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Social Services**

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Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development

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Honourable Derek Bennett, MHA

SOCIAL SERVICES COMMITTEE

Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development

Chair: Sherry Gambin-Walsh, MHA

Vice-Chair: Chris Tibbs, MHA

Members: Perry Trimper, MHA
Lucy Stoyles, MHA
Scott Reid, MHA
James Dinn, MHA
Paul Dinn, MHA

Clerk of the Committee: Gerrie Smith (A)

Appearing:

Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development

Hon. Paul Pike, MHA, Minister

Alan Doody, Deputy Minister

Tracy English, Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy and Programs

Brian Evans, Assistant Deputy Minister, Corporate Services and Performance Improvement

Aisling Gogan, Assistant Deputy Minister, Prevention and Early Intervention

Lori Rose, Assistant Deputy Minister, Child and Youth Services

Gayle St. Croix, Communications Director

Margot Pitcher, Executive Assistant

Dave Martin, Department Controller

Also Present

Craig Pardy, MHA

Helen Conway Ottenheimer, MHA

Lela Evans, MHA

Ashley Politi, Official Opposition Caucus

Colby Greeley, Official Opposition Caucus

Scott Fleming, Third Party Caucus

Jim Locke, Government Members' Caucus

Eileen Anderson, Government Members' Caucus

Annie McCarthy, Government Members' Caucus

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Craig Pardy, MHA for Bonavista, substitutes for Chris Tibbs, MHA for Grand Falls-Windsor - Buchans.

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Helen Conway Ottenheimer, MHA for Harbour Main, substitutes for Paul Dinn, MHA for Topsail - Paradise, for a portion of the meeting.

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Lela Evans, MHA for Torngat Mountains, substitutes for Jim Dinn, MHA for St. John's Centre, for a portion of the meeting.

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

CHAIR (Gambin-Walsh): All right, we'll call the meeting to order.

I'm going to announce the Committee substitutes first. So substituting for Grand Falls-Windsor, we have Bonavista. We have St. John's Centre here, but Torngat Mountains will come in to do subheads 4.1.01 to 4.1.03, I believe?

J. DINN: (Inaudible.)

CHAIR: More?

J. DINN: Well, no. When the Member arrives (inaudible) she's going to take over.

CHAIR: Okay, so the Member for Torngat Mountains will take over when she arrives.

For Topsail - Paradise – no, we have Topsail - Paradise here, Gerrie, and we have MHA Ottenheimer here also. So she's not substituting for Topsail - Paradise.

P. DINN: No, that's okay.

(Inaudible.)

CHAIR: So you'll be leaving?

P. DINN: Because we are back and forth on some issues, for example, (inaudible).

CHAIR: Okay.

The Member for Harbour Main will substitute for sections for the Member for Topsail - Paradise. Okay, that sounds good.

Break – so we'll see how we go. Usually if we're in an hour and a half and it seems that it's going to be going longer, we'll take a quick, 10-minute maximum break.

I just want to remind the Members also to wave to identify yourself. Please keep an eye on your tally to make sure the red light is on. Often, I will say your name just so that the crowd behind the scenes here can know who is going to answer this question.

We ask to not make adjustments to the chairs but if you have, we'll just say oops. The water coolers are down here and just up here.

First, I'm going to get the Committee Members and the substitutes and the employees to introduce themselves and then I'll go over to the departmental officials and we'll start with the minister. But first we're going to start on this side with the MHA for Harbour Main.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Helen Conway Ottenheimer, MHA, Harbour Main.

A. POLITI: Ashley Politi, Official Opposition Caucus.

P. DINN: Paul Dinn, Member for Topsail - Paradise.

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

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

C. PARDY: Craig Pardy, MHA for the historic District of Bonavista.

P. TRIMPER: Perry Trimper, MHA for Lake Melville.

S. REID: Scott Reid, MHA, St. George's - Humber.

L. STOYLES: Lucy Stoyles, MHA for Mount Pearl North.

P. PIKE: Paul Pike, Minister of Children, Seniors and Social Development, as well as MHA for Burin - Grand Bank.

A. DOODY: Alan Doody, Deputy Minister of Children, Seniors and Social Development.

A. GOGAN: Aisling Gogan, Assistant Deputy Minister, Prevention and Early Intervention, Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development.

T. ENGLISH: Tracy English, Assistant Deputy Minister of Policy and Programs with Children, Seniors and Social Development.

L. ROSE: Lori Rose, Assistant Deputy Minister of Child and Youth Services, Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development.

B. EVANS: Brian Evans, Assistant Deputy Minister of Corporate Services and Performance Improvement Branch with Children, Seniors and Social Development.

M. PITCHER: Margot Pitcher, Executive Assistant to Minister Pike.

G. ST. CROIX: Gayle St. Croix, Director of Communications.

D. MARTIN: Dave Martin, Departmental Controller.

CHAIR: Okay, thank you.

Before we start with the Estimates, I want to ask the Committee Members and substitutes to review the minutes. Did you receive the minutes?

So if there was any errors or omissions in the minutes, and I'll ask for a mover of those minutes.

P. TRIMPER: So moved.

CHAIR: The Member for Lake Melville so moved.

On motion, minutes adopted as circulated.

CHAIR: So the Committee previously agreed that if an independent Member comes into Estimates, that at the end they would get 10 minutes. So is everybody okay with that?

Okay. So we'll now proceed with the Estimates review, and I'm going to ask the minister first to speak for 15 minutes, and then a first responder will get to speak for 15, and then it's 10 minutes after that.

Go ahead, the minister will speak first.

P. PIKE: Thank you and thank you all for participating in this year's Estimates for the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development.

First of all, I'd like to thank the staff that are here with me; a fine, dedicated staff who do wonderful work. It's great to see the way that the department works together for the benefit of all Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. I certainly appreciate the passion they bring to their work. So thank you very much, everyone.

My department has 11 lines of business, which includes Child Protection, children in care, adoptions, Youth Services, Community Youth Corrections, adult protection, Disability Policy, Seniors and Aging, Income Support, the community sector, and Social and Economic Well-being, including poverty reduction.

I'm just going to highlight some of the department's key areas of progress since

last year. I know I have 15 minutes, but I'll try to make this as quick as possible.

Adult protection: The updated *Adult Protection Act* was proclaimed in December 2022 and continues to be used to support vulnerable adults, while also upholding and strengthening the rights of those adults. The act has a strong human rights focus and enhances our ability to keep at-risk adults safe, while completing a thorough assessment and a care plan for that adult. My department's adult protection staff are actively engaged with Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services, our police and community partners in implementation of the act.

Seniors and Aging: The Seniors and Aging Division focuses on helping seniors remain healthy, active, engaged citizens living in age-friendly communities and addressing the province's aging population. I must say it's a very rewarding area to have because we know that our province has an aging population, and it's great to get out and talk to seniors and see what types of things they would like to see happening for them.

Last week, we had three meetings which took in probably 15 clubs from my district. That's a start and then, hopefully, we're going to go on the road talking to seniors.

It was just great – we did it in an informal setting, but we just sat back and we talked about the various things that seniors need and their concerns. That, hopefully, will help us drive the types of things you will see soon in the Seniors' Well-Being Plan.

In October 2022, the Speech from the Throne established a Cabinet Committee on Seniors to build upon the work of the Health Accord, and I chair that Committee. We focus on how the provincial government can address seniors' issues, including helping seniors age with dignity and we also are looking at the challenges faced by the frail elderly.

In *Budget 2024*, we continued to invest \$600,000 to support seniors and older adults in the Age-Friendly Newfoundland and Labrador Communities Program, which we talked a lot about when we met with our seniors, and they liked that idea. They liked the concept. It does a lot to help them socially.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Community Transportation Program: We talked to seniors about that and the fact that some communities may join together at some point and probably purchase a bus and get into an agreement with towns and so on, and work through CSSD. Seniors have trouble getting places that they want to go. A lot of seniors give up their licences at a certain age. I think Clarendville would be the model for the rest of the province. They really have a good system out there.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Seniors' Social Inclusion Initiative – and we're also looking at the Intergenerational Program Guide. We announced that a couple of months ago and that'll help highlight the benefits of meaningful intergenerational interactions for individuals, and I've seen that in action too.

As a matter of fact, I just had some pictures sent to me and I spoke to a couple of CYN people last night. We were talking about the camp for persons with disabilities, but we went on to look at the intergenerational activities. Tuesday night, they had an activity in one of the CYNs I was talking about, where they had seniors in and they went back to the cornhole challenge again, seniors against youth, and it was really a lot of fun. They stayed and they had tea and sandwiches. The last word from seniors, I was told by the coordinators, was when are we doing this again, and that's a great thing.

With regard to the recent report of the Office of the Seniors' Advocate, all departments, including my own, have been working collaboratively on this. It is not only CSSD,

but it is other departments and, again, we are working together.

With regard to the recommendations relating to my department, I sent a letter on March 22, 2024, to Minister O'Regan to request that his department review the monthly payment schedule for OAS and GIS. The letter noted that seniors in the province were frustrated with the challenge of the monthly payments, after a lifetime in the workforce, where they would be paid every two weeks.

I can understand that. It is something that if you're used to getting paid every two weeks, you have a lot of adjustments to make if you're only getting paid once a month. We'd like to see something done with that. I think everybody is hearing that in their districts and we'd like to move on that as quickly as we can. We'd like to have the federal government move on it, I should say. We also suggested that this be a subject of a future meeting of the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors Forum.

The report also recommended the food bank delivery for seniors. Our government recognizes the challenges we face – seniors face in accessing food. I say we because I'm a senior – especially when transportation options are limited.

We are also pleased that we recently provided \$44,000 to Food First NL to assist in the acquisition of a vehicle to support the mobile market and food delivery operations in St. John's. Food First NL would be working with community partners and this will include food delivery options for seniors.

The Disability Policy Office works closely with persons with disabilities, organizations of and for persons with disabilities, as well as advocacy groups and across federal, provincial and territorial governments.

In 2022, as you know, the Accessibility Standards Advisory Board was established

under the province's first *Accessibility Act* and became law in December 3, 2021. This board recommended priorities for development and accessibility standards in 2023 and is currently in the final stages of establishing the first standard development committee for accessible customer service.

In *Budget 2024*, my department has a number of investments for program grants under the Disability Policy Office, including \$400,000 for Accessible Vehicle Grants program and the Accessible Taxi Grant program; \$325,000 for Accessibility Grants, formerly called Inclusion and Capacity Grants; and \$94,500 for paratransit, for GoBus operations.

Also being continued in the budget is the new Summer Camp Inclusion Grant, launched last year, which provides financial assistance to families to pay support to help facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities in summer camps.

I'm not quite sure of the uptake in that right now but, personally, I've had a number of calls about this camp and how great it is and the people that participated last year. We did an announcement on these camps a while ago and, hopefully, the applications will trickle in. But this is great. I had a call from a parent last night who has a child who has a disability and she was wondering how she could get her son into one of the camps.

So we not only provide funding to those people who are holding these camps, we also provide funding to the person who's attending as well to have a caretaker with them. It's all working out fairly well. When you get programs that people respond positively to, then you certainly try and do your best to keep these programs happening.

Indigenous children and youth in care: My department is committed to reducing the number of Indigenous children and youth in care. There have been a 22 per cent

decrease from June 2019 to December 2023 in the total number of Indigenous children and youth in care: 385 Indigenous children and youth in care in 2019, and 300 Indigenous children and youth in care in December 2023. We continue to work with Indigenous governments and organizations, along with the federal government, to improve outcomes for Indigenous children and youth.

Social well-being, poverty reduction, income support – I know my time is getting short here so I'll try to get the rest of this done. We all recognize the high cost of living and the inflationary pressures that we have in these challenging times. To support the overall well-being of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, my department led the development of a new Poverty Reduction Plan, which was released in November of 2023.

Guided by the recommendations of the Health Accord, this new Poverty Reduction Plan focuses on actions. We're reducing child poverty, creating meaningful and sustainable employment, improving income, as well as supporting seniors.

It's always important when you're developing a plan, you have extensive consultations – and we did – with people with lived experience in poverty, food insecurity, housing instability, community partners, front-line staff, and other government departments and agencies.

Budget 2024 includes \$41 million of incremental investments toward a new poverty reduction program. This includes \$4 million to expand the former prenatal infant supplement up to age five – absolutely wonderful. We are so pleased with this. The first payment was issued last month and renamed the Prenatal-Early Childhood Nutrition Supplement.

Close to \$30 million for the Newfoundland and Labrador Child Benefit, which we increased by 300 per cent, positioning us

the third-highest child benefit in Canada. The first increased payment was issued last month.

\$3 million to expand the school food programming to all pre-kindergarten programs in K-9 schools. This will be expanded to schools in September 2024 to schools with the highest needs, of course.

Chair, \$4.8 million to implement a targeted Basic Income Program for people age 60-64 who receive income support and also, they are assessed as needing supportive services and financial supports. They would also have to be receiving services from the Health and Community Services Community Supports Program. The enrolment in this will begin this month, by the way. So that particular program, enrolment is now starting.

Also under the Poverty Reduction Plan, we looked at the Employment Support Stability Pilot Project province-wide. Co-developed with Choices for Youth and Stella's Circle, this offers increased supports for Income Support recipients. Participants are able to keep more of their earnings and immediately experience increased financial benefits. Based on the success of the initial pilot in the St. John's area, we expanded the pilot province-wide in December and we now have 400 individuals, by the way, in that program. I remember when we had less than 50. Now we have 400.

Anyway, there are lots of things under our Poverty Reduction Plan. I could go on and on, but I'll have more time for that when we get an opportunity to speak in the House about our Poverty Reduction Plan. But we remain committed to working collaboratively with all community and organizations across government.

So thank you very much and I guess we'll get on with our Estimates.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

Before we proceed, I'll ask the Clerk to call the first subhead.

CLERK (Smith): Executive and Support Services, 1.1.01 to 1.2.02 inclusive.

CHAIR: Shall 1.1.01 to 1.2.02 inclusive, Executive and Support Services, carry?

The Member for Topsail - Paradise.

P. DINN: Thank you.

It's great to be here this morning. The minister is very lucky to have the staff he has with him. I've worked with many in the past and top notch certainly, for sure. Very dedicated to the cause and what they need to do. So I'm not expecting anything other than fantastic answers and information here today.

I do have a number of questions I wanted to start with and they're pretty general. But I have to ask them and I'll go through them. So just looking at – the minister has his binder. Will we receive a copy of that binder?

P. PIKE: Yes.

P. DINN: We can? Okay.

You also mentioned I think in your preamble about a letter you wrote to Minister O'Regan on March 22.

P. PIKE: Yes.

P. DINN: Can we also get a copy of that?

P. PIKE: Yes.

P. DINN: Thank you.

With CSSD, how many staff are currently employed?

P. PIKE: As of March 31, 2024, we had 1,027 approved positions, with 255 vacant, including incumbent on leave or no active

incumbent in position. So we have 772 filled positions; 705 of those are permanent and 67 are temporary or contractual.

P. DINN: Thank you.

Have any new hires taken place over the past year?

P. PIKE: We've had a number of new hires. Are you looking for the exact number?

P. DINN: Well, I mean, you can provide it after. That's fine.

P. PIKE: We continue to look for new employees all the time – very active. We do have that figure, by the way. It's 113 new hires from outside government: 65 hires and 48 re-hires.

P. DINN: Would you know how many of those are social workers?

P. PIKE: Social workers – no, we don't have that there here, but we'll get that.

P. DINN: Okay, I appreciate that.

Still on this, and I think you may have answered some of this, but retirements – how many have we seen retire this past year?

P. PIKE: Retirements are here – 24.

P. DINN: Twenty-four.

You touched on some of it when I talked about staff. Of your 1,027 – and you did the math on the numbers. But out of the actual numbers that are hired, how many are part-time, temporary and contractual?

P. PIKE: Okay, so 705 are permanent; 67 are temporary contractual.

P. DINN: Okay. Yeah, I thought you'd said it. I didn't catch the end of it.

P. PIKE: That's okay.

P. DINN: Okay, thank you for that.

Have there been any positions that have been eliminated from the department?

P. PIKE: We have two positions that have been eliminated. These are vacant and part of our restructuring.

P. DINN: Okay.

This goes back to my question on social workers; how many social worker vacancies are currently across the department?

P. PIKE: We have 105 social work vacancies right now, out of 369.

P. DINN: It is 105 out of 369, so whatever the math is, 200-and-something there.

P. PIKE: Twenty-eight point five per cent vacant.

P. DINN: With the social workers – so we have the number there – can you tell me the average caseload for each of those social workers?

P. PIKE: Yeah, we do have that. It's broken down into caseload. In metro – you're looking for the ratio?

P. DINN: No, the actual shortages in those areas.

P. PIKE: Yeah, the caseload –

P. DINN: Sorry, caseload.

P. PIKE: So in metro, it would be 2,735 number of cases.

P. DINN: Divided by how many actual employees (inaudible)?

P. PIKE: Well, the ratio is 1 to 19.

P. DINN: One to 19.

P. PIKE: So it's 144 social workers; 2,735 cases; and the ratio is 1-19.

P. DINN: With that caseload for each social worker, do we know the breakout of what the caseload entails, because there are some out there that have very complex needs, there are some out there that have not so complex needs, for lack of a better word.

So when we're looking at the caseloads for social workers, do we actually look at, in-depth, the complexity of that caseload?

P. PIKE: Yes, we certainly do.

In Central West, we have 80 social workers; we have 2,114 cases; and the ratio in Central West, by the way, is the highest in the province, 1-26.

In Labrador, the number of social workers, 40; the number of cases, 973; for 1-24. So the provincial total on that would be 264 social workers; 5,822 cases; and the ratio would be 1-22.

P. DINN: Okay.

I do applaud our social workers. I don't know how some of them get through the day sometimes with some of these complex issues they deal with. It's really amazing.

So with the numbers – and they are just numbers right now that I've talked about – are there any areas of concern? Are there some large areas of concern that we need more, or you see or identify a greater need for social workers?

P. PIKE: Obviously, child services would be the, as you know, most demanding that we have; protective Services, as well, but overall I think child services is probably our biggest.

P. DINN: Okay, thank you.

Just for clarification, when you talk about the ratio for social workers, I'm assuming they have a variety of cases. They're not just in one area, right? That was my question earlier on complex needs.

P. PIKE: The answer to that would be yes.

P. DINN: Is there any, I guess, initiative within the department to ensure that there is a balance of that with each social worker or is it just driven by demand in the area?

Again, going back to my question that some areas are more complex than others, so is there any attempt to balance that out between social workers?

P. PIKE: I'm going to ask Alan to answer that.

A. DOODY: Thank you for the question.

Absolutely, the caseload is driven based on the type of cases in the region. Caseload assignment is done at the office level and then actually rolled up through zones and then regions. So the overall intent is to try to balance the type of cases, whether it's adoption cases, foster care homes, child in protection, Level 4 case visits. So they're all assigned through that office and the intent is to try to create as much balance as possible across the system.

Sometimes that's not always achievable, based on the staffing shortages the minister had mentioned. So there are other initiatives within the department to try to create balance in workload. One of those initiatives is we're adding more social worker assistants into the mix to help create space for social workers to focus on their role. We also sometimes deploy social workers from other offices to other regions, depending on workload to help assist other social workers.

P. DINN: Thank you for that.

I didn't expect anything less. Good answer, thank you.

I guess it just takes me back to the question I asked earlier and it seems a good process lined out there and I know we're dealing with a shortage of social workers.

So with that process, have there been any trouble areas that have stood out in the past year where you couldn't adequately address with social workers, with programming?

A. DOODY: Operationally, there's always pressure on certain regions of the province. The vacancy rates in Labrador, for example, are high, as well as those in the Central West region are higher than those in metro.

The social workers are extremely dedicated and do a lot of work. So I guess to say there's not necessarily an area particularly within the field of social work in child protection that I would say, besides from child protection caseload, it's really regionally driven and, operationally, we're responding to that by trying to put more resources in place to support those who are doing it. Of course, this would drive overtime for social workers and things of that nature to help deliver that work caseload.

P. DINN: Thank you for that.

You just mentioned overtime. How much overtime do we have out there, do social workers require? I ask that because yes, you need overtime, but then too much overtime can lead to burn out. So how much overtime are we seeing by social workers?

A. DOODY: Again, it's regionally driven. Just based on the nature of the work, overtime is inherent in the work. Social workers in child protection caseloads in particular, they cannot control when they may have to respond to an incident where a child needs protection or they have to visit a home or things of that nature. So overtime is inherent in that work.

In remote areas of Labrador overtime is higher. A lot of that is just because we have

staff that are flying from different parts of the province to support that area. When they're in location, they work longer hours while they're there. It's usually a two-week-in, two-week-out model. That drives some overtime. So for some employees it's higher than others and it's regionally driven.

P. DINN: I guess the impetus for my question was around the social workers themselves to ensure there's no burnout there. I was going to say I assume, but I would hope that the department is keen on that and looking at measures to ensure that doesn't happen. Would I be correct in that statement?

P. PIKE: Yeah, I would say that our department is very much focused on recruitment and retention. When it comes to recruitment, we have brought in a lot of things to try and attract social workers to CSSD. We've offered a signing bonus, we've looked at flexible work hours and, as well, we're taking on Memorial's graduates for work terms, and that's right across, we'll take any Canadian university, we'll take their graduates as well or their students when they are doing their work terms, we'll certainly put them in and immerse them in our department.

I guess the thing with it is, and you talk about burnout and so on, it's very real. Our department is very much concerned about that. That's why we try and do a good mix.

P. DINN: So just on that topic, on the overtime burnout, we look at things like social worker assistants. What are the qualifications for a social worker assistant?

A. DOODY: Social worker assistants predominantly either have a background in early childhood education or a bachelor's degree in a social sciences major. So that's the baseline requirement for them to come into service.

P. DINN: How many of those will we have in the department?

A. DOODY: So how many we have, I'd actually have to get you the exact number. But we are working on an increased number. The current ratio, I believe, is 1-6; one social worker assistant per six social workers and we're in the process of recruiting one social worker assistant for every three social workers.

P. DINN: So, just for my own information here, would that work similar to an apprenticeship program? Would the assistant be mentored or how does that work, or do they just go right into a job?

A. DOODY: No, of course, anyone that comes into the department, regardless even if you're a social worker, there is training required and mentorship provided to folks to make sure that they're able to deliver the services that we ask them to deliver.

We do see that we do have social worker assistants that come in and eventually will apply to go back to get their social work degree and move into social work. So we do see that as well.

P. DINN: Thank you.

CHAIR: The Member's time has expired.

The Member for St. John's Centre.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

A few months ago, I think at the start of this year, we had an ATIPP that had 99 social worker vacancies. Now you're saying it's 105, so it has gone up by six. By your own admission, you're looking at a 28.5 per cent vacancy rate.

P. PIKE: Correct.

J. DINN: That's significant.

P. PIKE: Yes.

J. DINN: So has there been exit interviews with social workers who've left as to why?

I'm assuming, like, for people to leave a job, either they quit, they move on or whatever else. I'm just wondering what the exit interviews –

P. PIKE: We do exit interviews as much as possible and, to be quite honest with you, the nature of the work is very difficult. A lot of social workers move on from our department to other areas, other departments because of the nature of the work. It is really difficult; it's taxing and it can have long-lasting effects on people that have been in those positions.

J. DINN: I would agree with that, no different than a classroom teacher, that the work can be taxing. But it becomes increasingly taxing and overwhelming if the number of problems that you're dealing with are in excess.

So would it be possible then, if you've done these exit interviews, if there's a report or something on this from what you've found from talking to your social workers and what, if any, solutions they've provided? But, right now, it's increased since the ATIPP, so I'm just wondering like –

P. PIKE: Yes, with us, we find it very fluid. It changes from month to month but, again, you have to take into account – and you know, and you know – that it can be very difficult. There's certainly a network there of social workers that get together, I'm sure, and talk about their caseloads and try and get through some of the things that are happening.

But, again, when I talk to social workers in our department, a very dedicated passionate group but their work can be really, really difficult. Those that are on the ground, it can be really taxing. Of course, if positions come open in other departments, in other areas, they decide that they would leave.

I had an opportunity to speak to, I think it was, year-three social work students at

MUN about a month ago and we talked about the jobs and so on. I found that the majority of them want to stay in Newfoundland and the majority of them were excited about going to work in our province. From what I could gather, they didn't have a good insight into what they would be expected to do in our department, and that's why it's so important for us to take these students in to give them some experience in their work terms and so on. Then they could certainly see that this is for me, or this isn't for me.

That's our hope, but I guess the positive thing I took away from that is these social workers want to remain in Newfoundland and Labrador.

J. DINN: I'll finish with this. I can't speak to what other districts deal with, but I know that the number of calls and the complexity of the calls that come to my office are significant. It's one thing to have significant, complex problems. You can probably deal with it and you hopefully make it, but what I guess is overwhelming, I find, when I'm talking to my constituency assistant, who has become a partial social worker in many ways, as a result of this, is not so much the complexity of it but the fact that there are so many of them and that we can't make headway.

That's the frustrating part. Complexity is part of it, but it's the fact that we cannot make headway. So I guess my concern here is that yes, I understand that some of the problems are complex, based on my own experience as a teacher and everything else. But the issue has always been about, I think most of us want to feel that we can make some headway.

We may not win all the cases but if you have more and more cases, your workload is such that you can't make headway, and that's a significant problem. But I really think 28.5 per cent vacancy rate is a significant problem. It's a crisis, to me.

Also, if I understand it correctly, you've got 255 vacancies overall in the department. That's basically, if I want a rough math, again about 25 per cent or more in that as well. So what's being done to address that? And I would argue that this probably one of the most important departments in the government.

P. PIKE: Again, I mentioned a few initiatives, but we're also looking at the operational changes, enhanced technology, and also adding additional staff in other areas to share workload. We're constantly monitoring our social workers and ensuring that the workload remains as fair and consistent as possible.

J. DINN: Okay.

I'm assuming then you do actually survey the remainder of the 369 social workers as to – you monitor their mental health and well-being, right? I hope so.

P. PIKE: We certainly do.

J. DINN: Thank you.

I'll probably come back to that at another time.

Right now, what's been the effect of moving Housing, NLHC, out of the CSSD? I know it was a Crown corporation, but they worked hand in hand. Has that had any effect on staffing, procedures and so on and so forth?

P. PIKE: No. None at all, Jim.

J. DINN: Would you be able to outline what your department envisions by wraparound services for, let's say, a client, an individual who has complex needs, and how does that look on the ground?

P. PIKE: I'll let Alan answer that.

A. DOODY: So wraparound supports, it varies. There are multiple things, whether that's different types of counselling, it could

vary, anything from employment counselling to persons who are battling addictions, to financial counselling. A wraparound support's overall goal is to move people to independent living and help give them the skills to do that.

So depending on the complexity of the case, the types of supports provided could vary.

J. DINN: So let's take the most complex, the one who ends up renting in a house where they're paying \$3,000 a month for rent; the most difficult to house, probably the most danger of being unhoused, probably most likely – and I have written your department on this already, without identifying any individual, but there are a number of people in my district who are paying rent around the \$3,000 range. So they're the most difficult to house.

I'm talking about people who will kick the windows out of the house, the next-door neighbour or the neighbour has to have a police escort to get in. I'm trying to get an idea as to what wraparound services mean in this. Because if that's independent living, it's jeopardizing that individual's ability to remain independent and also infringing upon just the quiet enjoyment of the people next door.

Does wraparound services mean you check in on them, you have all the services take turns checking on them once a month, once a week? Are they in a setting where they can have supports or are they pretty well – as some ministers have said, if you note any suspicious activity, call the police? That has been the response from a number of departments on difficult to house people, call the police if you see any suspicious activities, and the people next door just feel totally abandoned.

So I'm just trying to get an idea what we mean by wraparound supports for the most difficult to house and make sure they stay housed.

A. DOODY: I think what's really important to highlight is that when you're dealing with adults with complex needs, who are deemed to have capacity, then they also have to be willing to avail of supports. So supports can be offered and individuals have to actually want to avail of those supports.

Without getting into the specifics of cases, I think the reality is through community partners, through multiple departments in government, there are always supports being offered to these individuals with the goal to try to help them maintain.

Unfortunately, we do end up in circumstances sometimes where the justice system does have to get involved with these individuals. But from a CSSD perspective, we work closely with community partners, as well as our own staff, to support those individuals with complex needs. Of course, the Department of Health and Community Services have a role in there as well.

CHAIR: Thank you.

The Member's time has expired.

The hon. the Member for Topsail - Paradise.

P. DINN: Thank you.

I'll just continue where I left off, which was talking about the social workers and overtime and vacancies and such, and my colleague to my right mentioned exit surveys. I don't want to misquote the minister on it, but the response was somewhere around the recruitment issues with potential social workers being familiar with the type of work that's involved in the department.

With that question, what, if any, recruitment – well, retention first, but retention and recruitment initiatives are being administered through the department to fill these vacancies?

P. PIKE: Yeah, I think I might have already mentioned some of those, but we are certainly looking at a number of things. One of the things for me is, I see our ability to do flexible work schedules; I see our ability to bring in more technology to help because, as you realized with the number of vacancies we have, there is a need for us to probably do some virtual work as well. We're trying a number of areas there.

I always go back to the fact that it's important – and I don't want to repeat myself on this – for us to go to MUN, to the university and as well to other universities across Canada to try and bring people in for these work terms. Not only do they appreciate the work, but we also appreciate the great work that they do and some actually stay.

We do have a working group, by the way, with NAPE, that looks at our social workers and our employees, and if they are getting any complaints or if they have some concerns about anything that's going on in our department, we take the time to address that. I've been in on one of those meetings. I think it was a couple of months ago and they go quite well.

It's great to work with unions because you're getting the information first-hand and they're getting it first-hand. So, again, that's basically some of the things we're doing when it comes to retention of our employees.

P. DINN: Thank you for that.

You talked about work terms; you talked about going to MUN and other universities. MUN, I think, produces somewhere in the vicinity of 80 graduates a year.

P. PIKE: Yeah, the number of social workers this year, for the first time, MUN has 100 students registered for social work.

P. DINN: So out of that 100, because I was going to go to 80, but let's use the 100, what

percentage of them will become employed with the department?

P. PIKE: Again, last year, there were 39 students from Memorial graduates who came to work with CSSD.

P. DINN: Just related to that – because you mentioned recruitment from other universities coming in and doing work terms – are all the work terms paid?

P. PIKE: Oh yes, in our department they are.

P. DINN: But anywhere in our province, if someone comes with a social work degree and goes to work in either private or public or wherever, do they get paid work terms?

P. PIKE: All I can speak to is our department. We do have paid work terms.

P. DINN: Okay.

My point being is given the shortages and given where we are in social work –

P. PIKE: I hear you.

P. DINN: – anything we can do to ease the burden of student loans and the like, even if they're on work terms, is a big help.

Just shifting gears a bit now, because you talked about the Poverty Reduction Plan that was announced last November and mentioned a couple of things: reducing child poverty, increasing employment opportunities and improving outcomes. Do you have any data on what you've done with child poverty or what your targets are, as well as increasing employment? I mean are there any targets that you are aiming at and have you reached any of them right now? I know it's only early but –

P. PIKE: As you know, a lot of this is being newly implemented and so on. We don't have any data yet, but we are very fixed on that. We will certainly be providing that data

to you as it becomes available, because we're thinking that it's going to have a huge impact. We're hoping it's going to have a huge impact. So we will be releasing the stats, that data to you as soon as it becomes available, but be rest assured, we're tracking what we can.

P. DINN: So with regard to that plan, have you allocated or assigned dedicated staff to the implementation of that plan? If so, how many?

P. PIKE: Again, we have dedicated staff that are working on it but, as you have to realize, this Poverty Reduction Plan involves more than our department. So we can get you the numbers that other departments have assigned, with ours, and we can certainly provide that.

P. DINN: No, that would be helpful, because poverty reduction is a huge issue and it does go over a lot of different departments and agencies. It would certainly give us an indication of the magnitude of the dedicated staff that are put to this. So I'd appreciate that. Anything you can provide on that would be (inaudible).

P. PIKE: That's one thing about the Poverty Reduction Plan, it's not just us; it's other departments. Just as our Seniors' Well-Being Plan is the same way. That'll be across departments, too.

P. DINN: Just on probably a more serious issue here – not to say that some of the issues you deal with are not serious – Income Support overpayments have been identified by the Auditor General's office as a significant issue. What is your office doing or what are you implementing to address such overpayments? Some identified as fraudulent, right?

P. PIKE: Yes, we've had discussions on this, and we continue to have discussions as a department and as management. These costs are due to a number of factors, but sometimes when people have a change

in living arrangements, we're not notified and so on. We do use the federal government; we involve them in this in trying to get the income of people. A lot of people don't even file income tax. That's another issue that we're having.

So there are all kinds of things that are happening, but we are doing our best to work through this. We realize it is a large sum, but if there's a change in employment, change in address, our department doesn't have any information about that, the people involved don't report it, that's how all that adds up. It is extensive. I think it's about \$4.2 million is what we're actively recovering right now.

P. DINN: Thank you for that.

Just back to children. How many children are currently being provided services by Child and Youth Services? And, if possible, can you break it out by program, please?

P. PIKE: Just one second.

P. DINN: Oh, yeah.

P. PIKE: Yeah, sorry about that. I'm just trying to find it there. You're all over the place.

P. DINN: Oh, I understand, totally.

P. PIKE: But thanks for the question.

There are 910 children and youth in care. If you need more information, I can break that out for you.

P. DINN: That's where I was going with it.

P. PIKE: Of the 910 children and youth in care, 545 are in continuous custody and 370 are in other forms of temporary care or are the custody of the department.

CHAIR: Okay, the Member's time has expired.

The Member for St. John's Centre.

J. DINN: Thank you.

I'm going to go back to wraparound services, and I know that Housing is not necessarily in your portfolio right now, but in terms of extending models like, let's say, Indwell in Hamilton or Carruthers – it's a living arrangement where people have the autonomy. They have their own apartments as such, but they're staffed 24-7.

Now, I know we have the hotel, but it's not quite the same, what I'm talking about here. But it is in some ways. Especially for people who are chronically homeless, who have a difficulty, where you have staff, you have peer support, you have a number of things there all designed to keep the person housed.

I use this very simple example of someone who is a hoarder, let's say, and that's been the main factor that results in them being unhoused. If you have an apartment in the community where maybe they're being checked on once a month or once a week and you can't get in, it's very hard to keep track if a problem starts to escalate.

However, if you're in one of these facilities and you see the person bringing in the third set of living room furniture and hasn't put any trash out, then at least there are staff there to intervene and have that conversation and peer counsellors and so on and so forth.

The unit, I guess, down at the Comfort Inn, has an element of that but the rooms are not necessarily self-contained apartments units as you would see down at the Ches Penney Centre of Hope, that model. So I guess where I'm going with this is when I'm thinking of wraparound supports, there is a continuum. I've heard that word but I'm just throwing it around, but I do think there are some people who can live out in the community. If they've had failure after failure and the result is let's call the police as a

solution, that's not helping them. It's not helping people in the community.

But I often think that that kind of a setting where you've got people to intervene, they can go about their own business all they want. I'm just thinking more models like that because right now if I look at the ATIPPs we've done, there are a number of landlords, a few who are getting an awful lot of money from the provincial government to house people who are difficult and the conditions in which they live, I can tell you, are disgusting, which does nothing for that person's rehabilitation or ability to move on.

I guess that's what I'm looking at. I don't expect an answer right now, but you've heard me speak to it. I'm just wondering like maybe move away from – there might come a time when a person will be out in the community. I really think that's a missing piece in that. Like I said, I'm not expecting an answer but I'm going to keep harping on it.

P. PIKE: I certainly appreciate where you're coming from. Being a previous minister of Housing and so on, you and I have had some discussions about that. Really, when you talk about that, you're talking with CSSD, you're talking about Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services, and there's more than us involved in this housing.

As you know, I was very concerned about these same things. I mean, I've even done a walk around with you downtown one time and I found your purpose in that was to give the minister at the time a good feel for what's happening in that area, and I certainly did. I came back with a whole new attitude towards people that were living there and the types of services that we needed there. So I hear you and I thank you for making those comments.

J. DINN: So just a few other questions then, before my colleague takes over.

With regard to, I think you talked about a mobile vehicle for food delivery?

P. PIKE: Yes.

J. DINN: Just one for the metro area and just for seniors, correct?

P. PIKE: Just to be clear on that, Food First made the request and we're responding by funding a vehicle for them.

J. DINN: Yes.

P. PIKE: It's a model that, certainly, something we'd like to see expand, of course.

I hear you when you talk about these types of services. We're also looking at the models for other parts of the province as well and how we can deal with it.

But a request from that organization came in and we said, yes, this is something we need to fund. It'll be a great service, but being the bayman, I think we need to expand it to rural areas of the province as well, especially in the hub areas.

Nothing works without partnerships. We've seen the models that exist. We looked at the one in Clarenville. We looked around the province, but it's something that we, certainly, would like to see. It addresses a lot of our concerns around seniors, too. It won't be solely for seniors. It will be for others as well, but it does address that need for seniors and have deliveries and so on made (inaudible).

J. DINN: I'm not taking away from that.

P. PIKE: Oh no.

J. DINN: What I'm asking is, I think it's worthwhile to consider expanding that. A lot of food banks, when I volunteered, we used to deliver. It was an opportunity to actually see the conditions in which some people live. It was an opportunity to speak to them

and have that conversation, but as volunteers get older, the ability to, especially in the winter months, when it becomes a hazard, it's difficult and a lot of the food banks have given up the delivery which puts the onus on the people to come. Fair enough, if they live nearby, but it's not always the seniors who are unable. All I'm saying is that it would be worthwhile to expand that. I think it would be a significant help to food banks who are struggling to service their clientele.

P. PIKE: Yes.

J. DINN: I know we talked about the review of income support services, and I'm going to end with this statement about what I will call the clawback of income support. I know we've talked about it sometimes in relation to our discussion around basic income.

I was listening to – and I only caught the tail end of it – the disability advocate talking this morning about how certain federal benefits are clawed back from provincial benefits so that the person who has received disability is no better off than what they were before.

We've seen it here when CERB payments were issued and I remember poverty groups here asked: Do not claw back CERB benefits from income support. A lot of people used it to actually buy a new bed or new clothes, but it was not spent on, let's go get a trip down south now; it was basic necessities.

We've seen here, even in the whole thing around the payment for funerals, where if they have some other source of income, like a CPP benefit, well that's going to be clawed back from provincial benefits. We've had people come to us on that. So they're no further ahead.

I guess what I'm looking at here, you're not talking about people who are earning \$50,000, \$60,000, \$70,000, \$80,000. We're talking about at the very low end, they're below the poverty line, or things like people

accessing shelter. We've had a few people come to us; they've got to show three-months financials before they get in the shelter.

Now, I would say that no one here in this room, if they find themselves out of a home today, is going to end up going to an emergency shelter. We're going to pay for a hotel room or something else, or family, whatever else.

I often find – and I can go on with more examples – that some of the measures or the checks and balances to catch people who might be abusing the system – whatever that means – end up inadvertently stigmatizing people further. I don't know what the plan is, if there's a review, I'm hoping the department is going to look at: Okay, how do we make it that the most vulnerable are not further stigmatized by, I guess, fiscal policies that I don't think are going to cost the government a significant amount of money.

That's my last comment and after this, Chair, I will be turning it over to my colleague for Torngat Mountains, you can deal with her.

CHAIR: Thank you.

The Member's time is expired.

The Member for Topsail - Paradise.

P. DINN: Thank you.

I will just continue on with the questions on statistics and data. How many clients currently avail of the Comfort Allowance, monthly?

P. PIKE: That does vary a lot, but we would say approximately 300.

P. DINN: On a monthly basis?

P. PIKE: Yes.

P. DINN: Are there any months where it peaks, or is it pretty consistent across the board?

P. PIKE: I think it's pretty consistent. I haven't been advised if it's moving up or down, but I have been looking at the average and it's pretty well the same.

P. DINN: With regard to the targeted seniors' poverty reduction plan, when is that expected to be released?

P. PIKE: We don't have a firm date on that, but we are working on it, continually. I would say in the coming months. We're not going to try and prolong it in any way, shape or fashion, but there is a lot of detail that needs to go into this reduction plan. We have to look at which people in our province, or who will actually get the benefits from it, but we are working diligently.

Our staff, as you know, are going to give this a good look to make sure we reach those who are vulnerable in our society, who need our support, who are on income support, who are on low income, these are the people that we'll be looking at there. So all I can say is that we'll move it as quickly as we can.

P. DINN: Thank you for that.

I'm looking at the Estimates *Hansard* from last year, and I know we came in with our *Accessibility Act* in December 2021, and there was established an Accessibility Standards Advisory Board that June.

P. PIKE: Yes.

P. DINN: And it goes on to talk about the pivotal role that the board plays.

Can I ask, how many times has that board met in the past year?

P. PIKE: I'm going to defer that to Tracy.

CHAIR: Tracy English.

T. ENGLISH: So the board meets four times a year, generally it's twice in person, twice virtually. Right now, we didn't have our last meeting because our chair and vice-chair have both resigned, so we're looking to get those positions filled and we'll get back on track for meetings shortly.

P. DINN: I hope they didn't resign because you drove them out.

T. ENGLISH: No, they had their own reasons for resigning.

P. DINN: So with that board meeting – and it's good to hear that it's a regular meeting – can you just allude to, I guess, the results of those meetings. Has it been positive? Have there been some key issues that have arisen out of those meetings?

T. ENGLISH: The first couple of meetings, obviously, were the getting to know you kind of start to the process. So coming out of that, they have committed to developing two standards. The first one is going to be on customer service and the other one is on information and communication.

So we're in the process of recruiting a subcommittee now to develop the first standard. That should be up and going in the next couple of months and then we'll report back on that when that standard is developed.

The process would be that the standard would be developed by the group, go up through the board and then would be sent to the minister as a recommendation.

P. DINN: Perfect, thank you.

Again, looking at the Estimates from last year – and I think my colleague had mentioned it as well, talking about the department reviewing the Income Support Program. I would guess and, from my past experience, that's almost ongoing anyway. There was a 5 per cent increase in basic income allowance support rate announced

last year. Has there been any other announcements or any other improvements to Income Support Program in the past year?

P. PIKE: We're looking at the numbers now for our targeted wage, for seniors from age 60 to 64. The purpose of that would be, if you look at their income at 60 and if they're receiving services from the Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services and they're also receiving Income Support, then we'd look at what their monthly income would be and then we'd look at what their monthly income would be if they were 65.

What we're doing is we're bridging that gap. So they would get what they would get at 65, at 60 to 64, and then when they turn 65, there's no big jump. When I looked at that and I looked at the ages that they were proposing – I spent a number of years teaching adults and a lot of the adults that I taught were adults that were back to school that were in that age range. Some had issues with their health and, of course, they were getting CPP and how they were supplementing their income was going back to school. They would be in school and try to bridge to 65 if they could.

But now, what we're doing with this particular cohort, they would have the same sum of money they would get at 65, now at 60. That's put in a way that – I was trying to simplify it.

P. DINN: Yeah, okay.

And that's one of the programs that they brought in, in this past year?

P. PIKE: No, we're just taking enrolment for that now.

P. DINN: Okay. So it's an older program that you're –?

P. PIKE: But it's ongoing this month.

P. DINN: Okay, I have you.

I'm also looking at, again, from last year, the government established and All-Party Committee on Basic Income. Can I get a status report on that Committee and what's been happening with it?

P. PIKE: Yes, that Committee is working quite well. As you know, our schedules have been disrupted as of late, so we haven't had a meeting now in about a month, I would say, but we are at the stage now where we're looking at a draft report and we'll certainly be moving on that.

I think we have a meeting scheduled for next week. But the types of things that we're talking about and looking at are very real. We've had presentations from all sorts of groups out there and we've got a lot of information that we're using to guide us in our decision-making. I think that you'll see, very soon, something from us coming.

But we are working, and the Committee is doing quite well. It is a Committee that I really enjoy and I have the privilege of chairing. We're all there for the right reasons.

P. DINN: And not to put you on the spot or hold you to a specific date, but about when will we expect to see a report?

P. PIKE: Look, we're very close on that. I'd say within the next couple of months.

P. DINN: Okay. No, just a ballpark – I won't be jumping up in two months and saying where's the report.

P. PIKE: No, I hear you. I'd love to have a date, as you know.

P. DINN: No, I understand.

P. PIKE: But, as you know as well, MHA, the last month or so it has been very difficult for us to get meetings and so on with the various things that are happening. Only for that, we'd probably be a little bit further

ahead, but we do have a meeting scheduled.

Great people on that Committee, by the way, caring, compassionate and they certainly have had so many conversations with people with lived experience and so on, and they're all there for the right reasons and we are all.

P. DINN: Okay.

And I have time to squeeze another question in here.

CHAIR: Yes.

P. DINN: Last year, it was also mentioned about launching the Employment Support Stability Pilot Project. That was mid-January and there were 105 participants at that time. Can I get a status report on what's happened with that?

P. PIKE: Yeah, I'm really pleased with that program, our employment stability program. That's grown now to around 400. It's a program that we announced that would be right across the province. We've expanded it – it started with Stella's Circle and Choices for Youth. That's where it started, it originated.

I think at the time, when I got involved, it was anywhere from 40 to 50, then it was up to 100 and now we're up to 400. But it allows people to go back to work. Not only that, but maintain their income support while they're doing that to get them started and they can actually keep a portion of that income support until they get settled and get in their jobs and so on.

So it's a great program. I'd love to see it grow even more. Having that program rolled out, now it's up to us to promote it in all areas of the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

CHAIR: Okay, the Member's time has expired.

Does the Member for Torngat Mountains have questions for Executive and Support Services, the first subheading?

L. EVANS: Yeah.

CHAIR: Yes?

L. EVANS: Can we get an update on the fly-in, fly-out model for service delivery for working social workers on the North Coast? How many active social workers in Northern Labrador are covered by the fly-in, fly-out, and how many are actually living and working in the communities?

P. PIKE: Okay, I'm going to pass this on to Lori Rose.

CHAIR: Lori Rose.

L. ROSE: I don't have the exact number of social workers that are in the fly-in, fly-out model. In Labrador right now, we do have full-time social workers in many of our communities. We also supplement that with a fly-in, fly-out model, where we bring social workers into the community to help support the staff and the clients in those communities.

L. EVANS: Thank you for the answer.

You don't have the actual number – would you be able to get that actual number sent over to us?

L. ROSE: Yes, we absolutely can.

L. EVANS: How many social workers are actually working in each of the communities? There are a lot of vacancies and there are communities that actually don't have social workers present, so I was just wondering if you could give me an update on that?

L. ROSE: In Labrador, currently, as of December 31, we do have 40 social workers on the ground in Labrador. We do have 20 vacancies.

L. EVANS: My question was for Northern Labrador.

L. ROSE: I don't have the exact number for Northern Labrador, but we can certainly get that for you.

L. EVANS: Just for the record of budget Estimates, approximately how many do you have – what the vacancy rate in Northern Labrador is?

L. ROSE: We have the vacancy rate for the full Labrador region, which, as of February 5, was 34.5 per cent of our positions were vacant, but the specifics for Northern Labrador, I would have to get that for you.

L. EVANS: That would be good.

I think I'll save some of the questions that I have for the heading under Income Support.

I'm actually done with the first category. I have questions for 1.1.01 up to 1.1 –

CHAIR: Okay.

Does the Member for Topsail - Paradise have any additional questions for Executive and Support Services?

P. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

Yes, I just want to continue on where I left off.

The minister mentioned about the Employment Stability Pilot Project and talked about upwards to 400 now, new clients. How many of those or what percentage of those are no longer in need of income support or a supplement?

P. PIKE: I remember seeing that data but I don't have it. I don't know.

A. GOGAN: Those 400 are all currently working and receiving income support as a supplement. So all of those are still receiving income support. That's the 400

number. But we do have – I think it's about 60 people who are no longer receiving income support as a result of participating in the pilot. We can certainly get you the exact number. So it's been very successful.

P. DINN: Thank you for that.

I was looking at last year's figures. It was around 105 people in the program, of which 10 had – so I'll just get an update.

Thank you for that.

I just want to move on to a section as well from last year where it was raised talking about chronic absenteeism in schools and, of course, there's a report that was put out prior to last year, actually, looking at that chronic absenteeism. There are a lot of factors that play into that and a lot of factors that your department would be quite familiar with.

From that document came a number of recommendations, four actually. They both tied together the Department of Education and early Childhood Development as well as your department, the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development. I will just read out the recommendations and I'm basically looking to see if there have been any action or any movement on these.

One recommendation was that: "Within one year, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in conjunction with the school districts, the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development, the Department of Health and Community Services and Regional Health Authorities develop an action plan to address chronic absenteeism." It goes on to say this plan should "a. Incorporate knowledge of best practices and results; b. Include community partners that provide services to children and youth; c. Provide appropriate resources for any pilots that emerge from the action plan; d. Implement professional staff development highlighting chronic absenteeism as a possible indicator of child

maltreatment; e. Include an evaluation plan.”

So my question on that one is has there been any movement on that recommendation or has anything been done in that respect?

P. PIKE: The only thing I can say about that is that there is work going on between government departments to address issues like that, one being absenteeism of children from school. So that is being worked on. I don't know the status of it other than that it is ongoing.

P. DINN: Thank you for that.

Just moving along with this recommendation. “The Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the school districts, the Department of Health and Community Services and Regional Health Authorities develop and implement policy specifically identifying how staff will effectively assess and respond to chronic absenteeism.”

Has there been anything done on that?

P. PIKE: Same thing. It's ongoing.

P. DINN: It's ongoing,

I'm probably going to get the same answer, but for the record, please.

P. PIKE: Oh yes.

P. DINN: Recommendation three: “The Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and the school districts, collaboratively develop and implement policies and protocols specifically defining the point at which chronic absenteeism situations require referral to the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development.” The activity on that.

P. PIKE: Again, it's ongoing, and Education would be the lead on that, but it is ongoing.

P. DINN: Okay.

The last recommendation from that document, “The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Department of Health and Community Services, and the school districts develop agreements with the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development and the Regional Health Authorities defining how all these partners will collectively contribute to addressing chronic absenteeism.”

P. PIKE: Yeah. Same answer, the work is ongoing.

P. DINN: It's ongoing, okay.

P. PIKE: But I'm glad you raised it for a number of reasons. Probably the main reason is chronic absenteeism is a big issue in our province, you hear it more and more through the social media and through local media as well.

The reason why I'm saying that is because our role in that, we will certainly make sure that we have a say in that, and I'll personally check on the progress because I think that those recommendations are made for a reason. I think if all the departments got together, we might be able to work through some of the issues that we're facing. So thanks for raising it.

P. DINN: Thank you for that.

The reason I raised it because of course it was brought up and it is an issue that was brought up last year. It's an issue that has many facets associated with it. The recommendations are it's not just an education issue. Usually when absenteeism is happening, the issue has already occurred elsewhere. The recommendations did refer to your department on all

recommendations, so I thought it was prudent to ask the update here today.

I'm done with this section.

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

CLERK: Executive and Support Services, 1.1.01 to 1.2.02 inclusive.

CHAIR: Shall 1.1.01 to 1.2.02 inclusive, Executive and Support Services, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye

CHAIR: All those in favour, 'aye.'

Carried.

On motion, subheads 1.1.01 to 1.2.02 carried.

CHAIR: Okay, it is 10:32, we have an eight-minute break.

Recess

CHAIR: Okay, we're going to restart.

Given the time we started this morning and the break, 12:14 will bring us to three hours. So just to let you know, we do have a hard stop at 12:30, but, after 12:14, you're over your three hours.

So I ask the Clerk to call the next subhead.

CLERK: 2.1.01, Child and Youth Services.

CHAIR: Shall 2.1.01, Child and Youth Services, carry?

The hon. the Member for Topsail - Paradise.

P. DINN: Thank you.

I think we should be able to make up some time on the backstretch. A lot of questions were asked and a lot of answers received.

Getting into the dollars and cents here – I'm looking at Salaries and I see an increase in Salaries of about \$3 million. What's attributed to that?

P. PIKE: Savings from the 2023-24 budget as result of vacancies in difficult-to-fill positions during the year, the department has implemented strategies to attempt to successfully recruit for these positions. The \$725,700 increase from 2023-24 budget is the result of scheduled salary increases.

P. DINN: Okay, thank you.

I see some ebb and flow in some of the categories there. Transportation, of course, went up and down. What's the explanation for that fluctuation, Transportation and Communications?

P. PIKE: The overrun from the 2023-24 budget, this was a result of inflationary increases in travel costs. Nature of staff work in this area requires constant travel.

P. DINN: And you're projecting that to drop off again then this year? Is that what I'm –?

P. PIKE: So this provides for travel including client visit travel, telecommunication, postage and courier.

P. DINN: It was over budget last year, I'll say, and it's gone back to what it was previously. I'm assuming there's less costs again this year?

P. PIKE: Yeah, that's our target.

P. DINN: Okay, that's where you are headed. Perfect, thank you.

I'm looking at the Allowances and Assistance. We see a \$22.5-million addition to the revised budget from last year. Why was that?

P. PIKE: Under Grants and Subsidies, a significant portion of the expenditure is related to group homes and emergency placement for children and youth in care. As these costs were effectively the same as services provided under Allowances and Assistance, CSSD decided, for budget '24-'25, to consolidate under one category, capturing all costs related to children and youth. This would also provide clarity on amounts that would be more accurately considered grants.

P. DINN: So I guess my question is, though, last year's budget and the revised, there was a jump of \$22.5 million. What exactly was that \$22.5 million used for?

P. PIKE: Okay, sure.

The overrun in the budget is a result of increased costs for children and youth in care due to inflationary pressures, combined with the increase in the number of children and youth requiring specialized care.

P. DINN: That's a huge increase.

P. PIKE: Yes.

P. DINN: Can you break that down by category and number of clients? A jump by \$22.5 million is huge.

P. PIKE: Yeah, we'll let Alan take that one.

CHAIR: Deputy Minister Doody.

A. DOODY: The one thing that we're certainly seeing on the child protection side is the complexity of cases of the kids that are coming into care and they require significantly more support. Although our overall caseload is stabilizing or generally stable, the number of children and youth that require specialized support is ever growing, so there are more complex needs for those kids and the wraparound support services that are provided by our service providers. Also, with the travel throughout

the province to provide those supports to them, it adds inflationary pressures to the budget.

We can provide a more detailed breakdown if you'd like.

P. DINN: Yeah, I would like that because, again – and I am not disputing the response here – I'm just trying to get the detail and clarity. As you said, the caseload has stabilized, yet we're seeing almost a 15 per cent increase in the effect of \$22.5 million. That's a substantial increase.

It is worrisome from the dollar figure amount but even more so now, with the answer, it becomes even more worrisome with the effects and the complex needs of the children out there. So that sends up a red flag to me. So if any further detail we can get on that, I would certainly appreciate to receive.

P. PIKE: No problem.

P. DINN: With the Grants and Subsidies, the amount there, can you provide a breakdown of who has received these grants and subsidies and how much they received?

P. PIKE: Nunatsiavut Government foster care program, \$200,000; Waypoints foster family support, \$489,162; Waypoints family support, \$589,492; Foster Families Association, that would be core funding, \$369,375; Daybreak Parent Child Centre home visitation, \$435,235; the John Howard Society open custody, \$1,408,670; Choices for Youth core funding for Youth Services, \$3,140,798; extra judicial sanctioned committees, Youth Corrections, \$30,000; and additional funding spread out over these groups would be \$245,968, with a total of \$6,908,700.

P. DINN: Thank you.

You mentioned the words "core funding," and I know with many groups out there that

receive core funding, whether it's yearly or sometimes up towards the three years, many groups look for a longer duration of that core funding, potentially five years.

The reason being it gives them an opportunity to plan well out in advance. I've heard groups talk about the three-year core funding. They're one year getting their feet going again or hoping on it. Then they're one year, in the middle, at it and then, the last year, they're all tied up in trying to get funding again. They do wonderful with the money, but their focus is drawn away from what they should be doing.

First of all, have any of them received funding of five years or more, core funding, and has there been any thought on moving towards five-year core funding?

P. PIKE: Choices for Youth get it and Foster Family Association get it.

I'd like to say, MHA, thank you for bringing that up because, spoken like a true MHA, we get that all the time from our groups out there: Why can't we give, you know, multi-year funding or core funding, at least we know where we're going to be at the end of three years or four years or five years?

I will tell you that the Department of Finance is looking at that right now and looking at the whole multi-year funding model because it would solve a lot of problems with some of these organizations for planning and staffing and so on. Again, I'm sure that the MHAs in this room today are quite familiar with the residents and groups who are asking for this.

So it would be something that I think would be very beneficial. We all came into our positions because we were former volunteers and we worked with different organizations and that was one of the biggest things with us was trying to get core funding. Again, to know that our Department of Finance is looking at multi-year funding is

something that we've all asked for it at one point in time.

Thank you.

P. DINN: Thank you.

I am done with that section now.

CHAIR: The Member for Torngat Mountains.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

Section 2.1.01, Child and Youth Services: Since the last amendment to the *Children, Youth and Families Act* a couple of years ago, what progress are you seeing in terms of the numbers of Indigenous children in care and the numbers of Indigenous children who are able to remain in their communities?

P. PIKE: Okay, MHA, on average, over the last 10 years, 34 per cent of children and youth in care are Indigenous. As of December 31, 2023, the proportion of Indigenous children in youth care was 33 per cent.

L. EVANS: Thank you for that answer.

P. PIKE: Do you need more?

L. EVANS: Yes, if you can give it to me because I was going to ask you more questions, actually, on the topic.

P. PIKE: Sure, I can provide more.

The average proportion of Indigenous children in care to non-Indigenous remains unchanged over the years. There has been a 22 per cent decrease in Indigenous children in care from 2019 to September 31, 2023; 385 Indigenous children and youth in care in June 2019, compared to 300 Indigenous children and youth in care on December 31, 2023.

Children and youth in care by Indigenous status as of December 2023 is Innu: Central, 10; metro, less than 5; Labrador, 115; provincial total, 130. Inuit: Central/West, 35; metro, 15; Labrador, 70; provincial total, 120.

Does that help?

L. EVANS: Yeah, I just wrote that down. Yes, thank you for that answer.

Just to clarify, you're talking about the Indigenous children, the Innu and the Inuit. How many Nunatsiavut children in care are living outside of Labrador?

P. PIKE: We're going to say approximately 50.

L. EVANS: Okay. The Innu, Natuashish and Sheshatshiu, how many are living outside of Labrador?

P. PIKE: We're looking at approximately 15.

L. EVANS: Okay, thank you.

Just looking at the way the system is set up now for children and youth in care, the difference between the benefits alluded for foster parents versus kinship, when somebody is actually basically fostering a relative's child. Have you looked at maybe actually increasing the benefits to the kinship families compared to the foster families?

P. PIKE: Yeah. As we've already said, we're looking at a plan now to look at all of our benefit structures so that will certainly be part of that.

L. EVANS: When would you be looking at actually coming out and producing that publicly?

P. PIKE: Yeah, work will soon start on that. We were thinking about when we talked about this previously, we looked at, I think it

was December. We should be able to provide some information then.

L. EVANS: Thank you for that answer.

One of the issues that has come up in my district, and I met with the department, when we're looking at children in care in my region, in Northern Labrador, people have wanted to see more children who have to go into care, remain in the region and, if possible, to remain in the communities. Everyone nods their head – everyone nods their head: This is a good thing.

I've got to say, Minister, you do have good people in your department, but one of the problems we're running into is that the high cost of living in Northern Labrador really makes it expensive to actually care for a child, whether it's your child, a family member's child or somebody else in the community or somebody else in the region.

Now, the problem we're coming up with is being able to be paid the cost associated with looking after children in care. I know that there's a problem in setting up when you get in the system because our system is so big and so cumbersome that it takes a long time for somebody who's doing respite care to be compensated when they're being first set up. But we've had people set-up in the system and not being able to be paid for up to a year. I'm not exaggerating; I handed the case notes over to your department. Now they are making inroads into that, but we're still currently running into problems.

I was wondering are you going to do a review of that? Because what it is, is forcing people not to support children in care in Northern Labrador because they can't afford to. They really can't afford to. It's not about convenience.

P. PIKE: I hear you on that. It's not the first I've heard about that. I can tell you that we are working within our department at the process in itself, and we also have to work with the Department of Finance on this one

as well. But we do want to do something with this, and we will be actively doing that.

Again, it is a problem, there's no doubt about that. We have to use our resources the best we can to try and fix that.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

Does the speaker know I am just looking for a commitment so, next year, in Estimates, when we're running into the same problem, that we can come back and actually quote Estimates? So can the minister maybe commit to having a review of the issues that are arising from the –?

P. PIKE: Yeah, I certainly can. I've already discussed this issue with the deputy minister. As a matter of fact, MHA, it's ongoing right now. It's something that we want to work on and, yes, hopefully next year in Estimates we'll be talking very positively about this.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

I realize Estimates is not Question Period, but it's a way for us to get information and also sometimes to get some commitment to have some policy changes. So I do appreciate that, Minister.

Moving on to my next question: Will the department be acting on any of the recommendations that came of the Ernst & Young review of the child welfare service delivery model?

P. PIKE: Absolutely for sure is the answer to that question. We are working on some of those now. I think on four, is it?

OFFICIAL: (Inaudible.)

P. PIKE: Yeah, four.

L. EVANS: Four, okay.

Just looking at some line items there. I'm still under 2.1.01. Why did the spending for

Transportation and Communications run over budget last year?

P. PIKE: The overrun was a result of inflationary increases in travel costs and the nature of staff work in this area requires constant travel.

CHAIR: Okay, the Member's time is expired.

I just want to confirm that the Member for Topsail - Paradise has no further questions?

P. DINN: I'm fine on this.

CHAIR: Okay.

The hon. the Member for Torngat Mountains.

L. EVANS: I was wondering if we could get a breakdown of the costs associated with children in care that are living outside their communities and regions. Specifically, my question is, could we get the cost for hotels and travel for children who are living outside their communities?

P. PIKE: We can certainly get those figures for you. We don't have a breakdown here, but we'll make sure that you get them.

L. EVANS: Thank you very much. So we look forward to receiving that information.

I do have one more question. I saved them for this section. I could've asked them in the general questions. Have you ever looked at the regional differences in costs of supporting children? The reason why I bring that up, for Child and Youth Services, is that children in care in Northern Labrador have difficulty actually being provided with the supports.

So when it's minus 20 outside and a child needs boots – sorry, I'm from Labrador, so I say boots; I'm supposed to say boots or whatever you call it – or mittens, jackets, snowpants, because they have to walk to

school, but for them, the allowance is provided, you can't purchase quality clothing that's required for the region. I was wondering, have you done any work into looking that and what the differences in cost are?

P. PIKE: Well, what I can say is that we're constantly monitoring costs. Our social workers do work with families to ensure that families have what they need. It's ongoing. If we look at the region by region, that is done. And we certainly can provide that to you as well.

L. EVANS: No further questions for this.

CHAIR: Finished?

L. EVANS: Yeah.

CHAIR: Okay.

I ask the Clerk to recall the subhead.

CLERK: 2.1.01, Child and Youth Services.

CHAIR: Shall 2.1.01, Child and Youth Services, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subhead 2.1.01 carried.

CHAIR: I ask the Clerk to call the next subhead.

CLERK: 3.1.01 to 3.1.03 inclusive, Policy and Programs.

CHAIR: Shall 3.1.01 to 3.1.03 inclusive, Policy and Programs, carry?

The Member for Harbour Main.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: We have a tag team going here.

First of all, this is subhead, 3.1.01, Seniors and Aging. I'd first like to make a couple of general comments, if I may.

This is a new portfolio for me, which is Seniors and Aging, as well as Persons with Disabilities. I would also like to thank the Minister of CSSD and his staff who are present today. I look forward to this exercise very much. One of the reasons I do is because it is a very different type of exercise than when we're in, for example, the House of Assembly. It's more collaborative I find and it's an opportunity for us, as part of the budget process to really, in a very collegial way, find the answers that we're looking for, so I really thank you all for being here in pursuit of that important goal.

I'd also like to express thanks to the Seniors' Advocate, Susan Walsh. I've had the opportunity to meet with her in this important role. As the lead in this independent statutory office of the Seniors' Advocate, I found her to be very dedicated and work very hard and performs her job with the utmost professionalism and concern and compassion for the seniors of this province. So I just wanted to add that as well.

With respect to the questions, there are a couple of questions I'd like to ask under the portfolio of Seniors and Aging with respect to, for example, the Adult Protection Act. I'm just wondering if the minister could provide some information or data with respect to how many referrals have been made in the last year.

P. PIKE: Yes, thank you, MHA.

For the fiscal year 2023-2024, data between April 1 and April 31, there were approximately 500 reports and 80 files went to investigation; self-neglect remains the most frequent allegation. An estimated 78

per cent of reports have concerned adults 60-plus this fiscal year to date.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Thank you, Minister.

Those are very sad and unfortunate statistics. They're not statistics because they represent real people and so we're sad to hear that.

P. PIKE: Yeah, terrible.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Just with respect to the Adult Protection Act, in general, Minister, I know that in last year's Estimates it was noted that training had been completed and that there was an effort to ensure that rights and obligations were clearly delineated to, for example, seniors groups and I understand that the minister of the day, at the time, said that they were working with SeniorsNL and other seniors' organizations to promote that.

So can you please just provide an update on that as well, today?

P. PIKE: Yeah.

We take allegations of neglect very seriously and, as you know, we can't talk about specifics, but, again, we use the Adult Protection Act. We continue to use that to support vulnerable adults throughout the province who do not understand or appreciate the risk of abuse and neglect.

When we're on this topic and when I read about this topic, I'm sure we all shudder at the thought that there's any type of abuse and so on, not only in our province, but in our world when it comes to adults. We also make sure that people realize that if anybody suspects anybody is being abused or neglected, that they contact Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services or my department because it's something that I really have a lot of trouble, personally, getting my head around this whole thing.

I know it happens and education with seniors' groups and so on is where we're to with it. When we met with seniors, last week, the whole idea didn't come up. Basically, we were there to talk about the budget and how we can improve the life of seniors and so on, but I think we need to continue to work with education, not only education, but law enforcement as well, and Health and Community Services on this.

Awareness is everything about this. When I think about it, it can happen in private homes, it can happen anywhere.

Anyway, be rest assured that we do monitor it, and we report every case by the way. If you have any suspicions or whatever, it's best to go through our department or go through local police, but we certainly will get on it immediately.

Also, as Alan has passed over a note here, we do have a campaign on elder abuse, an ad campaign on that, but it goes a bit deeper than that. It goes with being vigilant, really, when it comes to it.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Yes, thank you.

Clearly, education and awareness are crucial to addressing elder abuse in the province, as well as marketing campaigns.

In the last year's Estimates, I don't think there were any real campaigns, as such, so could you please provide a little bit of information about what efforts or initiatives are taking place with respect to campaigns to educate the public?

CHAIR: Tracy English.

T. ENGLISH: We are working with communications now to develop a new program for this year to be able to go out and provide additional information on who to call if you have an investigation of elder abuse or how to know what exactly it is. Because, as the minister said, this can be a

very dark subject for a lot of communities and so to be able to go out and explain to people that we have the right to make decisions, we have the right to live how we want to live, but sometimes that can veer into self-neglect or abuse and to know exactly who to call when that happens.

Then you talked about education. The minister mentioned before, we did a lot of information sessions with our health providers, the Supreme Court, Justice and a number of community organization to, sort of, get the word out about the new act and to be able to inform them about who to call and how to know when abuse is actually happening.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Thank you for that answer.

With respect to the reference earlier in the opening remarks of the minister about the Cabinet Committee on seniors. I understand, Minister, you're the Chair and this is in alliance, I guess, or it's spurred from the Health Accord. Can you just please elaborate a little bit about the work that your Committee has been doing?

P. PIKE: Yes, I can.

We're meeting with the community groups. We're meeting with seniors' groups and we're trying to put together a plan for seniors. We will have an impact as well on the Seniors' Well-Being Plan and I think, if you would like to, Ashley, you were –

OFFICIAL: (Inaudible.)

P. PIKE: The reason I'm saying that – I've been reminded that I'm eager to share information on the work. As you know, that's just innate with me, I can't help that, but I can't because it's a Cabinet Committee.

I will tell you that every area related to seniors is under a microscope and we're looking at doing our best. We've been

talking with the Seniors' Advocate and so on. That's as much as I can say on that.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Okay.

P. PIKE: But it is a great Committee and great work will be done with that Committee. In my thought process of getting back to you, I have to say that I can't say a lot of the things that I'd like to.

CHAIR: Okay.

The Member's time has expired.

The Member for Torngat Mountains.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

Section 3.1.01, Seniors and Aging, I, too, share my colleague's views on the work of the Seniors' Advocate and I'm sure the minister shares it as well. Susan Walsh, she has certainly changed the role the Seniors' Advocate is playing and, I guess, bringing seniors' concerns to the forefront. I do commend her on that.

That is what leads into my first question: What is government doing to support and expand the abilities of the Seniors' Advocate's office to be able to expand and grow?

P. PIKE: I don't know if I got your question, MHA. Are you talking about the expanded role in –

L. EVANS: Like, are there any financial supports for expanding roles, and what are you doing to follow up on her recommendations that came out of *What We Heard* and *What Golden Years*?

P. PIKE: The first question you have, the government has received the report on statutory offices. I think that was in fall of 2023 and they're currently working on them; however, we certainly appreciate the work of the Seniors' Advocate office and the

report aligns with a lot that was mentioned in the NL Health Accord.

I think that for our department I can speak but also, I guess, for other departments, we're all working collaboratively to address the recommendations in the Seniors' Advocate report. I can say, of the 12 recommendations in the report, many have already been actioned while some are in progress, and others will require further analysis.

I don't know if I mentioned in the House already but with regard to the report's recommendation – I might have mentioned here this morning as well – relating to the department around petitioning the federal government to change the current OAS and GIS payment schedule, I did write the minister in March. This is something that we're hearing a lot because the once-a-month payment, most seniors want to be paid every two weeks. Again, I want to mention that, and we all get that in our districts.

Also, you know, there are so many other things that we are doing for seniors, but does that answer your question?

L. EVANS: Thank you for that answer.

I'll just go on to the next question: What advances have been made in the past in preparing for the anticipated demographic shift towards a larger population of seniors?

P. PIKE: Are you looking at our support for seniors with cost of living and other areas?

L. EVANS: Yes, there is a growing demographic for seniors. Are you expanding the programs and benefits to, sort of, compensate for that? Are you looking at work that has been done that addressed the growing needs for seniors for health care, for cost of food, the cost of heat, the cost of housing, compared to –?

P. PIKE: Yes, to all of that. One of the things that we're doing is the targeted Basic Income pilot that we talked about earlier for seniors aged 60 to 64, and enrolment in that pilot has just begun, so we're pleased with that. That's going to make a difference in the lives of a lot of our seniors, this pilot.

We had \$10 million in *Budget 2024* for a comprehensive Seniors' Well-Being Plan, and this covers off some of the things, MHA, you were talking about like home repair and modifications; support care givers of individuals with high-care needs; and provide grants for low-income seniors. So we look forward to communicating other segments of this plan within the coming months.

L. EVANS: Thank you for that answer.

Have there been any initiatives in the department recently to examine and address the specific concerns and needs for two-spirited, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, plus seniors as they age? Are there specific initiatives for that demographic?

P. PIKE: The answer is, yes, and we are working with the Office of Women and Gender Equality. That's something that is ongoing, but we always consider this and we always build this into any of our policies.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

I was wondering, can we get a detailed answer from your department as to what initiatives you're actually working on, like what work, what studies, town halls, any kind of projects that will actually accommodate and assist this demographic as they age?

P. PIKE: Yeah, we'll take that away for sure and I'm going to ask the deputy minister to speak to that.

A. DOODY: Under the department's mandate, there was extensive consultation done over the last year with regard to social

and economic well-being for all individuals in the province and, of course, all demographics are considered in that as well.

There is continuously ongoing work within government across multiple departments and, as the minister stated, we're working closely with Women and Gender Equality on all those items.

L. EVANS: So we could probably receive something from your department about some of the initiatives you are working on specifically, as opposed to just saying consulting with other departments?

A. DOODY: Absolutely, we can provide you any of the initiatives that we're working on and how it relates to that demographic.

L. EVANS: Yes, thank you.

Are there any plans to enhance funding or services for public transport in rural areas, especially since seniors heavily rely on public transport, because they can't afford a lot of vehicles and –?

P. PIKE: Yes. We've had some discussions, as of late, with seniors' groups from right across the province. Regarding public transportation, seniors was the demographic we had the discussions with because we were doing some forums with them last week regarding budget and our Seniors' Well-Being Plan.

But, yes, we certainly are looking at public transportation in our department. As of late, we've had some inquiries. We've been talking to some of the groups that are looking at that and providing as much advice as we can, based on the models that we know of. For example, it's like asset management. In this case, if you have a van for bringing people to hospital appointments and things like that, to the banks and so on, or just getting them around the town grocery shopping and so on, then you have to have a plan in place of who's going to maintain

that particular vehicle, when it comes to oil changes, tires and so on. It has to be an effort.

In rural areas, we look more so at groups within the community helping out. I know in one of the models that we looked at, the council takes care of all of the maintenance on vehicles and so on. So there are ways people could help. As well, when we talk of rural Newfoundland, there might be four or five communities that are coming together for this transportation needs, because you may only need the transportation one day a week or whatever to do the things that this transportation would be designed to do.

That's where we're to with that. We're always excited about it. We do have a grant program within our department to support community transportation. We've been saying that out loud now more than ever because it's something that we feel there's a need to do, is to have public transportation in rural communities right across this province.

CHAIR: The Member's time has expired.

The hon. the Member for Harbour Main.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: With respect to the question that you recently answered regarding the initiatives of your department to examine and address specific concerns of 2SLGBTQ+ seniors as they age, you committed to providing information related to the initiatives for this demographic. With the initiatives that you have ongoing, for example, with Women and Gender Equality, I would also ask that we would like to see that as well, any information regarding that.

Thank you.

Going to subhead 3.1.01, Seniors and Aging, under Salaries, could you please outline why salaries were \$89,400 over budget, please?

P. PIKE: Yes.

The increase from the budget of 2023-24 is result of four temporary positions added during the year to assist with the adult protection requirements.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Thank you.

The Salaries expenditure is increasing from \$367,300 to \$736,900. Could you please explain that increase?

P. PIKE: The increase is due to the continuation of temporary positions to assist with adult protection requirements. This also takes in negotiated salary increases.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Okay, thank you.

Under Grants and Subsidies, we see that Grants and Subsidies are \$34,900 over budget. Could you please provide an explanation?

P. PIKE: Yes, that's due to increased grants funding approved for the seniors' resource centre, which is SeniorsNL.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Thank you.

Under Grants and Subsidies, I would like to see, actually, a breakdown of the disbursement amounts, please, if you could provide that.

P. PIKE: I can do that.

Under healthy aging research, \$100,000; under Age-Friendly community grants, \$95,000; NL Community Transportation grants, \$300,000 – that's the ones we just talked about there.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Okay.

P. PIKE: The 50+ Federation core funding, \$10,000. By the way, it's really a good thing if you take in one of those 50-plus annual meetings that they have, conventions. They're very well attended. I think last year there were 400-plus and it's an eye-opener.

The socialization that goes on there – we talk about the intergenerational activities and we talk about getting social activities for seniors, well, that's where it all happens. I was so pleased to attend last year; I can't wait to go back. Hopefully you'll get an opportunity to do that.

We had the Seniors Resource Centre core, \$343,000; and seniors social inclusion initiatives, \$191,000. It comes to \$1,040,000. That's the breakdown.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Thank you very much for the breakdown. I also hope to attend the next meeting. I know I've had the good fortune of being able to attend at some of the 50-plus club events in my district. I've heard good things about the provincial conference and delegation, so I look forward to attending.

Looking at 3.1.02, Disability Policy Office, the position of disability advocate. Last Estimates, the minister said there's been a fair bit of research that was completed on this regarding what your department could or what the office could or should look like – the disability office.

P. PIKE: Our government is currently reviewing the report, *Structural Review of the Statutory Offices of the House of Assembly*. That's being done prior to any decisions made with respect to advocate positions.

As you know, there are calls for the advocate and we'll have to wait and see. Outside government, we have organizations and groups, such as the Network of Disability Organizations, which play an important role in disability advocacy in the province. We need to listen to those as well. But I know where you're coming from with that question and I'm hearing it as well.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Yes, I understand that the review of the statutory offices has been completed, but the minister, last year, said there had been a

fair bit of research done, separate and apart from that by your department.

So can you give us any idea of the results of that research. Whether this is something that you've deemed to be a priority for your department.

P. PIKE: Again, it would be premature for us to speak right now on that, but hopefully soon.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Could you, please, under 3.1.02, Disability Policy Office, explain the savings under Salaries and why the '24-'25 Estimate is being increased?

P. PIKE: Yeah. Savings from the 2023-24 budget are as a result of vacancies during the year. The increase in the budget is as a result of the negotiated pay increases that we had.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Okay. Thank you.

Under Operating Accounts, could you please explain the savings under this subhead.

P. PIKE: Okay. The savings here are as a result of reduced travel requirements for the Accessibility Standards Advisory Board and the Standard Development Committee.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Okay. Thank you.

Under Grants and Subsidies, with respect to that, there are a number of stakeholders who receive those Grants and Subsidies. Could you please provide a list of that as well as how much?

P. PIKE: We can do that, but I'll just go down through – I have that here.

Under Grants and Subsidies, the increase from the 2023-24 budget is a result of a one-time grant of \$50,000 for the Summer

Camp Inclusion program. Again, we're accepting applications for that now. I'm not sure of the uptake, but I've been talking to a number of individuals, parents and organizations, so we're hoping to get a good uptake on that one.

There was \$25,000 for MusicNL and several additional smaller grants approved this year. Funded through \$500,000 additional grants budget that was provided for social and economic well-being – but I'm going to go down through the grant program line by line.

Accessible Vehicle Grants: \$350,000; Accessible Taxi Grants: \$50,000; Inclusion Grants: \$75,000; Capacity Grants: \$250,000; Coalition of Persons with Disabilities core funding: \$34,000; paratransit grant: \$94,000; Summer Camp Inclusion Grants: \$50,000; and additional grants: \$42,000.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Okay, thank you.

With respect to the disabilities act, you indicated in your opening remarks that on December 3, 2021, the act became law and it's currently in its final stages. Can you please give us an update on that?

P. PIKE: I'm sorry, could you repeat that question?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Sure.

In your opening remarks, you referenced that on December 3, 2021, that the act became law, but you said now it's currently in its final stages. Can you explain that and give us an update on the final stages of where it stands?

P. PIKE: What we were referring to is the Accessibility Standards Advisory Board is in final stages of establishing the first standard development committee to help inform the development of an accessible customer service standard.

CHAIR: The Member's time has expired.

The hon. the Member for Torngat Mountains.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

I just want to add to what my colleague from Harbour Main said. If I ask for any documents or any correspondence, I'd like for her to be copied on it. She's a tremendous advocate, and I think we both have the same, I guess, wish that we would help improve seniors and quality of life for people living with disabilities, et cetera, in the province.

Anything that I ask for, I'd like for it to be copied over to the Official Opposition as well.

P. PIKE: Just to comment on that, MHA. I certainly agree with you on that and anything that we provide, we'll provide to both.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Minister.

I just have one further question there on 3.1.01, Seniors and Aging. I was looking through the Seniors' Advocate reports, why it was generated, *What We've Heard* and also the one for *What Golden Years?* and one of the things that resonated with me was the Seniors' Benefit. I think it was six years without an increase and then, I think it was in 2022, there was a 10 per cent increase and then, a little later, was a 5 per cent. So that was a 15 per cent increase in the Newfoundland and Labrador Seniors' Benefit.

What resonated with me was that equated to \$200 extra, and especially for seniors living in rural areas where they can't access a lot of services or be able to shop around for groceries and things like that – for example, in my district – since I have you all here – \$200 for a year, an extra \$200 in the winter, that's not going to provide enough oil to heat your house for one week. So that

benefit that's given out to seniors on a fixed income – the \$200 – it's not going to be able to be able to heat your house for one week.

It's important for us to put things in perspective. So my question is: Are you looking at actually finding other means to increase the amount of income that seniors have, like, any benefits, any tax deductions, anything, programs, policies?

P. PIKE: The answer to your question is yes, and we'll certainly be using the Seniors' Well-Being Plan. When we do that, we'll be looking at all aspects of seniors' needs by geographical location.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Minister, and I think there's a lot of good information there in the Seniors' Advocate report that can really help government target benefits for seniors.

P. PIKE: We agree, MHA, and when we had our discussions regarding seniors' needs, we felt that there was a need to look at demographics and geographical location as well. So we are doing that. And you'll see that in the Seniors' Well-Being Plan.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Minister.

Moving now to 3.1.02, because we are running out of time, disabilities. Does this budget have funding for a director of compliance and enforcement, as laid out in the *Accessibility Act*?

T. ENGLISH: No, the budget doesn't include funding for a director of compliance. We mentioned earlier about how we had to develop standards. Part of the role of a director of compliance would be to monitor those standards. So until those are developed, there really isn't much for a director to do at this time.

Our accessibility plan was only released in December as well. So if we're talking about implementation of our own plan or anybody else's plan, that would be part of what a director of compliance would do. It's going

to take some time for us to get up and running with that as we go forward with the implementation of all those initiatives.

L. EVANS: Thank you for that answer. I appreciate it.

How many grants were awarded last year, and how much of the budget was spent on accessible vehicle program? I had a question previous, but I'm trying to cut out some questions because we're running out of time. So what grants were awarded last year and how much of the budget was spent?

P. PIKE: Okay, just looking at my chart again here. All the money was expended last year that was allocated for grants and so on. If we look in Accessible Vehicle Grants, Accessible Taxi Grants, you're looking at a total of \$400,000. There is a paratransit grant there as well of close to \$100,000.

L. EVANS: Thank you for the answer.

How many applications were received for the accessible taxi grant last year and how many were approved?

P. PIKE: We can certainly provide that answer to you as well. We don't have the number. I don't think there were a lot, though.

T. ENGLISH: I have the number.

P. PIKE: Oh, we have the number.

T. ENGLISH: It was two and two; two received, two awarded.

L. EVANS: Okay.

Moving on to 3.1.03, Child Welfare Programs and Policy, what recommendations are still outstanding from *A Long Wait for Change*?

P. PIKE: MHA, could you repeat that as well?

L. EVANS: Sure. I think I'm going to have to go into the next hour as well, just to prepare people.

3.1.03, Child Welfare Programs and Policy, what recommendations are still outstanding from the report *A Long Wait for Change*?

P. PIKE: Just one second.

L. EVANS: Minister, is it possible, maybe, for you to take that back and send it over to us and the Official Opposition?

P. PIKE: Sure, yeah.

L. EVANS: To both parties.

P. PIKE: Considering people's time, we'll do that.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

What progress has been made with Indigenous governments and organizations in setting up and training child welfare services of their own? Can you just give us a very quick overview?

P. PIKE: Sorry, we're going to need the question repeated. I didn't hear it.

L. EVANS: I was wondering if I could actually get some information emailed over to myself, my party and the Official Opposition on what progress has been made with Indigenous governments and their organizations in setting up and training child welfare services. For example, one of the reasons why is Nunatsiavut Government is actually supposed to be taking over the role.

Maybe you could just email it over to us because of the time constraints.

P. PIKE: Actually, we can provide a quick response, the deputy minister can.

A. DOODY: There's one thing that the department has done very well is to work really close with its Indigenous partners, both Innu and Nunatsiavut Government, on setting the conditions for transfer of responsibility when it comes to children in care. Just based on the amount of work that's been done, it would be almost something that's impossible to email, but perhaps we could set up an informal briefing, or something like that, so you could ask questions. That would be better.

L. EVANS: I appreciate that. Maybe we could set it up after the House is finished sitting for the session. I also invite the Member for Harbour Main to participate in the meeting. That would be great.

Moving on to the next question now, what work has been done on the action plan on prevention or early intervention for families?

A. GOGAN: That work falls under the Social and Economic Well-Being Division. As part of the work on social well-being, a lot of consultation was done. We're working closely with other departments, including the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Community Services, on initiatives to do true prevention.

CHAIR: Okay, the Member's time has expired.

The Member for Harbour Main.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: I just have two final questions under Disability Policy Office. I have to return to one of the questions that I asked because I really need clarification on it. It's still uncertain to me where this is going. It's in regard to the *Accessibility Act*.

We know that on December 3, 2021, the act became law. We were also told by the opening remarks of the minister that's currently in the final stages, but yet, there are still no regulations. This is almost – well it's since December of 2021.

Could we please have some explanation as to why it's taking so long and where it's at in the final stages. We need to understand that, please.

P. PIKE: Yeah, a couple of things with that, I guess.

The act, by the way, is implemented. The act is already passed.

What I was referring to was parts of it that we're still looking at some standard development within that act. The standards that would evolve from the act are being developed.

I don't know if anybody else would like to jump in on that.

Tracey?

T. ENGLISH: Yeah.

The biggest part, I guess, of the act for core government was the passing of our own Accessibility Plan. That was published in December of 2023. Then we worked with a number of other organizations towards finalizing their plans as well.

So there's nothing under the act that requires every group to come in with an accessibility plan to government; in other words, provide it to us. The idea is they publicize it themselves. So as part of that, they would have put it on their own websites or provided it through their stakeholders and everything else.

The minister is referring to the Accessibility Standards Committee, which is a part of that act. So the Accessibility Standards Advisory Board has been established. They've met frequently now over the past year and a half.

Then, underneath that are the standards that are being developed as part of the Accessibility Standards Advisory Board, of which the two that are being worked on are

– well, first is customer service and then communications and information.

The act itself is implemented. It has been proclaimed, it is implemented and it's being enforced.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: So can we have a time frame though, as to when everything will be completed, ready to go?

T. ENGLISH: On the Standards Advisory Committee or ...?

They set their own agenda. They're an independent board of our government, so they would come in with the (inaudible) recommendations, but they themselves would undertake their own work.

I mentioned earlier that we are down a chair and a vice-chair. We're in the process of recruiting those positions now to be able to continue on with the work of the advisory board.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Okay, thank you.

The final question is with respect to the *Building Accessibility Act*, Bill 52. I understand that's under the Department of Service NL; however, there would have been, obviously, consultation with your department.

So we're just wondering that this basically is still – there have been changes made to this act and they were passed in October or November of 2023, I believe. Could you please provide an update on that in regard to your consultations?

A. DOODY: There probably would have been a consultation during as part of the review. But those items would have been – the changes to an act would have been debated here within the House of Assembly, so all those concerns or any of our input would have been contemplated at that time.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Okay.

That completes my questions.

Thank you.

CHAIR: Okay.

The hon. the Member for Torngat Mountains.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

The amount for the Newfoundland and Labrador Child Benefit has increased. Section 8 of the regulations deals with indexing and has referenced CPI.

So just to clarify, is it now indexed to inflation or do we have to alter the regulations every year to do this?

P. PIKE: Yeah, we're going to be doing Child Benefits under the next section.

CHAIR: Yeah, that's under 4.1.01.

L. EVANS: Okay.

Has the committee in place with NAPE addressed the challenges facing child protection social workers. Have they brought forward any concrete measures that would deal with the issue?

A. DOODY: NAPE staff members from across the province and people from the provincial office make up that committee. It's a very collaborative working group. They bring ideas forward and they discuss issues.

In relation to that as well, there are other inputs. So there are multiple items ongoing to improve the work environment for those social workers and address recruitment and retention issues. So there are several initiatives ongoing.

Also coming out of the review of the Ernst & Young report and some of the items that we've been contemplating, there's been

extensive consultation done with staff across the whole province. Not just within that NAPE working group, where we are listening to what our staff on the ground are seeing and what the work environment is like to attempt to make changes within the system to improve things for children.

L. EVANS: Thank you, Chair.

I'm done with this section.

CHAIR: Okay.

The Member for Harbour Main, you're done with this section also?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Yes.

CHAIR: I'll ask the Clerk to recall the subheadings.

CLERK: 3.1.01 to 3.1.03 inclusive, Policy and Prevention.

CHAIR: Shall 3.1.01 to 3.1.03 inclusive, Policy and Prevention, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subheads 3.1.01 through 3.1.03 carried.

CHAIR: I ask the Clerk to call the next subhead.

CLERK: 4.1.01 to 4.1.02 inclusive, Prevention and Early Intervention.

CHAIR: 4.1.01 to 4.1.02 inclusive, Prevention and Early Intervention.

I believe it's the Member for Bonavista.

C. PARDY: Thank you.

CHAIR: He did move.

C. PARDY: Revolving chairs.

CHAIR: He moved so that changes it up for above.

C. PARDY: Thank you, Chair.

Pleased not to be the only Member from the District of Bonavista in this Chamber. I think probably that might be a first. I think, Lori, right?

You're not? Okay. My mistake. I'm still the only one from the District of Bonavista in this Chamber.

In the Budget Speech – and I'll be as quickly as I could with that – it said that: "Last year's increase in the Income Supplement benefits more than 150,000 families and individuals, and the Seniors' Benefit helps almost 50,000 seniors aged 65 and over."

Can you actualize what the increase was for those 150,000 families and individuals last year, generally, in real actual dollars?

A. DOODY: Yes, so I think that change is within poverty reduction in general. For real dollars, it may be best if we give some case studies that we can provide to you afterwards about individuals. Because depending on the individual –

C. PARDY: Okay.

A. DOODY: – and individual circumstances, what it means to each individual and each family could be different. So it's probably better for us to provide that afterwards in more detail on what it would mean to each individual based on circumstances.

C. PARDY: Good. Would it be fair to ask for a range or will I wait for the case studies?

A. DOODY: Yeah, probably wait for the case studies because they can vary.

C. PARDY: Okay.

Just for the official record, again, from the Budget Speech, it says: "Improvements to the Income Support program will result in some people receiving almost four times their previous benefits." Can we, for the record, state how many we're talking about. Out of what pool it would be.

Some out there are thinking that if they're between 60 to 65 they've got four times their income support payment coming, but that's not the case.

A. DOODY: Yeah, absolutely. So there are multiple changes happening under the income support programs, all under the theme of streamlining and increasing income for folks.

Again, every individual is different and details would be different, but in general, some of the initial changes that are taking place over the next year is about standardizing rates and reducing the number of different requirements. So we're going from 21 different benefits down to six over a two-year period as those occur. So everybody will be impacted at different times and different rates as those changes occur.

For example, there is an under-30 rate which will be eliminated. So those individuals will automatically receive an increase. I guess just for this forum it will be difficult to get into all those different changes here, so we can certainly do it afterwards.

C. PARDY: My apologies. What I was referring to in the Budget Speech was the – if I continued on with the next sentence: "... implementing a targeted Basic Income pilot for eligible individuals aged 60-64." My apologies on that because I went right back to the answer you had provided before.

Can we get a breakdown of that, for the record, of the 60 to 64, out of how many this will apply to?

A. DOODY: Absolutely. That program is designed for those individuals who are between the ages of 60 and 64 who are on income support and in receipt of home supports through Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services. That would be the exact cohort.

We can certainly give you the number of those folks. The application part of that process has just happened.

C. PARDY: Okay.

A. DOODY: So it may fluctuate. We are anticipating approximately 500 people will be immediately impacted by that.

C. PARDY: Five hundred out of how many? Can you quantify?

A. DOODY: I'd have to go –

C. PARDY: Okay, sure.

A. DOODY: We'd have to get the denominator for you.

C. PARDY: Good. Thank you.

How many residents, families, receive income support payments in the province? Individuals and families, I'm sure there is probably a different figure.

P. PIKE: Okay, we have it.

Comparing household types, in 2023-24 – to February 2023 the average monthly caseload was 20,699 households. The caseload was comprised of 29,116 individuals; 22,007 of those were adults and 7,109 children under the age of 18.

C. PARDY: Sorry, Minister, could you repeat the number of children?

P. PIKE: There were 7,109 children under the age of 18.

C. PARDY: Okay.

Do you have a figure there as well for single parents or able-bodied individuals?

P. PIKE: We'll talk about single parent; we can't do the able-bodied.

C. PARDY: Okay.

P. PIKE: There are 3,586.

C. PARDY: There are 4,492 individuals with children receiving child support. Would you have any parallel with your department serving any of those children that would be in those single-parent homes that would be drawing income support? Would your data show any correlation between those?

P. PIKE: We wouldn't have that information. I would think the Department of Justice would deal with that.

A. GOGAN: Child support payments are exempt because it's money for the children. So we don't have easy access to that as we used to when it was not exempt, but I think that's a good news story. We don't track anymore what child support payments are going into a household, because they're exempt income.

C. PARDY: Okay.

So you're saying that quite conceivably those 4,492 may not be on income support? There'll be no benefits coming from your department for these individuals?

A GOGAN: They absolutely could. We just —

C. PARDY: It could be, but you don't have the figure.

A. GOGAN: Correct.

C. PARDY: Okay, that's good.

Forgive me if it was mentioned earlier, but income support clients that we have in my jurisdiction, I know they are heavily taxed. Any time you lose a dollar on your cheque, then there's a lot of grief.

This CERB payment, has your department made representation to the federal government on trying to avoid them clawing back the CERB payment for these income support individuals, knowing the hardship and also knowing that they were given the approval from the start that they were eligible? I even checked myself at that time. I didn't know if you did.

P. PIKE: Yeah, we'll get back to you on that one as well.

C. PARDY: Okay, good. Thank you.

P. PIKE: That was before my time.

C. PARDY: Okay.

May I squeeze in one more question?

CHAIR: We'll come back to you.

C. PARDY: Okay.

CHAIR: The Member for Torngat Mountains.

L. EVANS: Sorry, we're just working through the questions that my colleague from Bonavista has been asking. He's doing a great job.

I'm still under 4.1.01: Why was spending on Salaries half a million under budget last year?

P. PIKE: The savings from the 2023-24 budget are a result of vacancies during the year.

L. EVANS: Okay, thank you.

I'm just keeping to that section there: How many employees do you have working in Income Support? Is that answer in the binder?

P. PIKE: No, it's not in the binder.

A. GOGAN: Thank you.

There are just over 200 positions in the Income Support service delivery division.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

How many positions are vacant in Northern Labrador?

P. PIKE: We'll provide that information to you.

OFFICIAL: (Inaudible.)

P. PIKE: Oh, I'm sorry, the answer was no, we don't have any.

L. EVANS: Do you have any employees currently staffed in Northern Labrador?

P. PIKE: Not for Income Support, no.

L. EVANS: So just to clarify for the record, you have no workers working in Northern Labrador to provide income support services?

P. PIKE: That's correct.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

My next question: Do you have any plans to have any income support workers working in the six remote, isolated Indigenous communities in Northern Labrador?

P. PIKE: Okay.

Deputy Minister.

A. DOODY: So there are no plans to have permanent positions assigned in Northern Labrador. However, we've worked really

closely with NG and with support, as required. So always open to providing a staff member to fly into the North as required to provide support.

L. EVANS: Since everyone is present here from the department, there was a letter sent out a couple of years ago to everyone on income support. I'm not sure if my colleague from Bonavista is aware of the situation. A letter was sent out to everyone on income support in the province asking them if they still needed to be continued on income support and that they had to reply to this letter. If not, they would've been removed from income support.

In actual fact, that letter was sent out and about a year later, I started finding people who had no means of support because they didn't realize they had to send a reply back. They weren't even aware, a lot of times, of the letter that came out.

So now that everyone is here during budget Estimates, I was wondering if you would actually re-evaluate the fact that you had no permanent income support workers working in Northern Labrador. Because even though you've stopped that, I'm still finding people in my district that has no income coming in because they have been cut off income support.

P. PIKE: Certainly, a couple of comments. When it comes to us putting someone in income support in Northern Labrador, we certainly would take that under advisement and take a look at that, see if it's required.

The other thing about the letter, I'm not familiar with that, nor is my deputy minister, so we will find that letter and take a look at it. But you're right about information getting out there. Sometimes people get letters and they don't take a look at it properly. We've noticed that with some of our programs for seniors, when we were doing our forums last week, we found that a lot of seniors weren't aware of certain things that we were doing or certain programs.

In this particular case, we will find that letter and we will take a look at it. I'm not aware of it, personally.

L. EVANS: No, actually, it was sent out to the entire province. I'm sure people in other regions that are remote and isolated (inaudible). I would have assumed the question that would have come to your mind is, what were they living on? What were they living on if they had no income coming in – none?

I'm sure my colleague from Bonavista is going to wonder on that, too. If you have no money coming in, you're relying on income support, you get cut off and you don't know why you're cut off, but you don't know who to talk to, what were they living on? Living on tea and bread? Well, where did the money come for the tea and bread? If they were living on food, where were they getting the money to buy food? Right?

So this is quite damaging, Minister. I'm quite shocked that you weren't aware of this letter that was sent out that caused so many problems for so many people in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

P. PIKE: You said it was sent out two years ago?

L. EVANS: It was sent out a couple of years ago, yes. We're still feeling the effects of it. So, I mean, we need to make sure that if you're going to make any changes to your programs, your policies, especially when they impact supports to people, that we learn from the past.

P. PIKE: Has this come up before now? I have a question. Just –

L. EVANS: Yes.

P. PIKE: – wondering about this.

L. EVANS: I've actually brought it to the attention of the department, and they did say that they were changing it but I'm still

finding people in my district that still doesn't have any income coming in. So it'd be really good to have access to income support workers.

Just moving on now to –

P. PIKE: Can I make just one more comment, if you don't mind, MHA?

Look, if you hear tell of anything like that, please, get in touch with our office so we can deal with it. I hear you and I know what you're saying. I'm an MHA as well. But, please, get in touch with our office so we're aware of it. We'll certainly be taking a look at this immediately to see what we can do with that.

L. EVANS: Just to clarify statements made; I have been contact with the department. I've been in contact with the department of Income Support. I have been in contact with Western region. I've been in contact with Goose Bay office. I've been in contact with St. John's office over the last two years and still finding people.

So please don't infer from the comments made that I am working in isolation and not communicating with the departments. One of the things that I do is I do write letters and I do phone and I do follow up.

Thank you.

P. PIKE: Yes.

L. EVANS: Moving on to the next one under 4.1.02, Income Support Program and Policy. Has there been any progress on increasing the uptake of the Prenatal Early Childhood Nutrition Supplement?

A. GOGAN: We've been working with community partners and with the health authority on ways to increase the uptake. Of course, we can't readily identify people who are pregnant. We do know after the fact, we have a pretty good sense of people who were missed because, once a child is born,

then they automatically qualify, as long as they file a tax return.

So we've really been looking at that. The numbers have gone up slightly, but we still know that we're not getting all the children that we should be and all of the families. We've been working also, through social media and other means, and primarily with the Canadian partners, to promote the program.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

Social media is a huge benefit now to getting awareness out about the programs. So thank you for your answer.

How much money is budgeted for the Prenatal Early Childhood Nutrition Supplement for this year and what portion of last year's budget was actually spent?

P. PIKE: Would \$270,000 sound right?

OFFICIAL: Yes, that's it: \$270,000.

L. EVANS: So \$270,000 was budgeted for this year?

P. PIKE: Yes.

L. EVANS: And how much was spent for last year's allotted amount?

A. GOGAN: The Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development delivers the prenatal component, and the postnatal component is delivered through the Department of Finance through the tax system.

The budget hasn't changed for the prenatal component but the budget for the program overall has because it has been extended from age one up to age five. So the budget that you see in our department is only for the prenatal component.

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

CHAIR: The Member's time has expired.

We will go until 12:30, but then it's a hard stop because the House sits at 1:30. If you wish to come back after that, you can make arrangements to come back for another Estimates.

The Member for Bonavista.

C. PARDY: I will be very succinct.

The Auditor General report on the financial statement audits for 2023 had indicated that income support overpayments represented the third largest category of receivables for the government. I think it was \$98.5 million that they had indicated for 2023. Can you speak to that, please?

A. DOODY: Yeah, absolutely.

The total amount quoted in the Auditor General's report is over the lifetime of the program. It is not just that 2023 amount.

Overpayments are established for several reasons within the program; for example, if we are providing extra assistance to folks with security deposits and things for apartments so they can get access to housing, that gets recorded as an overpayment. There are also, of course, operational: Folks may go to work part-time; they may be delayed in reporting their income, which also automatically ends up being an overpayment; and sometimes we run into cases where folks have been living together and were lying about where they're living.

I shouldn't say lying – that's not the right word, but have probably not come forth with the fact that their living arrangement may have changed. Once these things – because they're against legislation, that amount gets calculated and recorded as an overpayment.

But just to keep in mind, we are still dealing with our most vulnerable population, so our

recovery rate is very low for those that are on income support because we know that they don't have the means to repay. I just wanted to highlight that.

C. PARDY: No, and good job.

I would say I asked a question, but I'd be the one that would be complaining if we didn't act with immediacy and when the need was out there. That's the vulnerability part. So where that balance is, and you said yes, that \$95.8 million, whatever it was. But I think in the Auditor General's report, it also said, annually, \$13.6 million.

What can we do differently or what is the department doing differently to try to minimize that amount? I am aware of the sensitivity and the need for immediacy when the situation occurs.

A. DOODY: Yeah, so it's the assessment of the department and the department's staff that the changes that are forthcoming within the income support programming and the streamlining and the things like that. So we're talking about changes of rates, whether you're living with relatives, non-relatives, are some of the things that are driving this, that this will have a significant reduction in the amount that we set at overpayments.

But, keep in mind, where we're dealing with those who are most vulnerable, we're always going to provide emergency assistance to those folks. So there's always going to be an overpayment component to our program.

C. PARDY: I agree fully. But it is a large amount and I understand, thus the question.

How many Community Sector Councils do we have in the province? That's 4.1.03, the section there. I know you're going to present it to me but, even quickly, the locations. I wouldn't say there are too many in the province. By me asking, you know that I do have one on the Bonavista Peninsula. If I

knew more about it or if we had one, I would probably be more cognizant of it, but I don't.

A. GOGAN: There's just one Community Sector Council. They do have a presence, though, in different parts of the province. They have some staff in Gander as well as in St. John's. They do try and offer events and supports throughout the province as well. They're there to support the sector, wherever they may be.

C. PARDY: One council, but how many chapters do they have? Because I know that Marystown, for example, St. John's would have several. How many chapters would they fund?

A. GOGAN: So they don't really operate that way. They're just one organization. They do have some staff in Gander, but they provide support to the whole community sector. Whether that's offering sessions on how to help people with retirement planning or business development or whatever may be necessary.

They're doing some great work right now in rural areas in terms of trying to encourage non-profits or supporting non-profits to buy for-profit businesses when the owners are retiring and there's nobody to buy it. So they are working a lot in rural areas, as well as urban areas.

C. PARDY: I don't question –

P. PIKE: You're not referring to CYNs, too, are you? Because CYNs are youth organizations that – do you have one in your area?

C. PARDY: No.

P. PIKE: CYNs, by the way, are fantastic. We're looking at funding for them. They do a lot of work with the youth in our communities. A big uptake and they are staffed. Anyway, I just didn't know if you were –

C. PARDY: No, thank you for that.

But I'll just throw out a name, Bonnie at Buckmaster's Circle. Would Bonnie fall under this category and heading?

A. GOGAN: No.

C. PARDY: So I am totally off track.

She's kind; she's not answering. She's so kind.

Okay, so it's different, but is that somewhere here in the Estimates? That's probably prior to that, was it, my section?

A. GOGAN: The Newfoundland and Labrador Housing community and neighbourhood centres, they fall under NLHC. So you can ask about those in there.

C. PARDY: With so much time available and here I just spent, what, 2½ minutes, three – my apologies.

When the new federal disability top-up occurs, this would be a clientele that your department would be involved with?

P. PIKE: Yeah.

C. PARDY: Yes, it would.

Can you assure that there will be no claw backs from our – because sometimes we have these thresholds in place where, all of a sudden, we know the federal provides it, provincial claws it back.

I just throw that question out to see as to whether there is a threshold somewhere in your department and allocation that's not going to change.

P. PIKE: Again, we've had this discussion already about that. We're in the process of looking at it. It's new. We will take a look at it. The whole idea of thresholds did come up in the conversation and we were wondering ourselves. We hope not.

C. PARDY: Okay.

You will try your best not to or to –

P. PIKE: One hundred per cent.

C. PARDY: Okay, to index or whatever.

We've had a lot of comments in the House, and the minister can attest to that, about the burial and those people from income support coming up short in the burials.

P. PIKE: Yes.

C. PARDY: Can you speak to where we're going from here to try to alleviate what we've seen and what people are facing in getting it? And knowing that, I think we're probably gone back a couple of decades without it being indexed or without the cost being revised.

P. PIKE: Okay. Both of us here are wanting to answer this question.

C. PARDY: Probably just with one, with some time constraints

A. DOODY: I really just want to highlight what's important in this conversation is that families on income support, the payments are directly to funeral home operators. We're not giving families of income support money. When a family of income support has a loved one that – or anyone in low income, I should say, and they make the application to the department, we deal directly with the funeral home on payment for those, so the family is not out. So this is a pre-arranged rate.

So that work is under review as part of the income support review and those rates will come out of that. The consultations are going to start in the coming weeks with funeral home operators on those rates, but it's really important to highlight this is about income support pays funeral home operators so, from a family perspective, once your application is granted, you

proceed with burial, and we deal directly with the funeral home operator on payment. It's not the family that's in that situation.

C. PARDY: Okay, that's right. Good.

P. PIKE: There's so much to say about that, but there are other rates besides the basic rate. So we talked about \$2,335 as being the basic rate for a funeral. But, in actual fact, we pay other things as well. So, in actual fact, I mentioned yesterday in the House, because I had some looks at me, if the basic rate is \$2,300, why are you saying the average is \$2,800? Because of all of the other costs that we take care of as well.

Just for example, for cremation, you and I live in rural Newfoundland and there is no crematorium – I don't know if there's one in your area, but there's not in mine. But we pay for the transportation of the body from, say, St. Lawrence to St. John's and back again. That's \$900 maybe, or whatever it was. I think our cut-off is \$850 or whatever. So they get the max for that. There are all these other costs, too, that come in. There is so much to that.

CHAIR: The Member's time has expired.

It's 12:29, if there are additional questions for this department, we can recess and return.

L. EVANS: (Inaudible.)

CHAIR: Okay, go ahead.

L. EVANS: When you decide to increase the Newfoundland Child Benefit, why didn't you adjust the maximum income cut-off as well, since there hasn't been a change since 2011 and it's very low?

A. DOODY: So there's an ongoing review across all income-tested programs in government, being led by the Department of Finance. That's the only reason why that wasn't considered at that time, but that is

ongoing and is expected to be completed, you know, sometime in the next year.

L. EVANS: Oh, you're going to give me the 38 minutes.

CHAIR: That's seconds.

L. EVANS: I already asked this question earlier. The Newfoundland and Labrador Child Benefit has increased; section 8 of the regulations deals with indexing and has reference to CPI. Just for clarification, is that now indexed to inflation, or will we have to alter the regulations every year to do so?

A. DOODY: Yes, that benefit is already indexed.

L. EVANS: It's indexed to inflation?

A. DOODY: It's based on CPI.

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

My time has ran out.

CHAIR: Are there additional questions or are we finished?

L. EVANS: I will be writing a letter with some questions over to the department that (inaudible) and also some of these questions we can speak in the House and I will be sharing some of that with my colleague from Bonavista.

CHAIR: Okay, thank you very much.

I ask the Clerk to recall the subhead.

CLERK: 4.1.01 to 4.1.02 inclusive, Prevention and Early Intervention.

CHAIR: Shall 4.1.01 to 4.1.02 inclusive, Prevention and Early Intervention, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subheads 4.1.01 through 4.1.02 carried.

CHAIR: I ask the Clerk to call the total.

CLERK: The total, the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development.

CHAIR: Shall the total for the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development, total heads, carried.

CHAIR: Shall I report the Estimates of the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development complete?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Motion carried.

On motion, Estimates of the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development carried without amendment.

CHAIR: The next meeting is Friday, April 19 at 9 a.m. to consider the Estimates of the Department of Health and Community Services.

I thank the departmental staff and the minister, and the Committee for your attendance.

Thank you very much.

On motion, the Committee adjourned.