe Power heard, MHA Keith Russell heard is this booking in advance, 28 days. Man, who knows when they're going to be travelling 28 days in advance? Most Labradorians don't. A lot of times it's so expensive to fly, they only fly when they need to, like if something come up that's kind of urgent.

So one of the things that the team is doing now is negotiating with PAL, but we're trying to get that wait time down, right? In actual fact, we're looking at getting it down to three weeks but, by the time we got things in place, we're hoping to have it even shorter so that people can actually avail of the tickets when they need to because, 28 days, a lot of people are losing out on this subsidy.

I remind people out there who may be listening, we're only talking about two tickets a year for Labradorians that are subsidized. It's not bringing down the overall cost of travel. In actual fact, we see the cost go up while this program is in place, so it's not solving the high cost of travel.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

I think I'm going to move on to Medical Transportation. Hopefully, I will come back

and get to – it sounds like it's all the same. I think the two tickets for people to travel leisurely or whatever will help. The 14 days was what the airline required.

On the Medical Transportation, which is a super important program, long before the program came under me in budget '23, I had a really solid appreciation for the program and the benefits of it for the people that I work for in Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair. A tremendous value and we made improvements year over year. In the budget this year, I thought I was miscalculating last night as I was going through Estimates. Then I talked to the lady on my right, who is a pretty brilliant fellow Labradorian, and she said: no, the math is not working out for me either.

In the budget, it indicates \$3.7 million in new money, I was getting \$3.4 million and I think you were getting \$3.1 million. I'm going to ask a couple of questions – the clock is quickly going – I want to ask for clarity in the amount because it's not aligning with what we're seeing here in the budget.

Just for the record, the budget and the blue book talked about 100 per cent medical coverage, but it's 100 per cent of what was already under the eligibility list, right? I'm looking to the ADM who knows it inside and out. It sounds like there was nothing extra there but, for clarity, anybody needing to avail of medical transportation now, they're getting 100 per cent of hotel reimbursed, 100 per cent of mileage, 100 per cent of airfare?

I'm asking because I remember my meetings with the executive. One year we had an individual out of Central Labrador and I think it was 18 trips in one year. So I want on the record, in *Hansard*, we are now covering 100 per cent, it could be 25 trips a year for one individual, and I'm looking for clarity on that \$3.7-million figure that was in the budget?
Thank you.

CHAIR: Just for clarity, the subject that we're on is 2.1.01 to 2.1.02 inclusive. Both the Labrador Affairs and Medical Transportation Program, those are both under the one subhead, so we can ask or answer questions under either one of those at this time.

The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Yes. We're just trying to find out where she is.

I spoke at the beginning, in the blue book, we're committed to taking the MTAP eligible expenses up to 100 per cent because the MTAP eligible expenses were only partially funded. That has created issues for the patients, especially, like the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair talked about, people who have to travel frequently for their health care need.

Just to clarify, it's 100 per cent of eligible medical travel costs, and this coverage applies to approved travel for specialized insured medical service. When you were talking about the \$3.7 million and you were talking about new money, in actual fact, what I'll do is defer to our assistant deputy minister for MTAP to answer the questions and explain the breakdown.

S. SNOW: The \$3.7 million is made up of \$3.5 million relating to MTAP, plus the \$200,000 for salaries. The reason why the math is probably not working out is because there's a \$300,000 savings in MeTS, which is offsetting that \$3.7 million.

L. DEMPSTER: Okay. That's very helpful, yes.

CHAIR: The time has expired. I'll come back to you.

L. DEMPSTER: Okay.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Leader of the Third Party and the Member for St. John's Centre.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

Under Labrador Affairs, \$850,000 was announced last year for targeted recruitment of teachers and student assistants for hard-to-fill locations. Would we be able to have a breakdown of how much of that money was spent, what it was spent on, how many vacancies were filled and any vacancies that still existed after that?

Last year, I think, government spent for 400 positions, but we were still short 161. I'm just trying to get a breakdown of how effective that money was in filling those positions. I'm looking for numbers in this case.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Could I go back to the Member and just ask which one he's talking about on the lines and what section?

J. DINN: I'm looking at last year. It would be under section 2.1 that we're looking at this. There's no specific line there. I'm just trying to figure out with Labrador Affairs and having teachers up there, I'm just wondering, last year it was announced, probably before your time, for targeted recruitment of teachers and student assistants.

Do you have any breakdown as to how that money was spent and the number of teachers that were hired to fill those positions? I don't know, maybe you have to speak to the Minister of Education on that one as well.

L. EVANS: Yes, in actual fact, it may be under Education, but we can go back and get that information for you.

J. DINN: Yes. Thank you.

I do know there are retired teachers in some of the districts, in your district in particular as well, so there are hard-to-fill positions as well.

With that, I want to move on to the Medical Transportation Programs, I guess it comes down to 100 per cent and the key word there is eligible. As we find out, there are people who are denied access even though they've got medical notes and so on and so forth. I'm just wondering will there be analysis to see what's not covered now but that should be covered in the future?

Again, I look at the person in my district who had to fly to Ontario. Their surgery was not offered here at all. It couldn't be done here. I know a family member who went to have surgery done, a different form of it, it could have been done here. There was a more expeditious form in New Brunswick, Mohs surgery. We weren't expecting to get the payment because we knew that there was a similar surgery here, except it would require a longer wait time for the results.

However, when it comes to surgery that's not done here, as in the case of the person that's in the media, it couldn't be done here, there are cases where the doctor up there said you need to stay around in the area for a few days after, before you can go on the plane, because it had to do with – I don't know if it was the carotid artery or the veins, nevertheless, had to stay around. But MTAP said, well, we don't cover for hotel visits for personal time following the surgery. It wasn't personal time; she was directed by the doctor.

So I guess what I'm looking at here in the review is will there be any analysis to see, I guess, in reviewing these, I don't know, arcane requirements and eligibility rules, I'm just trying to figure out will there be some analysis done to see if things should be covered or some flexibility.

I don't know if anyone in MTAP can explain that one to me or offer that to me.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: With MTAP, since I've become minister and also while I was in Opposition, when people would come to me, I would reach out to the MTAP office because if somebody wants you to advocate for them, they're willing to give you consent. So the first thing I would say is, you get consent from the patient, contact our MTAP office or the minister, then ask those questions. Because what we found out, not about this specific case that you've mentioned, but we've had other cases in the news, multiple cases over the years where somebody is out saying, oh, I submitted receipts for \$6,000 and I'm only getting \$1,000 back.

Well, if you had consent and was able to advocate on behalf of the patient, a lot of times what you'll find out is that they didn't travel within the timelines for the treatment. Say, for example, a case that you just raised where the doctor says that they have to stay longer. Well, if they had gotten a doctor's note and brought it back and it was part of the procedure, they would have been re-evaluated for their eligible stay time.

MTAP is very efficiently run and getting that consent and being able to advocate and get the right answers and get the information really is enlightening I have to say, Mr. Dinn, because a lot of times there are situations.

So what wouldn't be covered if somebody travels for an eligible trip is if they go up many days in advance or if they stay many days after their procedure and it's not a part of their recovery. For example, if somebody goes to Toronto for surgery and their appointment is cancelled, MTAP still compensates them for the travel up and the travel back.

The next part is very, very important. If they stay another five or 10 days outside of what

it should have taken them to travel up and travel back, it's not going to be covered.

Now, if the doctor says you just had a procedure, which is totally different, and you need to stay around for your health and well-being as part of the procedure, you need to actually stay around. If you come back with the documentation, then MTAP reviews that.

Chair, do you mind if I let my ADM actually continue on with answers on the specific questions that they had about procedures?

S. SNOW: I'm not sure I can add much more than what the minister already highlighted because that is actually true. If somebody actually goes up for a procedure and they are required to stay additional time, they have to have a medical note and then we assess that medical note. If it outlines to say that they had to stay for an extra five days and then they may have had a follow-up appointment, all of that time is actually included in our analysis for what is eligible for assistance.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Member for St. John's Centre.

J. DINN: Has there been a medical note provided from a specialist or doctor – have there been claims rejected because there wasn't enough information in the note?

L. EVANS: Before my ADM answers, will you acknowledge me?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Before my ADM actually gets into specifics for your question, it's very, very important to know that MTAP will not reject. They'll go back and say this is not eligible because you don't have supporting medical information.

In defence of the department, there have been times where patients have been told

it's not eligible because, say, for example, the medical information they provided was for a second opinion. I have to say, Mr. Dinn, that second opinions are not covered under MTAP.

In defence of the department, they actually reached out and helped the patient get the proper medical documentation. Now, that's not in their job descriptions. It's not a part of their responsibility, but they worked with the patient's doctor to actually make sure that the documentation was changed so that they were eligible.

A lot of stuff that gets out there, that kind of subjects MTAP to being seriously undermined and sometimes the criticism can be quite harsh, a lot of that is not founded. Also, the important thing is sometimes patients who are actually accessing health care but the policy doesn't allow for that to be covered. I think that's what you were alluding to – are we reviewing it?

We are open to reviewing things, but at the end of the day, the MTAP staff can only follow the policies that are in front of them. That's why when we look at extending it to 100 per cent, that is why we have to take the time to hire the extra staff to put in place so that people don't fall through the cracks. But more importantly is that we update the policies because the MTAP staff follow the policies.

We have to go through and get the policy changes drafted, reviewed, approved and then put through the proper approval processes. That's very important. At the end of the day, like I said, we don't deny people outright and reject them. We go back and say your documentation says this; to be eligible, you have to have this.

Anything more you want to add to that, Assistant Deputy Minister Snow?

S. SNOW: When we assess all claims, any missing documentation, including

insufficient documentation regarding medical terminology or sufficient information for us to be able to assess, results in an incomplete letter, not a denial. What that outlines to the patient is exactly what is missing and what is required.

The opportunity then rests with the patient to provide that additional documentation and once it's submitted, then we'll complete our assessment and then make a decision as to whether it's eligible or denied.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Also it is very, very important if a constituent comes to you with a concern that you think they're being failed by the MTAP system, please reach out to the office. Please provide the information and we will work with you if they're eligible and there might be missing information or some sort of misunderstanding or the person didn't properly communicate, as we want to make sure that all eligible patients get the benefits that they're entitled to. That's so important. Reach out to our office anytime.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

Just back to the MTAP questions a little bit. One of the changes that was put in place was 100 per cent of the first \$1,000 would be covered upfront with the voucher program. Now with the 100 per cent coverage, how will that work and what's new there?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the ADM for MTAP, Ms. Snow.

S. SNOW: In regard to the 100 per cent, what would happen is if it's for a particular client who is travelling from the Labrador-Grenfell health zone region, based on the contract prices that we have established with PAL, then we would provide 100 per

cent coverage of that amount which we have a contract with PAL for.

CHAIR: Just for clarification purposes for *Hansard*, PAL stands for Provincial Airlines and it's been said an awful lot of times and I don't want anybody to miss that.

I acknowledge the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

I want to ask the minister about the MRI that was announced for Goose Bay. All of us, all of the time when we're in the chair should be asking on behalf of the people that we work for. So during the election, people in Lab West thought the MRI was going there and people in Goose Bay thought the MRI was going there. It's good to see that an MRI was announced for Goose Bay.

So I would ask the minister (a) and (b) – (a) what is the time frame for the MRI for Goose; (b) with two remaining to be announced, is Lab West on the docket at all to be considered for the second MRI?

Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: The time frame for the two MRI, we didn't commit to time frames, so I was really pleased that we were able to actually deliver in this budget two MRIs for more rural regions. It's going to increase accessibility. It's going to really improve access to health care.

For Labrador to be one of the ones that's approved first, in the first year, is amazing. I realize that putting it in one community, such as Happy Valley-Goose Bay, or if we put it in Lab West that we would have people having to travel, but the travel is significantly cut down where people can actually access it quicker.

Also for me, as minister, in my other role as the Minister of Health, I believe it's going to serve as a recruiting tool. Because it's basically going to revolutionize how we can access health care in terms of the doctors and nurse practitioners being able to order an MRI. Here in Labrador, it is really going to be a huge improvement.

In terms of the time frame, we're looking at this year. This year, we're committed to actually funding the two MRIs. I was pretty surprised, to be quite honest, because of the financial constraints the provincial government is in right now, for us to be able to step up and be able to deliver two is really a huge thing. I think it shows the investment and the commitment the Premier and our government have to Labradorians.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

In the budget – I don't have the figure right in front of me but I think it was \$10.5 million – I was going to say \$10 million – an investment in seniors' housing. We all know the tremendous need for housing in Lab West. The money announced was to support the federal application that is gone to the Build Canada Homes.

I'm just asking the minister, what will happen to that investment if for some reason the federal application isn't approved? Some of us have been down the road and through the cycles when it comes to housing in Lab West. It has really been a challenge. I know there's money in the budget but it's kind of contingent on the federal money. If the federal money isn't there, where does that leave Lab West?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

I am quite confident that we will be able to access the money. There is already work

underway. Also, the MHA for the district, Joe Power, has engaged myself and Minister Joedy Wall of Social Supports and Well-Being and Housing, and there were some initial conversations we had with the federal MP. We're all very supportive of this. That's why we put the \$10.5-million investment in there to make sure that it is successful.

If, for some reason, it is not successful, if the money did become available, myself and MHA Joe Power – also, MHA Keith Russell is very supportive of Lab West even though his district is Central Labrador – we will make sure that the money is invested to offset housing in Lab West, especially when it comes to seniors' housing, but I'm quite confident that that's actually going to happen.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Thank you, Chair.

We're going at a better pace now. That's good because we have about 20 minutes left.

CHAIR: I'm good like that.

L. DEMPSTER: I'm going to ask two parts again in the interest of time.

The branch roads on the South Coast, I do have a letter going back to when Nick McGrath was the minister of Transportation – so that's some time – when folks were asking about the paving of the branch roads, because as soon as the asphalt and the contract started going through to do the Trans-Labrador Highway, people were saying don't pass my door; we're just tired of living in this mess of a dirt road.

He said, once the Trans-Labrador Highway was connected border to border – it's not finished and I'll come to that because I know the North Coast is not tied in yet – the next logical step would be the branch roads. This

year, we had \$3 million that was approved in budget '25 for Southern Labrador. Engineering work started last season, and really sadly that roadwork was cancelled and I'm going to continue to lobby really, really hard.

I'll use Charlottetown branch as an example. It is 29 kilometres, a dirt road, heavy traffic going and it serves three communities: Norman's Bay, Pinsent's Arm and Charlottetown, home to the only processing facility in all of Labrador. All spring we're trenching through, it's super bad. In the summer, it's like a dust storm with heavy traffic, because the shrimp company hauls their product out of Pinsent's Arm by trucks, and then we've got harvesters from all over Labrador and the Island, they dock in Charlottetown and they're in and out.

I'm just asking the minister for her support. We're not done if we don't have asphalt on all of those. I know that the Premier of the day, when he was CEO, was having dialogue with one of the communities about regionalizing health care in Southern Labrador. I fought it really hard at that time saying we can't drive an ambulance over a dirt road when someone has got a broken femur or a bone sticking out of their ankle – we had all those scenarios – and someone's holding an IV bag without pavement. St. Lewis is a dirt road; Charlottetown is a dirt road, they're 29 kilometres. Then we've got Cartwright, which our folks were saying we would need federal help with, for sure, because it's longer, but I want to ask the minister where she stands on getting the branch roads paved?

Also, we had done the pre-feasibility for the road to the North and the next step is a feasibility. I actually flew North with my former colleague, Minister Bragg, and I didn't agree with how the study was done – going straight up and tying in communities after monumental investment – but I firmly believe a road to the North Coast starting

with places like Postville, there will be an investment, lots of return on investment, lots of minerals and things like that, but paramount would be the better access for the people.

When the road in Southern Labrador was done, it was done in, usually, 80 kilometres, each chunk, and the federal government met us halfway. I do think that it's not insurmountable at all. Maybe in my time and the minister's time, we won't get a road to Nain, but places like Postville and Makkovik and those areas, it's definitely within reach. So if she could speak to if they're moving on a feasibility and the branch roads of paving to the South, I would appreciate that.

Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

Just for clarification for *Hansard*, when you were talking about the branch roads, you said you had a letter from TI regarding pavement or you sent a letter to TI, could you clarify what year that was and who the Minister of TI was when you sent the letter?

Also, you were talking at one point and you said about the Premier of the day, which premier was that and what year was that conversation?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: So the letter, that should be in *Hansard* still, TRIM and I'm sure I have it up there in one of my boxes that I could get. The letter is from Nick McGrath, who was the Minister of Transportation. At that time, we were building the road and there was a school of thought that we should be tying in as we go, but then the government of the day were just going to proceed on and do the main link. I see the merit in that.

The Premier that I referenced is the Premier today. When he was CEO, he was having dialogue on regionalizing health care –

L. EVANS: What year was that? What year?

L. DEMPSTER: When he was CEO, so 2012 or 2013.

I was pretty strongly opposed to anything like that. Once you've got a paved road, St. Lewis will be able to drive somewhere for a half an hour, Charlottetown would be able to drive, Mary's Harbour got it now. In the absence of pavement, I wasn't willing to entertain a conversation on regionalizing health care because it just wouldn't work for the people. So those are the two things and then it's the North Coast piece.

Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Okay.

Nick McGrath, I think he was removed. The time frame was before 2015, because that's when your government took power. So your conversation was about a letter that was written pre-2015 and you are talking about the current Premier, when he was CEO, back in 2012 so, I mean, you're looking at more than 10 years that your government was in government.

So referring back to when the PCs were in government, any kind of commitment pre-2015, it's really difficult to be able to draw back and say, okay, back when the PCs were in power, before 2015, before your government took power and was in power for 10 years, and you're talking about your community and needing some paving. The first thing the Minister of Transportation would say is, well, that's something that we'll have to look at, but we've only been in power for seven months. It's the same thing if you try to tie the Premier into something

he said to the CEO about health care and transportation back in 2012, it's pretty difficult to tie that.

I know in my district now we don't have roads. We don't have paved roads. We don't have highways. We can't get aboard a car and drive out for an appointment. We can't put an ambulance on the road to take you out if you can't fly.

There's a lot of work that needs to be done, but I am very supportive of improving road infrastructure, advocating for improvement for road infrastructure. I understand the value of the fish plant. I understand the value for paving.

In actual fact, Lisa, Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair, you mentioned it to me now, post-budget, but say, for example, if that had been raised to me earlier, I probably would have had the conversation with the Minister of Transportation.

I'll do so now, and I'll do so in the future, because I do understand the value of having a fish plant, a productive fish plant and how the economy of the region relies on it. I'm sure the people also would like the convenience of having their road paved. I will be having those conversations along with you and the minister.

CHAIR: I just want to remind the floor that there is half an hour left to the three hours.

The Chair acknowledges the Member for St. John's Centre.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

With regard to MTAP numbers, I'm looking at last year, even up to this year, it doesn't matter, if you have the number of people who availed of or applied to the MTAP to have costs covered? I'm looking at those who applied; the number that eventually were approved; the number for any who were denied, if there were any denied; and the number of any applications that are still

in progress because you sent back the information as incomplete. I'm looking for specific numbers of those who availed or applied; those that were approved, no problems, or eventually approved; and those were that denied.

I can think of one who was denied, and I'm not talking about the person in the news. In this case, I won't oppose the denial. It makes perfectly good sense.

I'm looking for the number of any applications that are still in process, very straightforward numbers, if you have them, please.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Chair, I'll just address the first part and then Assistant Deputy Minister Snow will add the other parts to the question.

Looking at MTAP in 2025-2026 for Labrador, we processed claims for 2,401 patients and that amounted to the number of claims of 4,079. They were reimbursed at 50 per cent of the cost.

What we're going to be doing is when we go to 100 per cent, that will be a significant increase.

For the Island, we've had 4,981 patients availed of MTAP and that resulted in 8,665 claims. The per cent of the cost there was 50 per cent.

When we're looking at the people who availed of MTAP, we had 7,382 but we also had the 12,744 claims.

Now, when my assistant deputy minister speaks, she'll talk about the increase year over year. Just looking back, I just want to look at the total numbers. For patients back in 2022-2023, we had 4,449 patients avail of MTAP with 7,320 claims. That went up to 5,668 patients availed of province-wide of

MTAP with 8,794 claims. In 2024-2025, we had 6,203, resulting in 10,278 claims.

When you look at the patients availing of this system, the MTAP support system, the number of claims has grown significantly. We think that's because of awareness. People who have become more and more aware of the MTAP are now availing of it. Also, people who have had success under MTAP, they have reimbursement through word-of-mouth and also becoming more aware. There is a significant increase.

Like I said, a lot of times people think their medical travel is going to be covered but it may be outside of the policy. That's so important.

I'll let my Assistant Deputy Minister Snow speak on the numbers for people who couldn't avail of the system, if we do have that information.

S. SNOW: In '25-'26, we processed 12,744 claims and we issued 387 denial letters, which represents approximately about 3 per cent of the total claims that we process.

The majority of the claims that are generally denied are for people who request assistance outside of the 12 months of the date of service, because they have 12 months in order to submit from their date of service.

As to how many claims that are currently outstanding, that we're waiting on additional information, that is not something that we track in terms of numbers.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Member for St. John's Centre.

J. DINN: Thank you.

For the purpose of *Hansard*, I'll go back to the analysis, this is to make sure that this is on record, as well. I think the minister said about the authorization, having access to the information and that we should contact

the office. Well, in the case I'm talking about, we did. We did contact the minister's office and we were involved with it. Actually, that's why the person was so frustrated that they went to the media about it. They had exhausted that route beforehand.

That's the first thing, with regard to that. That's the key aspect of that, that was so frustrating. Also, I guess, what I was looking at, to a point, was with regard to a medical notation. Maybe this is the one that I really – because it's not just with MTAP but also with the health system as well. I'll give you this example.

I can think of the one gentleman who was on income support. He was hit by a car, had his leg broken and the orthopedic surgeon, or the emergency room doctor at the point, said he needs a boot cast to walk. His leg is broken; he needs a boot cast. What came back was, well, we can't approve. We won't pay for the boot cast because not enough information. We want more information from the doctor.

For him to pay it out-of-pocket would have been half his monthly income. He's on a Comfort Allowance. Now I remember having the conversation with the personnel, I said, you understand how this is going to sound on the media if I go to the media about this because what you want now is this person, or me or someone, to go back to a specialist, the emergency room doctor and ask for more information.

Now, I can understand if you come back to me and say, Mr. Dinn, you said this person needs a boot cast; we need more information; I'm not a qualified doctor. I can think of Krista Stephens as well when, through the system, they needed more information as to why she needed these certain type of injections. The amount of detail that required from the specialist at the time, I think, had more to do with bureaucracy than actual medical need. I think Hugh Segal said that the social safety

net is strong enough to entangle but too weak to lift up.

In the end, we eventually got the boot cast. I don't know if someone donated it or whatever else but, the fact is, you wanted me to go and track down whoever the specialist was and say, well, yes, he needed a boot cast; his leg was broken. I think that having the specialist, that should be the word right there if they've already determined that. I don't know, unless you had doctors reviewing it or so on and so forth, but it's second guessing the professional judgment of a health professional.

If there's anything that you're going to review, then that needs to be reviewed. Because I understand if I call and say this person needs this, yes, you're going to say you need documentation; but when it comes to a health professional, you want me or the patient to go back and take up more of that time where they are already under enough strain, I think it's unnecessary and puts an unnecessary strain on our health care system. It's just simply designed, from my point of view, to eventually drive people to find other solutions.

That's where I'm coming from in that. If there's going to be any review done, I would like to know, I guess, even in the number of denials or the paperwork, how much of it is going back, well, we need more information from the doctor? That's where I'm going with that.

So two things with regard to that. People do go to the minister's office and to the department and still they get entangled and, secondly, I think if anything, we've got to find a way to make it more streamlined. People don't seek to be sick. They really don't want to travel to another place to get treatment, and when they're sick or if they're facing a life-threatening situation, they do not want to be entangled, nor do their doctors, in bureaucratic gatekeeping.

Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

A reminder that we are now down to 20 minutes left in the three hours.

L. EVANS: Chair, I'll let my assistant deputy minister answer the question, and then I'm going to add some context to it about MeTS and what is covered.

S. SNOW: MeTS, which you're referring to, which is the Medical Transportation Supports Program provides medical transportation. With regard to a boot cast, that would be covered off by a separate program within the Department of Health called the Special Assistance Program.

But in any case, as a program, there has to be a balance in terms of the documentation we have to request to ensure proper accountability. Not talking about a specific case, but oftentimes the information that a minister or an outside stakeholder party has in regard to a particular case, they don't understand the full picture and there may be additional reasons as to why we're requesting additional information to be able to support a request for a particular transportation request.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: I think the Member of the Official Opposition –

OFFICIAL: Third Party.

L. EVANS: Third Party, St. John's –

J. DINN: Centre.

L. EVANS: Centre, yeah.

J. DINN: I'm hurt after all those years working with me that you don't know that.

L. EVANS: Sometimes I forget my own name.

J. DINN: So do I.

L. EVANS: But he raises a really good point, and the point is people who are vulnerable and who need support, we need to make sure they're not falling through the cracks. So MeTS is for transportation. It wouldn't cover a boot – sorry, that's my Northern Labrador accent. It wouldn't cover a boot, but in actual fact, he's probably referring to the Department of Health Special Assistance Program where they didn't automatically cover it, or it could have been some program under Income Support where the person should have been looked after.

But I think what it shows is that working in isolation and in silos really hurts vulnerable people. I'm not running down your clock; it's already at zero. But I just want to take a point to say that, you know, with government, we have to do better. Because, at the end of the day, the Member raises a good point. We can't let bureaucracy, administration bureaucracy, we can't let policies prevent people who need the supports and services from accessing them.

We will try to do better. We will try to work with you, your CA, to do better, because also, my role in Health, we have to make sure.

J. DINN: If I may, the example I gave is an example, I guess, across all departments, and I run into it in all departments, the bureaucracy and the paperwork and the gatekeeping and it slows things down. So I take the minister at her word and that we need to be doing better and that is positive.

L. EVANS: In addition to that is, like, I will say it's really hard for staff, and it's not just in MTAP. In any government service, it's really hard for staff to be criticized when they're following the policy. If the criticism should be directed anywhere, it should be at

government policy that they're enforcing. That's something that we have to work at. We have to make sure that our policies address the problem and that there are supports in place.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair.

L. DEMPSTER: Given where we are with the clock and the fact that I have many, many questions that aren't answered, but we'll get to some of them in due time. I am going to ask about – I think it's four or five questions that I have. I know we're going to be out of time. Minister, I'm just going to ask those questions and if you would commit that your folks will prepare an answer for me, that'll be quite acceptable.

Post-secondary: Seeing a lot right now in the media around MUN going to shrink their campus, making a lot of cuts. I don't need to go into that. We're all really familiar with the direction that it's going. I think we're really going to need the minister for Labrador's support to ensure that we don't see any erosion of services from the Labrador campus. We need to make sure that these services continue there.

We're seeing phenomenal examples coming out of the North Coast residents, South Coast residents, Central, et cetera.

I also would ask that, given the dialogue that's happening around the MOU, Churchill Falls on the horizon, everything that's happening around Kami, and people have reached out to me asking, I believe that we need to be lobbying, advocating together for expanding training to Labrador.

The money that's coming to 5 Wing – I don't want any of us who represent Labrador to lose sight of the needs still around search and rescue. Jeanette has been phenomenal leading that charge and she is still regularly posting about that.

The wharf in Red Bay, I am sure I could get it through an ATIPP but it's probably easier to just ask here. Harbourside consulting did maybe two studies. My concern around the wharf in Red Bay is, yes, there's no fish harvesting activity. Their tourism industry is booming and growing year over year with cruise ships and we do have Harbourside that I've met with on three occasions, that have said it's a safety issue. It's just a really serious incident waiting to happen.

Something has to be done, even if it's going to be boarded up. I don't know how you take down the front of the wharf that's dangerous, which got all the piles gone from the crib and all the things that the underwater ROV showed us.

With the *Nao San Juan* coming – 2027 will be a blink, you close your eyes twice and then a year is gone – I'm really worried about the safety. I've talked to the Minister of Transportation two or three times; talked to him the other day, still happy to continue that conversation.

My other topic is on Cartwright school. I'm really, really worried. We're fortunate that we haven't had an incident in Cartwright. I was there again recently and they told me when they plug the kettle in at one end of the school, the power goes out in the other end. I want to get this in *Hansard*. There are so many things wrong with the structure, with how it's not accessible. They had a young student there with dwarf syndrome; she couldn't even do all the steps. It's up and down, up and down, for anyone who has been there. The whole electricity seems to be just a garble together. It's really a serious issue and it needs to be moved.

The contract was awarded; we had concerns about the contractor that it went to, but folks in TI vehemently wanted to go that route because the next highest bid was \$500,000 over. It was a guy who was quite familiar with Labrador.

My final comment on the roadwork – and I thank the minister for her comments, that she's going to talk to the Transportation Minister, because we did have money approved in *Budget 2025* and it was cancelled. I don't think it's too late yet to do something because the work has already been started. When the roads plan was announced, first, there was no money for Labrador at all. Then North West-Sheshatshiu area is now getting roadwork. I know the department inside and out and the pots of money. There's always money held back, and because it was approved and started, it would be a shame for it to be cancelled now.

I did have something else but, anyway, I'm going to leave it at that. While I do have a little bit of time on the clock, the roadwork, the Trans-Labrador Highway, I know the minister said you're asking about something from 2015. It's not that nothing was done. When we took government in 2015, we had 80 kilometres only of pavement that the former PC government had done, and it was the road to Muskrat Falls. That's all we had done. They started on the Goose Bay end. There were hundreds of millions of dollars year over year over year, and I can tell you it wasn't even easy for me with my own government when people would say, do we have to put another \$40 million in the summer, when it's carryover from last year?

I was like a dog with a bone, as someone in Transportation called me, and we built the rest of that road. We redid 76 kilometres in the Straits. Ambulances couldn't drive on it. School buses couldn't drive on it. We did the 76k new. We did the rest of the road going north out of Red Bay. It was gravel, all the way up to Goose, except for 80k out. So all of that just got done and now the next logical step would be to move to branch roads.

I want to thank the minister for her time this morning. There are a lot of issues in Labrador. Anybody who sits in that chair, it's a lot of issues and we're not going to fix

them all in a four-year term, but I think it's important to prioritize. I think it's important to have good dialogue. I think there's strength in numbers. I think that we can help each other on some of the issues.

My health questions, I've kind of left for when we do Health on the 19th of May, but those four or five questions that time did not permit, I'm hoping, Minister, that maybe you can ask your staff to endeavour to pull something together. I know it comes to you for final sign-off, but I would like to have some answers to some of those things that are really, really important to me.

I'll leave the couple of minutes that I have left on the clock because we probably both have to go and get briefed for Question Period.

Thank you.

CHAIR: Are there anymore questions from the Committee?

The Chair recognizes the hon. Minister of Labrador Affairs.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

I'll just address some of things that the Member left out there in terms of the MUN campus in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. There's no forecast erosion or reduction in services. Also, she did talk about search and rescue, that's something that's very near and dear to both of our hearts. I do support the calls for response in Labrador. We talked about the lifeboats. That is something that needs to be addressed in terms of regional access to those lifeboats that can make a difference when it comes to response.

Also, when you look at the dock in Red Bay, that's something that we will have to discuss with the Department of Transportation. I'm not quite sure where it would be in terms of if there's any work requested. I don't think

there was any work in past budgets about addressing some of the issues.

L. DEMPSTER: Research and studies.

L. EVANS: Yes.

I know, for example, all the docks in my communities, in actual fact, when they put on that new ferry, most of the docks weren't up to being able to hold the boat in place. In Makkovik, I was told that engineers came in and looked at it and said the dock should have been condemned, but they couldn't condemn the dock because they still needed to have the ferry be able to access the dock. Most of the work that was done was based on trying to upgrade it so that the dock would be safe.

There are issues in all of Labrador ports in terms of dock infrastructure, and it's certainly been a constant erosion and underfunding of those supports. I think there's going to be a call for a lot of work that needs to be done but in terms of budgeting priority, that's something that we'll have to work with the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure.

For me, Chair, my time is up as well, so I'll end it there.

CHAIR: Seeing no further questions, I will now ask the Clerk to recall this subhead.

CLERK: 2.1.01 to 2.1.02 inclusive, Labrador Affairs.

CHAIR: Shall 2.1.01 to 2.1.02 inclusive, Labrador Affairs, 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.

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 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: I'd like to thank the minister, her department officials and the Committee for your attendance today. I think it was very cordial and a good debate and, hopefully, it'll advance things for the people of Labrador going forward. I appreciate the debate and the preparedness of the people that gave answers today.

The next date and time for our next meeting in this Government Services Committee is May 21 at 9 a.m.

I ask for a mover for adjournment.

M. BUTT: So moved.

CHAIR: The Member for Lewisporte - Twillingate has moved for adjournment.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Motion carried.

Thank you, everyone.

On motion, the Committee adjourned.