



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Children and Family Services
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, March 19, 2025
8 a.m.

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First Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP), Deputy Chair

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participant

Ministry of Children and Family Services
Hon. Searle Turton, Minister

8 a.m.

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

**Ministry of Children and Family Services
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Children and Family Services for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2026.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce the officials who are joining you at the table when it comes to your turn. My name is Jackie Lovely, and I'm the MLA for the Camrose constituency and the chair of this committee. We'll begin, starting to my right with Mr. Singh.

Mr. Singh: Good morning, everyone. Peter Singh, MLA, Calgary-East.

Mr. McDougall: Good morning, everyone. MLA McDougall, Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mrs. Johnson: Good morning, everyone. MLA Jennifer Johnson, Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mrs. Petrovic: Chelsae Petrovic, MLA for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Turton: Good morning, everyone. Searle Turton, Minister of Children and Family Services. To my right I have Deputy Minister Lisa Sadownik and senior financial officer Darren Baptista. On my left I have assistant deputy minister for child intervention delivery David Wheeler and assistant deputy minister for youth and preventive services Joni Brodziak.

Member Irwin: Good morning. Janis Irwin, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Batten: Good morning. Diana Batten, MLA for Calgary-Acadia and shadow minister for Children and Family Services.

Ms Hayter: Julia Hayter, MLA for Calgary-Edgemont and the shadow minister for status of women.

Member Miyashiro: Good morning, everyone. Rob Miyashiro, Lethbridge-West.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, everyone.

Just a few housekeeping items here. I'd like to note the following substitutions – this is not correct. I did have that Member Arcand-Paul is subbing for Ms Goehring. [interjection] He's not well. Okay. No worries. We'll carry on: Member Irwin for Mr. Haji, Mr. Stephan for Mr. Lundy, Ms Hayter for Member Tejada.

Okay. A few more items here. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. No need to turn them on and off. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Children and Family Services shall be considered for two hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(7) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation

chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to ministry officials at the table. For each segment of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both the minister and the member agree. If debate is exhausted prior to two hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding the speaking times or the rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk about the process.

Ministry officials who are present may, at the direction of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting.

Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at any time.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused; however, the block of speaking time and the overall two-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both the questions and the answers without interruption during estimates debate. Debate flows through the chair at all times, please, members, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

I would now invite the Minister of Children and Family Services to begin with your opening remarks. Sir, you have 10 minutes.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Once again, it is an absolute privilege to serve as the Minister of Children and Family Services. Just for some introductions again: to my right is Deputy Minister Lisa Sadownik and senior financial officer Darren Baptista, and on my left, as I mentioned, is the assistant deputy minister for child intervention delivery David Wheeler and assistant deputy minister for youth and preventative family services Joni Brodziak. In the gallery we have the assistant deputy minister for Indigenous partnerships and strategic services, Cynthia Dunnigan; and assistant deputy minister of regulatory compliance, quality assurance, and business supports Brian Makowecki.

Madam Chair, I am pleased to present the Budget 2025 estimates and 2025-28 business plan for Children and Family Services. Budget 2025 invests nearly \$1.6 billion, an increase of 6.1 per cent, into programs and services that keep children, youth, and families safe and prevent violence. We are increasing support for critical legislative programs that protect our kids. After all, my ministry has a very important legal responsibility to get involved when children and youth are at risk or have experienced abuse or neglect. When a child cannot stay at home, we provide safe temporary or permanent homes and care.

Budget 2025 also invests in supports for survivors of family and sexual violence, keeping our promise to invest in women's shelters and sexual assault centres. We're supporting youth and young adults transitioning out of government care, helping them to build healthy, independent futures by funding needed programs.

Madam Chair, Budget 2025 strengthens the services that Albertans rely on in times of need. Our focus on these priorities will help Alberta's government meet fiscal challenges, making sure our province remains the best place to live, work, and raise a family. We serve nearly 9,000 children receiving child intervention

services each year. The safety and well-being of children and youth is the ministry's top priority.

Budget 2025 invests nearly \$1 billion into child intervention, an increase of \$58 million from the 2024 and 2025 forecast. These investments address the growing challenges in our system, including increasingly complex cases, rising costs for service providers, and the need for a range of placement options that provide the right level of care and support for children and youth so that young people who have been impacted by abuse and neglect and are dealing with behavioural and mental health needs have the care that they require.

Through our longer term strategic procurement plan we will ensure that children and youth in government care are in placements that best meet their needs, where they are safe and cared for and connected to family, community, and culture. This plan will increase family-based placements such as foster and kinship care, where evidence shows that children and youth do better. We are also investing in our agency sector, which provides so many supports to vulnerable young people, so agencies can recruit and retain staff to run programs that best meet a child's needs.

Budget 2025 also invests in caregivers. Foster and kinship caregivers offer safe, caring homes to children in need, and I've been listening to them at round-table discussions for over the last year. That is why we are increasing caregiver rates by 2 per cent on April 1, building on the increase of 4.2 per cent last June. These adjustments help caregivers cover day-to-day necessities like food and clothing as well as babysitting and relief.

My ministry also continues to invest in our workforce of front-line child intervention practitioners. These are dedicated professionals who help keep children safe while working hard to meet legislative requirements. We recruit and retain staff and support them through training, coaching, and mentorship.

On a path to meaningful reconciliation we work with Indigenous communities to protect the safety and well-being of Indigenous children, youth, and families. Budget 2025 invests \$10.5 million into Indigenous-related initiatives such as cultural competency training for staff, enhancing connections and work with communities. We also remain committed to working with First Nations and the government of Canada on the federal act respecting First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children, youth, and families.

My ministry is also helping some of Alberta's lowest income families by keeping more money in their pockets so that they can provide a higher quality of life for their children. We're investing \$375 million in the Alberta child and family benefit, an increase of almost \$30 million from the 2024-25 forecast, to support Alberta's growing population. This benefit funds basic necessities through a monthly tax-free payment to about 190,000 families. This program also encourages families to participate in the workforce and helps keep children out of poverty.

Budget 2025 also increases funding to a key program serving youth in their transition to adulthood. Almost \$61 million, including an additional \$6 million this year, will go into the transition to adulthood program, or TAP, for youth and young adults transitioning from government care. We all know that entering adulthood is tough for many young people, and transitioning out of government care can be even harder. That is where TAP comes in. It prepares young people ages 18 to 24 to live independently, find mentors, develop work and life skills, attend postsecondary, and build careers with support from compassionate and trained staff. Alberta has developed a strong and robust TAP program for children and youth aging out of government care, and intake numbers continue to grow, so we have committed to an increase of almost \$12 million by 2027-28.

8:10

Another service with increased demand is in the area of crisis services, women's shelters, and sexual assault centres. Madam Chair, every adult and child deserves to be free from a life of violence and abuse. Alberta's government is supporting organizations that provide a safe place to turn, and Budget 2025 invests more than \$88 million into preventing family and sexual violence. This includes more than \$60 million for women's shelters in 2025-26, an increase of more than \$3 million from Budget 2024-25, and \$19 million over three years. This funding supports more than 30 women's shelters across Alberta as well as second-stage and fee-for-service shelters in First Nations communities.

Fifteen sexual assault centres and their umbrella organization will also continue to receive \$13.8 million in '25-26 for their important work. In addition, we are rolling out our mandate commitment to roll out \$10 million to sexual assault centres, with \$1.5 million coming this year. This builds on our '24-25 one-time investment of \$1.5 million that currently funded sexual assault centres using the funding formula developed by the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services and its members.

Budget 2025 also funds eight child advocacy centres which serve children and youth who have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. This includes funding from my ministry as well as Mental Health and Addiction. We continue to listen to and work with all of these partners to strengthen how we can support children, youth, and individuals who have experienced abuse and meet our mandate commitments and make sure that funding goes where it is needed the most.

Madam Chair, as I mentioned earlier, Budget 2025 focuses on delivering these critical services to Albertans and increasing funding to essential services. To do this and meet the challenges faced by our province, we also have had to make some difficult decisions such as choosing not to implement supplementary health benefits for adoptive families as well as discontinuing the child and youth support program and reintroducing income testing for supports for permanency families. As the supplementary health benefits program had never been rolled out, it will not have a direct impact on families.

It was still a hard decision for me as an adoptive parent, and I remain committed to making adoption more affordable for families. That is why Budget 2025 maintains an increase to the provincial adoption expenses tax credit of about \$4,000 per family and a one-time \$6,000 subsidy for eligible families who adopt through a licensed private adoption agency. We have also made numerous policy improvements such as shortening the time it takes to complete a government home study. I am committed to supporting adoptive families who provide children and youth with safe, loving, and forever homes.

Madam Chair, our budget is supporting vulnerable Albertans while meeting the challenges faced by our province today. We are focused on the services that children and families rely on, increasing funding to protect children from abuse and neglect: the Alberta child and family benefit for the province's lowest income families, support for youth in transition, and safe places for women and children fleeing violence. We're also working in collaboration with the family and sexual violence prevention sectors to ensure that we are investing in the right supports, and in doing so, we're making responsible choices that will help us be there for those who need help down the road.

With this prudent plan we will continue to help children, youth, and families through their most difficult times, fostering resilience, strength, and independence. I am incredibly proud to lead a team of talented and dedicated employees who work tirelessly to make a

positive difference in the lives of Albertans and who care deeply about the people that we serve. Thank you very much for your time, and I look forward to answering any questions that the committee may have this morning.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now begin the question-and-answer portion of the meeting. For the first 50 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams.

Now, Member, do you prefer to share your time or have blocked time with the minister?

Member Batten: I would love to have shared time if the minister would share.

The Chair: Minister, what's your preference?

Mr. Turton: Block time, please.

The Chair: All right. We'll go ahead with block time. Member, you have 10 minutes to ask your questions and make comments to the minister. Once you've done so, the minister will have up to 10 minutes to respond.

Member Batten: Perfect. Thank you so much. Good morning to everyone, and thank you for, you know, coming early, early this morning to discuss Children and Family Services' estimates for 2025-26. It's unfortunate that the minister does not want to share time as that would have allowed for a conversation back and forth through the chair, of course. But I do appreciate that the minister and ministry will try to capture as many of my questions as possible, and I would absolutely, gratefully, accept any answers in written form given the amount of time that we have today.

I first want to start with child intervention. Page 62, government estimates 2025-26, budget line 2.1, program planning and supports will see a cut of 3 per cent when adjusted for population and inflation. Budget line 2.3, supports for permanency will see a cut of more than 6 per cent when adjusted for population and inflation. By the way, Madam Chair, everyone can find in the government of Alberta fiscal plan 2025-28 page 10, which shows that inflation and population change in the last year was 5.1 per cent.

Madam Chair, there is a need for more families to accept children and youth into their home and to care for them. These families rely heavily on every dollar because, as I suspect everyone in this room understands, children are expensive. When children require a little more therapy, maybe specialized equipment, maybe special food, these costs can easily add up to more than another mortgage payment. To the minister through the chair: what justification has been provided to these families impacted by the income testing applied to supports for permanency? Can the minister share how many Albertan families will no longer be receiving this promised support?

Children or youth need the resources they need regardless of the income of their adopted family. See, Madam Chair, in addition to the quite sudden decrease in supports of these families this type of change might very well have the dire consequences of presenting yet another barrier to attracting families to open their homes to these children and youth. To the minister through the chair: given this, what, if any, cushion is being provided for these families for which this change could suddenly make the adoption process impossible? What about sibling groups in the same house? Does the \$180,000

threshold still apply when siblings are adopted into the same family?

Madam Chair, this knee-jerk cut has sent chaos into Albertan families who took the government's word at face value and entered into an agreement in good faith where they, the parents, would provide a home and a family for a child or youth who'd been in government care and the government would provide supports up until the youth's 18th birthday. To the minister through the chair. This cut demonstrates disrespect for Albertan adoptive parents and their children. Can the minister provide reassurance that these concerns are being heard and that the ministry will return to acting in good faith?

On page 63, government estimates 2025-26, budget line 2.4, kinship and foster care support will see a cut of more than 3 per cent. Madam Chair, Alberta has spent money advertising to find additional foster parents as there are far too many children who simply do not have a home to go to. To the minister through the chair: was the foster parent campaign so effective that the ministry felt confident that we had enough homes for all the children in care? Can the minister share how many children and youth are currently being housed in group homes? What is the capacity of these group homes? How many children and youth leave the group homes prematurely because it's not a good environment for them? They likely end up on the street because shelter space is always a problem. If there isn't a foster home or a kinship available, these children and youth will go to a group home, assuming, of course, there's space.

Research shows that children and youth thrive inside a family community-like environment, which can be provided through fostering and kinship care. It is much more difficult to provide through group homes. To the minister through the chair: what happens when there isn't room in the group home? Is the minister aware that children and youth are spending nights on the floors in offices? Madam Chair, this just doesn't make sense. We are talking about providing a safe place for apprehended children and youth. To the minister: why do we then see cuts to supports for permanency, budget line 2.3, and cuts to kinship and foster care support, budget line 2.4?

Madam Chair, I cannot overstate the vulnerability of these children and youth. To the minister: what message are you trying to send when this budget defunds both their short-term and long-term options? Further, outcome 2, page 36 of the business plan 2025-28, key objective 2.2: "develop and implement improvements to kinship and foster care to continue to provide children and youth in temporary care with a healthy, nurturing family environment." To the minister through the chair. There are no additional FTEs or full-time employees indicated for Children and Family Services in Budget '25-26. We are seeing temporary and permanent homes being cut through rollbacks. The workforce, though mentioned in key objective 2.4 "develop and implement workforce strategies to support the child intervention workforce," hasn't any obvious funds earmarked to achieve this objective. Minister, where is the funding coming for these improvements? Where can I find that in the budget?

8:20

Budget line 2.2, page 62, government estimates, child intervention delivery. This budget line does indicate an increase of just over 6 per cent with population and inflation adjusted. To the minister through the chair: how much of this increase in child intervention delivery will go towards key objective 2.4?

Page 36, business plan, under initiatives supporting key objectives, first bullet refers to "the implementation of preventative, safety-oriented, evidence-based programming." How much is

earmarked for this new program? How much is earmarked for operational needs or for workforce development? The first bullet indicates “operation of government-supported facility-based care.” Can the minister explain what this term “government-supported facility-based care” means? Madam Chair, the bullet continues, saying, “which targets complex care needs of children and youth.” To the minister: what are we talking about here? Should Albertans expect private or public buildings to house our more complex children and youth in care, like a hospital or long-term care or asylum? Should this be the case, will the ministry use Rubicon consulting? Will Albertans see competitive bids for services, or will we only see private sole-sourced contracts?

Page 37, business plan 2025-28, performance metric 2(a) at the top of the page reads, “Performance Measure: Percentage of children in care placed in family-based care.” Now, Madam Chair, as we discussed, children and youth show better outcomes when placed in family-like care. The concern I have with this measurement is that it claims that it demonstrates the ministry’s commitment to prioritizing the “best interests of children,” and it goes on a little bit more. But really what I want to draw your attention to is the chart for performance metric 2(a). From these numbers it appears that somewhere between 14 to 16 per cent of children and youth in care end up either in a group home or on the street.

Further, Madam Chair, the targets each year are also kind of interesting. To the minister through the chair: if the goal is that as many as possible children and youth in care are placed in family-based care, why are we not seeing this target increase? Does the ministry think that there cannot be any real improvement year over year? If the measurement the ministry is using does not provide the necessary insight, I would expect then the ministry to select a more appropriate measurement. To the minister through the chair: should Albertans expect to see a more precise performance measurement next year?

Just to kind of end this first block on a high point, Madam Chair. In the 2025-2026 budget, page 64, government estimates 2025-26, drawing your attention to the line reading “Alberta Child and Family Benefit”: this specific item does appear to be index for population and inflation for the upcoming year. The increase from the current forecast is absolutely welcome to support low-income families with children under 18 because times are tough, which is why I do not understand how the Alberta child and family benefit was underspent this last year.

To the minister through the chair. There’s a difference of about \$9 million between the budget and the forecast on page 64, government estimates 2025-26. If that in fact is true that the \$9 million wasn’t spent and therefore the \$9 million was not then spent to support low-income Albertan families with children, even in a time of high inflation and population boom, can the ministry share how many Albertans are currently accessing this support? What is the allocation of the \$375 million budgeted for 2025-2026 between base and working payments?

Madam Chair, from what I understand the Alberta child and family benefit is split into two pots. One is to support very low-income Alberta families with children, referred to as the base, and the second, working payments, are for low-income Albertan families with children under 18 who are active in the workforce. It’s a sliding scale, where every dollar of income earned sees an increase in payments till the maximum is reached.

I will continue asking questions about this specific topic next.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We’ll move over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you very much to the member for those questions.

We do plan on getting to all the points. We have been making some extensive notes, and so on. Because a number of your questions were focused on foster care, that’s what I’m going to try to focus these first couple of minutes on.

I just want to provide a bit of a story for context, that helps guide me as I’ve been travelling around the province over the last couple of months. I had – I’ll use a different name; we’ll call him Rob – an old friend of mine who is a municipal leader in northern Alberta, and in conversations with Rob he shared with me that he was a foster care kid growing up. Now, Rob is in his 50s, and he was telling what the experience was when he went through the foster care system in another province. It shows about the ramifications that could lead through your entire life by bad experiences. He went through the system in another province, but he talked about how as a 50-year-old, on garbage day, he absolutely cannot stand to see a garbage bag on the front steps to take out to the bin. If he does, it puts him through PTSD because he remembered as a young child going through the foster care system, that every day when he would come home from school and he would see that garbage bag on the front, that was all of his belongings, and it meant that he was going to another home.

He went through this I think he said over 20 times, where he saw his belongings in a garbage bag waiting in the front. So as a 55-year-old – and if you would look at him from the outside, you would think Rob has everything put together. But even as a grown man, as a leader in his respective community, he absolutely can’t stand it. His wife always makes a comment that on garbage day, she has to take the garbage out to the side or else put it in the bin. That shows about the effects of what we’re talking about here today in terms of the benefits that a robust foster care system and the right supports can have, because it’s not just benefits for today, but it’s benefits for many years to come.

That’s why as part of my July 2023 minister mandate letter, Children and Family Services has been tasked with developing and implementing improvements to the foster care system to reduce the number of moves and minimize disruptions during a child’s time in care and supports for kinship and foster care families, where appropriate, to provide permanent homes in the continuity of care for children.

Children and Family Services is thankful for the caregivers who offer safe, healthy, and loving homes to children and youth in need and recognize the great lengths that caregivers go through to help children maintain their identity through connections, family, community, and culture. I have been blessed and humbled as we’ve been having round-tables over the last 12, 14 months, meeting with foster caregivers all the way from High Level to Medicine Hat and listening to their stories about how they continue to open up their hearts and their homes and also the challenges that they’ve had working within the ministry as they are trying their best to help with some amazing and vulnerable and complex kids. Sometimes, I understand, for some of those foster caregivers, it feels as if the world’s against them, but I wanted them to know that we are making big improvements to the system so that they can do a better job in helping looking after these amazing kids.

My ministry is committed to reducing the number of moves and minimizing disruptions during a child or youth’s time in care. The Children and Family Services kinship and foster care programs provide temporary care for children and youth in care in a healthy, nurturing, and family environment. Children and Family Services is focused on enhancing the caregiver programs to retain and recruit foster caregivers and promote placement stability, improve

meaningful caregiver recognition, and improve the kinship and foster care systems.

In addition to the enhancements made in 2023 and '24, we will be increasing financial supports to caregivers by increasing rates annually to address inflation. This includes the basic maintenance, relief, and skill set per diems. In 2025-26 these rates will increase by 2 per cent, which is in alignment with other programs such as income and employment supports and such as AISH. I will say this was the number one request that foster and kinship caregivers were telling me at those round-tables around the province, and I'm thankful that as a ministry we've been able to meet that request.

Kinship and foster caregivers can express interest in adopting or providing private guardianship of a child in their care as part of the permanency plan; they may also apply directly to the court to become a private guardian of a child in care of the ministry. Also, therapeutic foster caregiving is a short-term, culturally responsive, and family-based placement. It's a therapeutic intervention designed to provide the necessary supports to a child or youth so that they can transition successfully to their home or to a less intensive out-of-home placement. We realize that the more that we can reduce the number of moves for these children, they will have those long, positive effects so that we won't have to hear any more stories such as my friend Rob.

8:30

Regarding some of the other questions that the member talked about in terms of the number of foster homes that we have in the province, as of December 2024 we have 850 foster homes. We have 493 agency foster homes. We have 59 therapeutic foster homes, and all approved foster care homes are 1,402. For kinship, because I know that is a huge question as well, when it talks about family connections, looking after family members in the region or off-reserve, in kinship care we have 1,554. Agency kinship care, we have one. Out-of-province kinship care, we have 124, and in total approved kinship homes we have 1,679. In December of 2024 the children and youth in care receiving services from a region or off-reserve: we have 2,614 that were in foster care placement; 2,004, or 77 per cent, of the children were Indigenous, and 610, or 23 per cent, of the children were non-Indigenous. As of December 31, 2024, there were 1,495 approved and licensed foster care homes, of which 1,402 foster care homes were managed by region or off-reserve.

In terms of some of the other questions that you have regarding the percentage of children who are in care or were placed in family-based care, the ministry does continue to focus on keeping children safe and connected to families, because again we understand that family connections are extremely critical. The last thing I want to do is hear stories about children that were denied access to family members. It provides that base of stability, because we realize that long after they're out of the system, they will continue to rely upon those family connections for strength and support.

Obviously, the safety and well-being of children in care remains our top priority. Alberta's government is committed to ensuring that children are placed in a safe and nurturing family setting when out-of-home placements are necessary. Due to the rising number of children requiring more intensive supports, we saw an increase in the number of facility-based placements. This measure reflects the ministry's range of programs and services to help children grow up in a safe and nurturing family setting, where out-of-home placements are necessary for short or longer periods. This measure illustrates the ministry's commitment to prioritizing the best interests of a child. Again, we want to make sure that we do everything possible to make sure that those one-on-one relationships in smaller type settings such as kinship or foster care

continue to be supported because we know that those are going to actually have better outcomes for children versus some of the more group home settings that the member talked about.

You talked a little bit about the family-based care as well as with Indigenous children, but the methodology describing the percentage of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children and youth who are in care and placed away from home in a family-based placement in a fiscal year – family-based placements include at-home placements, kinship care, foster care, and permanency solutions.

One of the other questions that the member talked about are some of the targets in terms of how the targets set the benchmarks and metrics to ensure that we are getting the right care to the right child in the right and appropriate manner. Targets are set at 85 per cent for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children over the next two years and 86 per cent in the final year. Over the last year results for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children have seen decreases, more so with non-Indigenous children compared to Indigenous children, and the ministry did not meet its targets. Last year 86 per cent of Indigenous children and 84 per cent of non-Indigenous children were placed in family-based care through at-home, kinship, foster care, or permanent placements.

The Ministry of Children and Family Services continues to see an increasing number of children with mental health, addiction, emotional, and behavioural difficulties that require intensive supports and exceed the level of care and supports provided by foster and kinship caregivers. This may be further reduced due to challenges with foster care and kinship care recruitment. This has negatively impacted the ability to achieve or exceed the proposed target in the 2024-2027 business plan.

Thank you very much for your questions, and I look forward to your next round.

The Chair: All right. Back to the member.

Member Batten: Thank you so much to the minister and the ministry, through the chair, of course, for those answers. I'm just going to touch right back to where I had finished when the timer went. Again, I was talking about the Alberta child and family benefit and how it's split into two pots, the one pot being the base, which is supports for very low-income families with children under 18, and then the second is that working component for low-income families with children under 18 who are active in the workforce. So it's a bit of a sliding scale, where every dollar of income earned sees an increase in the payment until the maximum is reached.

Now, Madam Chair, the maximum income for this program is just over \$45,000. The living salary for a family of four, two parents and two children under 18, in Calgary or in Edmonton is reported to require at least a household income of \$80,000, almost two times higher than where the income support cuts off. To the minister through the chair: what resources are the ministry providing to families to help them make that giant leap from \$45,000 to a living salary? What about supports for families who do not meet the salary threshold?

Madam Chair, what the ministry fails to acknowledge is that Albertans want to work. They want to feel valued and to be respected for their contributions. It is not incentives to work more hours that are needed, Minister; it is the investment from this government to train and empower Albertans. That is what is needed. To the minister: will we see an investment in the next budget?

Moving on to early intervention services for children and youth, Madam Chair, a common saying is that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and this continues to be true and relevant as

we discuss Children and Family Services today in Alberta. Now, this next section is all about early intervention, and I want everyone to think of a toothache. You can ignore it all you want, but in the end that tooth will need an intervention, and the longer you wait, the more pain it's going to cause you both in terms of, well, your mouth and your pocketbook.

I draw your attention to government estimates 2025-26, page 62. Overall, this portion of the portfolio will see a cut of over 1 per cent when factoring population and inflation; 3.1, early intervention and early childhood development mitigates the need of child intervention services and enhances child, youth, and family resiliency through a variety of supports, including mentoring, parenting resources, home visitation, and supports for healthy development. We are talking about stopping something before it escalates and gets worse, Madam Chair. Using outcome-based decision-making, of course, allows you to track the effects of the intervention, be it that you added something or took it away. The outcomes will tell you whether or not that intervention was effective.

It appears, Madam Chair, that there is not a set metric to measure performance here. To the minister through the chair: why not share the outcomes of this budget line? This was brought to the attention of the ministry last year during estimates, and Albertans need insight into where the government is spending their tax dollars and what return Albertans should expect to see. My question to the minister is: what is holding the ministry back from providing these numbers publicly?

The government of Alberta published a family resource network program. The preliminary report 2023-24 was released back in August 2024, which does provide some indication of how this budget line is performing. Captured inside budget line 3.1, page 62, of government estimates 2025-26 are the family resource networks, or FRNs. The spoke-and-hub model programming is spread across the province to address root causes and factors leading to families and children becoming involved with child intervention services. The idea, of course, Madam Chair, is that the 70 FRNs, made up of 131 agencies, can provide what Albertan families need when and where they need it, with the idea, of course, of nipping the problem in the bud before it becomes a full-blown concern. A problem is so much easier to deal with when it is still small. To the minister through the chair: why are we not seeing investment here?

Budget line 3.1, through FRNs, aimed to establish equitable access to services. Madam Chair, we know that the needs and resources found across the province are highly variable. We know that action is needed to truly ensure equity for all Albertans, and of course equity is where we provide the resources that are needed and not simply an arbitrary resource that disregards the specific needs of Albertans. To the minister through the chair: what specific ongoing efforts are being made to ensure that whatever data is being collected is, in fact, representative of the desired outcome?

FRNs, budget line 3.1, page 62, have become a well-accessed resource across the province. In fact, Madam Chair, in 2023-24 the participant number increased over 60 per cent. That is six-zero. That is an outcome that you would think this ministry would be sharing loudly. To the minister through the chair, this wild increase since last year is showing a great need for these services. What is the ministry's plan to grow these important resources for Albertans, and why, then, is budget 3.1 not seeing an increase? To the minister through the chair: how does the ministry plan to serve more than 60 per cent more Albertans without providing one dollar investment? Why not invest in something that is working?

8:40

Same budget line 3.1, page 62, government estimates 2025-26. FRNs really shine when it comes to providing parents the necessary foundations and supports. As new parents navigate having a newborn in their home, or maybe it's baby number two, who acts nothing like baby number one, or maybe it's a brand new, newly landed family, immigrant family, who need resources simply to navigate the systems – Madam Chair, the largest population served by FRNs are children under five and caregiver and parents over 21. The areas that are sought out most frequently are parenting and child development, and the most popular programs are parenting programs for young parents, for new parents, for immigrant parents.

It's really quite obvious that not only are FRNs supporting thousands of Albertans; in 2023-24 the numbers show that more than 128,000 Albertans access them, and from the information we've just discussed, it's obvious that FRNs are very capable and are actively providing the necessary resources to Albertan parents. To the minister through the chair: given all this, why do we not see investment in budget line 3.1, even if only to negate for future costs?

Moving on to budget line 3.2, page 62 of the government estimates, youth in transition, Madam Chair, this specific budget line received an increase of just over 3 per cent when adjusted for population and inflation. Page 26 of the government's strategic plan, first bullet, speaks to improving supports for youth and young adults transitioning from government care to independence: \$17 million over three years for transition to adulthood, or TAP. This doesn't really seem like a lot of investment, especially when we're looking at the upcoming targets for the next years. If you look at the target for 2026-27, we're estimating less than a 2 per cent increase. That is unlikely to even cover population and inflation. Then, when we look further at '27-28, the intentional reduction in funding continues. To the minister: again in consideration to the message this budget is sending to Albertan children and youth in care, how can these Albertans see investment in themselves when the UCP government is clearly not planning to continue their investment in them?

Let's talk about performance metrics. Page 35, business plan '25-28, bottom of the page, 1(a), is to demonstrate how well the ministry is addressing the needs of youth transitioning from care to postsecondary education. Again, Madam Chair, we are seeing a metric where the status quo is apparently the goal. Note that the target does not increase year after year. To the minister: why not continue to invest here? As mentioned in the previous question, budget 3.2 funding reduces year over year, especially when adjusting for population and inflation. To the minister through the chair: how will the minister maintain the targets of 89 per cent when intentionally reducing investment here?

Outcome 1 of the 2025-26 business plan, page 35, speaks to reducing reliance on intensive supports. Now, Madam Chair, it's a great outcome, absolutely, but it is unachievable without continued government investment. Children and youth who are involved with child intervention services will likely require more resources, more time, just more, as they not only have to learn new things; they are likely also processing things from their past, maybe some trauma. They're trying to not rely on bad coping skills while developing new ones while trying to build healthy relationships, all the while being a child, maybe a tween or a teen, all of which, we know, comes with its own special challenges and adjustments. To the minister through the chair, please provide specific actions and plans to address these concerns given that there is no further financial investment.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right. To the minister.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you very much to the member for those questions. We are going to get to the answers you require about the Alberta child and family benefit and permanency, but a big chunk of your questions in this round were on family resource networks. I'm just going to touch base on that, but I am going to get back to those other answers as we can.

I remember, actually, Member, one of our very first conversations after the election. We talked about family resource networks, and I said, I think, at that time, if you recall, that of all the parts of my ministry family resource networks is the one area that gives me the most amount of hope because for so many families that don't know where to go in a community, if you need help, you tend to go to a family resource network first. I remember, you know, a story for myself. I decided to go to a *Finding Nemo* dance-off party at my local family resource network in Stony Plain. I'll give a shout-out to Alberta Parenting for the Future. It was a bit of a father-son moment – I went with my two boys – but I also wanted to kind of experience the spectrum of services first-hand versus, you know, seeing it in a PowerPoint. I went, and we made sandcastles, and I did a big dance-off. I'm pleased to say that I won with my son. Then we watched *Finding Nemo*, and it was a great kind of beach father-son time.

But while I was there, I remember looking at some of the other people that were showing up to these services, and that's really what I was interested in. I remember a young dad. He showed up, and he had a young daughter, and he was obviously very awkward, didn't know his way around. The staff went over to help him out and, you know, took him off to the side. I found out afterwards this young dad was a single dad, and he was just trying to deal with this new stage of his life, dealing with how to address being a single parent for this young girl. The amazing staff at APF: they handed over brochures and information about how he could find additional supports. Then I remember that at the end of the night of dancing and hanging out, the father left, and he had a box full of food because food security was very important for this particular FRN as well. I guess times were tough for his household.

These are the positive benefits that family resource networks have throughout the entire province. They become almost the equivalent of Swiss Army knives for social sustainability, to help out families and kids that have nowhere else to go. I can't tell you the number of stories that I've come across where family resource network caregivers will tell me how children after school – they know that there's no one at home, so they come to the local FRN because they know that's going to be a safe place where adults are going to be around. Again, just changing times with latchkey kids.

That's why as a ministry we are committed to ensuring that all children and youth and families have access to supports and services that promote safety, well-being, and development regardless of where they live in our province. By providing prevention and early intervention supports, we can reduce the need for more intensive services later on. That's really the key goal that I have for family resource networks. We can provide those soft supports that kids and families will require because we know that it has horrible results if they go down the path for more intensive services, and we want to be able to focus on prevention, as the member talked about, versus those more intensive services efforts. FRNs provide a wide range of high-quality prevention and early intervention supports for children, youth, and families across Alberta so that they can access the supports they need regardless of where they live or the individual needs of their community.

One of the things I find fascinating is that different FRNs, based upon the local demographic or cultural needs, can provide different

services. It truly is not one size fits all. They can look at the needs of their respective communities. One FRN I was meeting with in southern Alberta decided to focus on family violence prevention services. Other ones decided to have mom-and-tot services for their kids because they had a lot of young moms. Other ones were offering enhanced cultural connections to Indigenous communities. Again, family resource networks have that ability to be proactive and to adapt to the needs of their community.

In 2025-26 we are maintaining the FRN budget at \$66.7 million. CFS remains committed to addressing the needs of families and communities, and this includes continued supports for family resource networks in this upcoming year and leveraging our current investments to continue to reduce wait-lists, enhance service delivery, and support meaningful outcomes.

I know there is another case where a young Ukrainian family – again, not knowing where to turn, they came to their local family resource network, and then they talked about issues regarding self-harm and other issues that required additional supports. Through their trauma-informed approaches and collaborations, this young adult received the support that they required, and now they are fully utilizing services and building life skills as this one particular individual is now getting used to being a new Canadian in our amazing province. Again, these are the types of flexible funding arrangements that FRNs have access to that they can again adapt to their local communities.

8:50

The member also talked a little bit about the prevention and early intervention supports. In addition to services offered through the family resource network, the ministry also supports other prevention and early intervention initiatives to promote the well-being and resiliency of young people in the province. We continue to ensure that children, youth, and families are supported through grant funding to community-based agencies, and by providing access to early intervention supports, again we will help mitigate the need for more intensive services later, which includes child intervention.

As some of the success stories that we have concerning youth, because I know that was something that was very prevalent that the member talked about – agencies funded through the youth suicide prevention grant program have built strong connections with youth in their respective communities. They gave youth a voice by giving them opportunities to provide input on programming. As an example, one agency created a youth advisory group to design youth suicide prevention training that meets the needs of young people in their respective community. I'm happy to say that the youth were so excited about the project, they wanted to keep working long after the original tasks were finished. I wish my own kids would do that after they were done shovelling the driveway.

Another key program that we're very excited about that family resource networks are involved with is involving family reunification. Family reunification and family preservation are extremely important to myself as Minister of Children and Family Services. Another example is about a young person arriving at a youth shelter and sharing that they'd been kicked out of their family home. Staff reached out to the mother, who explained that she asked the youth to leave because she was worried about the youth's substance use and mental health concerns, again, touching to the member's questions about increased complexity that is facing the youth of today compared to maybe when we grew up.

With the youth's safety in mind, the staff helped them connect with a treatment facility for substance abuse. There were challenges connecting with the youth's mother for safety planning, but staff noticed a pattern of intergenerational trauma in the family. The case

manager built a relationship with the mother and learned more about her struggles. They explored supports for her well-being and helping her access some resources and assisted her with the planning for the return of her child. The youth has successfully completed a treatment program and returned home, again, another example of family reunification through this incredibly important program.

Another example involving cultural connections for Indigenous families – again, as the member talked about, a large portion of the children within Children and Family Services is Indigenous. To help children and youth develop a stronger sense of self and a stronger sense of self-funded Indigenous programs, they provide culturally appropriate supports, including traditional teachings. One program focuses on the Cree concept which translates into kinship. I would actually try to pronounce it, but I always seem to get it wrong, and in respect I don't want to try. But in practice this concept emphasizes that all things are related and it is not possible to exist in isolation. Again, this talks about the family connections, which are extremely important.

This program's co-ordinator teaches children and youth through kinship mapping. Participants may not know their family history. In some cases, they may be sitting next to their cousins without even realizing it, and they are excited to learn how they're connected again to each other. Again, these are all ways that family resource networks are increasing family and cultural connections.

Since December of 2021 the FRN program has been undergoing a phase evaluation in partnership with FRN agencies. This evaluation is helping to inform the ministry's understanding of service gaps as well as the program's impact on family and communities. The findings from each phase are a set of recommendations to continuously improve the family resource networks. To date, available funding within the FRN budget has been invested to address notable service gaps. This includes access to short-term mental health supports, \$1 million annually; expanding services in rural and remote communities; enhancing service delivery in Métis settlements; youth programming for pregnant and parenting teens, which I know is very important to the member; building capacity to support ethnocultural families in rural communities, again, because we realize that the face of rural Alberta is changing; and capacity building to address the needs of the LGBTQ2S-plus community, which again was something that I noticed very quickly as a gap in the system. We want to make sure that all Albertans and youth are looked after.

The Chair: Great.

Back to the member.

Ms Hayter: Thank you, Madam Chair. Looking at line 5.3 of page 38 of the CFS business plan, prevention of family and sexual violence funding has decreased from \$90 million in 2024 to \$88 million in 2025. How can the minister justify \$2 million from these life-saving services when Albertans' intimate partner violence rates remain disturbingly high at 596.69 per 100 per cent of our population according to page 30 of the business plan. And given that 74 per cent of Albertans personally know at least one woman who's been physically or sexually assaulted, how can the minister defend reducing funding for these critical services? The statistics don't even account for the countless women who never disclose this abuse.

The minister keeps referring to the \$19 million over three years for women's shelters in press releases, but this allocation isn't clearly reflected in the estimates. Can the minister point to the exact line item where this funding appears in the ministry's budget documents and explain how much of this is one-time funding versus

sustainable operational funding. On page 36 of the CFS business plan there's a reference to allocating \$25 million for community-based organizations supporting those impacted by sexual and family violence. How much of this is going to be one-time funding? Will it be grants that organizations have to reapply for and reapply for and reapply for?

Page 30 of the Arts, Culture and Status of Women business plan lists outcome 2.4 as co-ordinating government efforts to implement a 10-year strategy to end gender-based violence, yet the funding and service delivery responsibility sits with CFS. While this is very critical work, fragmented across ministries, it's creating confusion and lack of clear accountability. The performance indicator for gender-based violence on page 30 shows the intimate partner violence rate at 596.69 per 100,000, yet there are no corresponding performance measures in the CFS business plan, where the actual services are funded. How can Albertans trust that either ministry is taking this issue seriously enough?

Page 35 of the CFS business plan discusses reviewing and updating government's investments and long-term vision for women's shelters – it's key objective 1.4 – while Arts, Culture and Status of Women claims that it's to co-ordinate the strategy. Which minister is actually accountable for ensuring women's safety in Alberta? Is any of the shelter funding merely a pass-through of federal dollars from the national action plan to end gender-based violence? Is any of the \$19 million announced from the federal funds? Why is this government taking credit for federal funding while actually reducing provincial commitments to essential services?

If we're going to be looking at key objective 1.4 on page 35 of the business plan, review and update government's investment and long-term vision for women's shelters, shelter directors report that this review has excluded their input and seems designed to justify funding constraints rather than address real needs. The same directors up here say that the funding seems to be arbitrary and lack transparency, overlooking those with demonstrated need. What objective criteria and metrics does the ministry use to allocate women's shelter funding across Alberta? Women's shelters consistently report that one-time and short-time funding creates significant operational challenges and prevents effective planning for staffing, programming, or capacity. Why isn't CFS providing multiyear operational funding commitments that would allow these essential services to implement sustainable plans, especially given the government's stated commitments to support vulnerable Albertans?

Calgary Police Service received nearly 24,000 domestic incident calls in 2023, approximately 1,990 calls per month. At the same time, the rural shelters received a disproportionately small share of provincial funding. What percentage of the \$88 million prevention of family and sexual violence budget is allocated to rural services versus urban centres? The 3.5 per cent one-time operational increase mentioned in the mandate letter sent to women's shelters falls significantly below what is needed. How does the minister justify the minimal increase in funding priorities for life-saving services?

The ministers have shared that they're creating an Alberta-made action plan to end gender-based violence, and I've heard of the women's shelter renewal project. How much of this creation is, in the action plan, costing Albertans? Is the renewal project a duplication of past recommendations? Which line item is it, and are you using the federal gender-based violence national action plan for this?

I'm hoping for answers, not stories, and for all of our questions we would love to have written responses.

The Chair: All right.

To the minister.

Mr. Turton: Okay. Thank you so much to the member for her questions. Appreciate, obviously, her passion when it comes to supporting women that are fleeing domestic violence. I do plan on getting to her questions. I just want to touch base on a couple of things that were in the previous block about the Alberta child and family benefit, really quickly.

9:00

An estimated 185,000, 190,000 families benefited from the Alberta child and family benefit in 2024-2025. The amount received by eligible families varies, depending on the family's income level and the number of children that they have under the age of 18.

Budget 2025 benefit amounts and phase-out thresholds for the ACFB program increase by 2 per cent. The next benefit amount increase will occur on July 1, 2025. The ACFB includes a base component and a working component, with a maximum yearly benefit of \$5,767 for a family with four or more children. The maximum base component ranges from \$1,499 to \$3,746, depending upon the number of children. There is no minimum income required to access the base component, and the base component begins to phase out once the family net income exceeds \$27,565.

The maximum working component ranges from \$767 to \$2,021, depending upon the number of children, and families are eligible for the working component once their working income exceeds \$2,760. This component is designed to encourage families to enter the workforce, as the member talked about, as families with no or very little employment income will receive more benefit as they earn more. The working component begins to phase out once family net income exceeds \$46,191, and a family becomes ineligible for ACFB funding after their income exceeds a total of \$68,780.

Regarding eligibility for ACFB, which I know the member talked about, to be eligible to receive a ACFB, you must be a parent of one or more children under the age of 18 and be a resident of Alberta and have filed a tax return and meet the income criteria.

Regarding some of the members' questions regarding supports for permanency, which I know is obviously very important to the member. The safety and well-being of children and youth continues to be a top priority for myself. The Ministry of Children and Family Services works to ensure that they have the tools they need to thrive in healthy families and communities. The government is focused on prioritizing core intervention programs that focus on, number one, keeping children safe, and two, supporting early intervention for children, youth, and families and assisting Albertans who experience family violence and sexual violence. The supports for permanency program offers financial support to families who adopt or obtain private guardianship of a child, leading to a more permanent, loving home and better outcomes for children in government care.

Children and Family Services is reintroducing income testing for the basic maintenance rate at \$180,000 level based on the guardian's income. All other components of the supports for permanency program will remain the same. These include additional needs funding, respite, support for maintaining cultural connections, medically necessary orthodontic treatments, counselling, residential treatment, and medical or psychological assessment assistance.

Again, just to go into a little bit more detail about some of the supports that are included under the supports for permanency. The basic maintenance benefit follows a caregiver rate schedule. Some

of the additional needs funding includes up to \$70 per week. This is allocated for medication; tutoring; counselling; sports fees and equipment; overnight and day camps; Indigenous regalia; respite care, which I know is something extremely important for so many families as I've been travelling around the province. This includes a maximum 576 hours of respite per family annually, and rates are negotiated based upon the needs of the individual child; support for maintaining cultural connections; negotiated maximum annual financial assistance. It also includes medically necessary orthodontic treatments, and this includes the cost or partial cost of orthodontic treatment approved by Alberta Blue Cross. Counselling, which includes up to 10 one-hour sessions per year. Again, we realize the positive effects that mental health has. Residential treatment includes the cost of an out-of-home placement in a residential treatment facility and also the medical or psychological assessment assistance, which is the cost or partial cost of an assessment recommended by a professional. Again, we realize how important all these soft supports are for so many families across the province.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll move now to the government side. I understand, Member McDougall, you are up. Would you prefer to have shared or block time with the minister?

Mr. McDougall: I prefer to have shared, but what the minister prefers.

The Chair: Minister, what is your preference?

Mr. Turton: We'll go block time.

The Chair: All right. Block time.

Member, you have up to 10 minutes to ask questions and make comments to the minister. Once you are done, the minister will have 10 minutes to respond.

Mr. McDougall: Okay. Well, thank you very much, Minister and department officials here today. I have to say that this session here of estimates is personal for me. I grew up in a household that took in a number of foster children over the years, and in one case ended up acquiring an adopted brother, which enriched our family.

As you know, a lot of the children that end up under care in foster homes come from a lot of very dysfunctional and difficult situations. I had the experience of seeing what can happen when a child with behavioural and other issues, because of the situation they came from, are able to come into a stable and loving household and, you know, watching them improve as they are able to get that. Sometimes it's a short time because they're going back to their families or other situations. Sometimes it's a long time. I certainly understand the challenges that many of the children who end up in foster homes are going through, many from very sad situations, and, you know, sometimes some good results, where a family that is having difficulties gets itself back together and is able to take back their child into a more stable and loving environment.

It's a big part of my life. And, of course, I'm very fortunate that I have a brother now, you know, for the last 40 years, who is somebody that deserved to be part of our loving family, and we're the richer for it. I guess you have the same type of situation in your own family, and that's wonderful to see.

A number of questions. First of all, on child intervention: according to the statement of operations on page number 38 of the business plan, the child intervention program is anticipated to grow by approximately 6.5 per cent from the 2024-25 forecast to 2025-26 estimate, where it sits at about \$957 million. It's followed by an

increase of 1.6 per cent in 2026, and, as has been mentioned, a reduction of 1 per cent in '27-28.

Firstly, I wonder if the minister can outline – while I had some familiarity with this 40-some years ago, you know – what child intervention delivery does and how it works today. Can the minister explain what factors are driving this increased investment into child intervention delivery and how this funding is used? And why the increase in budget allocation for this year and '26-27 and the decline in '27-28?

I'd like to look at an initiative also on child intervention system improvements located under outcome 2 on page 36 of the business plan. This initiative has allocated \$622 million in '25-26 to "improve the child intervention system through the implementation of preventative, safety-oriented, evidence-based programming, and the operation of government-supported, facility-based care which targets complex care needs for the children and youth in care." I would appreciate it if the minister could outline in greater detail what that funding allocation through Budget 2025-26 is aimed at addressing.

There's a mention of implementing preventive, safety-oriented, evidence-based programming. I'd just be interested to know how it's expected this program will improve the child intervention system and is the ministry tracking progress on this initiative? Can the minister please tell us more about the plan to make sure that children have appropriate family-based placements and the system's capacity to ensure children receive the support that they need?

Looking at the initiative on page 36 of the business plan related to caregiver supports, which, again, is something that I had some perspective on many years ago, I see that \$325 million "is allocated to support foster, kinship care, and permanency placements, increase caregiver rates, and attract new caregivers." Well, this is a large budget allocation, yet it is also being used to serve a broader range of objectives, including supports, rate increases, and recruitment.

9:10

Seeing that the funding will be used for caregiver rate increases and recruitment, I anticipate staffing is a consistent challenge, and I recall back in the day that was a challenge then as well. Could the minister please explain to this committee the contracting arrangements of caregivers? And how would the minister outline how the investment through Budget 2025 will address concerns with staffing, recruitment, and retention?

Also related to child intervention staffing, key objective 2.4 on page 36 of the business plan involves supporting the child intervention workforce through developing and implementing workforce strategies. I understand that there have been challenges in Alberta and across Canada around recruiting and retaining child intervention staff. As I mentioned earlier, this makes objective 2.4 that much more critical to the success of the ministry. Would the minister provide greater insight to this committee on the challenges around recruiting and retaining child intervention staff as expected in '25-26? And, finally, would the minister please highlight what types of strategies will be used to accomplish key objective 2.4?

With that, I will cede the rest of my time to MLA Singh.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. Good morning, Minister. Thank you for coming here today. I will applaud you for the work and initiatives in the ministry relating to the programs and services for children, youth, families, and individuals, ensuring them to live safely and succeed in Alberta.

Through you, Madam Chair, my questions are on the child intervention system complex needs noted in the Budget 2025

documents. Through the discussion today there are concerns about the sustainability of the workforce. While that is a priority, I noted with concern that there is an increasing case of complexity. Page 77 of the fiscal plan indicates that more children and youth are experiencing mental health and addiction, emotional, aggressive, and behavioural difficulties. This is a disturbing trend. I would like to focus this question on how the ministry is addressing it. Could the minister please outline to the committee the factors behind the trend of increasing case complexity and how it is affecting operations? And how is the ministry helping those children through Budget 2025?

Through you, Madam Chair, my next questions are on foster care and kinship support. Line item 2.4 on page 63 of the main estimates details foster care and kinship supports extend to just over \$255 million in 2025-2026. I understand that this item involves providing culturally appropriate and diverse supports to children temporarily unable to live in their family home. Could the minister outline what this investment through Budget 2025 will go to support? And what is the ministry doing through Budget 2025 to address foster caregiver shortages so that children can find stability during challenging and difficult times here?

Through you, Madam Chair, my questions are on the family resource networks. On page 35 of the business plan, key objective 1.2 references family resource networks strengthening "caregiving capacity, support healthy families, child development and well-being, and increasing social connections." I also read that these family resource networks deliver a continuum of targeted prevention and early intervention services. This is an interesting support that I would like to ask a little bit more about. Could the minister please provide further information about family resource networks and how they offer preventive programming that benefits our communities? And how will Budget 2025 impact the operations and enrich the family resource networks?

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I see that we have Member Stephan who has joined us. Member, would you take a moment to introduce yourself, and then we'll go to the minister.

Mr. Stephan: Thank you very much. Jason Stephan, MLA for Red Deer-South, substituting for Brandon Lundy. I guess I can't use daylight savings time too much as an excuse anymore.

The Chair: All right, Member. You're taking the minister's time.

Mr. Stephan: But great to be here.

The Chair: All right.

To the minister, please.

Mr. Turton: Awesome. Well, thank you very much, Madam Chair. From the member, I was expecting him to say that Red Deer is good, as he always does.

Mr. Stephan: It's very good.

Mr. Turton: Very good.

Anyway, thank you very much to the members for your questions, obviously, as well as sharing a little bit about your personal experience.

Member McDougall, I know that one of the first questions you asked was about child intervention. What does it encompass, and what does it mean? You know, when I think about my ministry, I truly do think of my ministry as a ministry of hope. When you have

nowhere else to turn or you don't know where to go, you tend to come to the services and programs that my ministry provides. It could be like that family that comes to a family resource network. It could come to a child that just simply wants to have a loving home. It can come in the form of a young woman fleeing a domestic violence situation who doesn't know where to begin that next stage of healing.

For each and every one of those individuals, the services we provide within Children and Family Services are a big responsibility that we have as a government. It's something I definitely take seriously, and every morning when I come to the Legislature and I stare up at that building, I'm thankful that I have been asked to serve in this capacity to help out some of our most vulnerable and complex families and kids. So it's a responsibility that I take extremely seriously.

You talked a little bit in terms of the budget increases that we've had this last year. Just to kind of sum up: our actual ministry budget has gone up by approximately 6.5 per cent from the 2024-25 forecast to the '25-26 estimate, again just highlighting the need, as a compassionate conservative, in terms of the recognition that there are families here in our province that need help.

Included within the child intervention delivery service, our services are provided to many kids and children that have nowhere else to go. Some of these services for children include regarding in-home services and supports; out-of-home placements including foster, kinship, and group care; permanency services such as adoption. I will say that it's always humbling to know that as an adopted parent, I went through the adoption process, which I'm very open about and proud about, and then I have now the responsibility to look after adoption here in the province of Alberta to help provide forever homes for so many kids.

As well, I guess the other question that you asked about pertains to the budget allocation increase in '25-26 and then some of the numbers going down. Children and Family Services remains committed to directing ministry funding to where it will have the greatest impact for vulnerable children, youth, and families and is continuing to look for ways to improve how we can provide services to better and more consistently meet the needs of vulnerable children and youth in the province. Identifying those areas of greatest concern is always changing.

As a ministry we are always adapting to those changing needs. Alberta is much different today than it was when I was graduating from high school in Spruce Grove in the late 1990s, as many of us can attest to the changing of the times. Children today go through different challenges than what we experienced decades ago, and I'm proud of the fact that as a ministry we've been able to change and to adapt and to meet those growing and different changes for so many kids here.

The member mentioned about implementing preventative and safety-oriented and evidence-based programming. The member asked about how this programming will improve the child intervention system and about tracking progress, again talked about data-driven decision-making, which I know the previous members asked about in their prior question. Our ministry is committed to ensuring that vulnerable children, youth, and individuals are protected from abuse and neglect and that children and youth are safely maintained in the home with a family whenever possible and appropriate, again just stressing how important family preservation and family reunification is within this ministry. The ministry and its partners are working to prevent domestic and sexual violence, helping families stay together and reunite, and finding placements in kinship, foster, and adoptive homes when children and youth come into care.

9:20

This will include continuing to review policy and practices by implementing safety-oriented, evidence-based, and culturally appropriate approaches and methods; developing and implementing improvements to kinship and foster care to continue to provide children and youth in temporary care with a healthy, nurturing family environment; providing targeted support and optimal placements for children and youth with complex care needs along the continuum of available out-of-home placements and support reunification with their families and communities; developing and implementing workforce strategies to support the child intervention workforce; partnering with community-based organizations to support Albertans experiencing sexual and family violence and abuse so they can get the support that they need, find healing, and live safely in their respective communities; working closely with First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and urban Indigenous communities to support the healthy development of Indigenous children and youth in care by providing opportunities to maintain and enhance connections with family, community, and culture.

Again, a key point that I am always focused on: how are we increasing family connections? How are we increasing cultural connections? We know that by nurturing those relationships, they will lead to better outcomes for the child.

One of the other questions that the members asked: talking about the plans to make sure that children have appropriate family-based placements and how to grow the system capacity to ensure that children receive the support that they need. This is, obviously, extremely important, because, as some of the members talked about, each and every year the province of Alberta is adding almost two Red Deers to our province and population. As much as I would love to say that many of these families are perfect – I know my family is never perfect – there are sometimes issues and sometimes messy situations that some of these families moving to our province are dealing with. It's up to our ministry and our government to be able to provide programs and services for those families that need help as well.

Our first priority is and always will be safety of staff, safety of children. Our ministry is committed to reducing the number of moves, which minimizes the disruption of a child or youth's time in care. Again, touching base with and referencing my friend Rob, who had to go through this over 20 times growing up, again, dealing with the long-term intergenerational trauma that he had to deal with as a foster child.

In February 2023 the ministry launched a provincial-wide campaign to recruit new quality foster caregivers, and data collected during the campaign showed an increase in the number of new Albertans expressing interest in the foster care program. We will be doing additional work in this upcoming year not just for foster care recruitment but kinship care recruitment. We know the value of having family members looking after family members, those positive effects it can have.

In 2022-23 therapeutic foster caregiving services were introduced. The ministry is investing \$8.1 million in 2025-26 to support the implementation of 135 therapeutic foster care placements right across the province. TFC provides special, highly trained caregivers who receive intensive program support, clinical oversight, and 24-hour crisis support to take care of children with high emotional, behavioural, or trauma-impacted needs. TFC serves as an alternative to group care, ensuring that children who require specialized therapeutic interventions can receive support in a stable and family-based environment. Again, stressing what one of the other members mentioned, it's about that one-on-one care versus group care, which we know does not have as good results.

The member also asked a question about contracting arrangements of caregivers. I know that was another question that came up as well in the earlier block. Children and Family Services does not directly contract with caregivers. CFS is proud of our strong relationships with our network of contracted and grant-funded agencies. Again, I just want to highlight the important work that Align does being the umbrella organization for so many of these agencies. I have appreciated the leadership from Sonja in that regard with helping lead that organization. Their commitment to delivering essential services and providing crucial supports to children, youth, and families in the province is pivotal to our success and the success of our families, and I am very grateful for their work.

We are committed to fostering and promoting a collaborative and supportive partnership with the contracted agency sector. We will continue to work with our partners to achieve our shared strategic priorities for child intervention and ensure the continuous improvement of services for children, youth, and families to meet their evolving needs. This includes working with Children and Family Services' contracted agencies to provide foster care to children and youth in care through our agency partners. Again, we're just very appreciative of the leadership of all of our agency partners because we know they're helping out incredibly.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.
To the Official Opposition.

Ms Hayter: Thank you, Madam Chair. Violence is more likely to occur against women with disabilities, Indigenous women . . .

The Chair: Shared or block time?

Ms Hayter: Oh, sorry. I'm just going to do block time.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Ms Hayter: Violence is more likely to occur against women with disabilities, Indigenous women, women of visible minorities, and LGBTQ+ women. What specific funding is allocated in this budget to address the unique needs of these vulnerable populations?

Line 5.4 on page 78 of the CFS fiscal plan shows Indigenous partnerships at only \$11 million, an increase of just \$1 million from the last year. Given that Indigenous women face disproportionately high rates of gender-based violence, why is this funding so minimal?

In 2023 Calgary alone recorded 5,161 reported incidents of domestic-related violent crime, including three homicides, 426 sexual offences, and 4,072 assaults. How can the minister justify reducing funding for violence prevention services in the face of these alarming statistics?

Several women's shelters across Alberta have expanded their physical capacity through capital grants, noted on page 30 of the fiscal plan, but CFS has failed to provide corresponding operational funding. How many shelter beds funded through capital grants now sit empty due to the lack of operational dollars?

Shelter directors report that the lack of affordable housing forces many women to return to abusive situations. Why isn't there a corresponding increase in funding for second-stage housing of those fleeing violence?

According to Statistics Canada Alberta's rate of police-reported intimate partner violence against women in urban areas, 535 per 100,000, exceeds the national average of 461 per 100,000. Given these alarming statistics, why doesn't the CFS business plan include specific targets for reducing rates of gender-based violence?

The CFS business plan doesn't include a single performance metric related to family violence outcomes despite this being a major ministry responsibility. How can Albertans trust the ministry is committed to improving these services when they don't even measure their effectiveness?

The Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton sent this committee a letter last week. I'm hoping everybody had an opportunity to read it. In 2023 this government provided \$1.8 million in wait-list reduction funding to the Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton over two years. Now the minister is refusing to renew this funding, calling it a one-time grant. Yet their election platform promised \$10 million in substantial funding for sexual assault centres. Can the minister explain why he's delivered only \$1.5 million of that promise while simultaneously eliminating critical wait-list funding that helps real survivors? SACE has a wait-list of over 200 people, primarily women and children. With the elimination of that \$900,000 annual wait-list reduction funding, that wait-list will grow. It's going to grow to 500 people by year end. What specific alternative supports will these survivors have access to while they wait 18 months for counselling?

Sexual assault centres are implementing creative solutions like selling magnets to fill the gap left by inadequate government funding. Why should essential services for vulnerable Albertans have to rely on merchandise sales?

Mr. Singh: Point of order.

The Chair: A point of order has been called, members. Please proceed.

Mr. Singh: The point of order is 23(j). I would request the hon. member to direct her questions through the chair.

Ms Hayter: Awesome. I will do that.

Madam Chair, front-line providers can't maintain basic services under the current budget.

The Chair: We just have to finish the process of the point of order. Please proceed.

Member Irwin: This is a waste of time, and I'd ask that member to not be calling points of order on such frivolous matters. I would ask the member to continue.

The Chair: What I'll say about this is that if any side feels that there's a point of order, we will pause, and I will hear it. For all of you at the table, please feel free to call a point of order.

At this moment, yes, please direct the questions through the chair, and let's proceed.

Ms Hayter: Sorry, Madam Chair.

Can the minister explain this disconnect between budget amounts and the actual support reaching survivors? What message does it send to sexual assault survivors when the ministry claims to be on track with funding while services are being reduced across the province? How does the ministry justify the delay in the March 2024 funding announcement and the January 2025 notification that centres would receive significantly less than promised?

Madam Chair, centres like Sendero have committed to maintain service despite funding shortfalls because they refuse to let survivors suffer. Why isn't the ministry showing the same level of commitment and compassion? While the ministry claims funding hasn't decreased, centres are clearly struggling to maintain services. Is the government aware of the real-world impacts its funding decisions are having on sexual assault survivors? You know,

Madam Chair, women's shelter directors are reporting spending increasing time on ministry reporting requirements as well as instead of doing direct delivery services. What percentage of the prevention of family and sexual violence budget is being consumed by administrative overhead versus real survivors directly?

9:30

Madam Speaker, Statistics Canada data shows women and girls experience family violence at more than twice the rate of men and boys, and intimate personal violence is up to three times that rate. With such stark disparities why doesn't the ministry's business plan include specific targets or metrics for reducing gender-based violence? The funding is in this ministry. You know, I still haven't actually heard any real solutions or answers to any of my questions about women's shelters or gender-based violence, so I'm wondering if this funding actually would be better to be suited in the status of women, where they might actually be served.

The Chair: All right, Member. So when we pause for points of order, it doesn't come out of your time. It just comes out of the general time. So just so you don't need to feel rushed, you still have your allotted five minutes of time.

Ms Hayter: Okay. I didn't realize that. Thank you for letting me know for the future.

The Chair: That's okay. Yeah. I could sense by the pace that you maybe had that concern, so I just wanted to put you at ease with that.

If you're okay with surrendering the nine seconds of time then we'll move over to the minister unless you had another question. The time is yours.

Ms Hayter: Yeah. I can get it in in nine seconds.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms Hayter: Approximately one in five victims of spousal violence report their experience to police, and police are notified of less than 30 per cent of intimate partner violence cases overall. Given these statistics, what is the ministry going to do?

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

Over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Turton: Thank you very much. Could have got it in 12 seconds, but anyways, I appreciate the speed reading. Thank you very much to the member. Her advocacy in supporting women that are fleeing domestic violence is well known. I do appreciate her passion for this subject, and so this block of time I will be focusing on our funding for sexual assault centres as well as women's shelters as well.

In 2024-25 we made a one-time investment of \$1.5 million to currently funded sexual assault centres. This investment will help support and sustain existing programming while we continue working with sexual assault centres to strengthen provincial co-ordination to better support survivors. Again, I just want to say how much I appreciate the close communication I've had with the Alberta Association of Sexual Assault Services over the last 12, 13 months as they have been providing input into the funding that we have been able to put forth and the best ways to provide the flexibility in those funding arrangements for sexual assault centres.

We know that there's more to be done, and we have been engaging with sexual assault centres and child advocacy centres and sexual violence agency partners as well as survivors of sexual abuse

to ensure this funding goes where it is needed the most. We appreciate their input and insights in how to strengthen those services.

I know the member talked quite a bit about SACE, so I just want to provide a little bit of input into that. The ministry will continue to provide annual operating funding of \$13.8 million to support 15 sexual assault centres and the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services. Budget 2025 also includes an additional \$1.5 million for the mandate commitment on top of the annual operating funding for a total of \$15.3 million in 2025-2026. This is in addition to the \$1.5 million one-time funding we recently provided to all currently funded sexual assault centres as part of the 2024-2025 mandate commitment.

Some sexual assault centres did receive one-time funding in 2023-24 and '24-25 to address backlogs and counselling wait-lists. This one-time grant to reduce the backlog was not extended. However, the funding provided to sexual assault centres is flexible. Each centre chooses how to allocate the funds provided to best meet their own priorities, and again this was as a result of the round-tables that we had with sexual assault centres throughout the entire province. They did want to have more long-term, sustainable, and flexible funding arrangements to be able to deal with their own local concerns, and I was happy to meet that with the operational increase.

Specifically regarding SACE, SACE continues to receive the annual operational funding from Children and Family Services, and that amount has not decreased. Additional information regarding their funding is in 2025-26, operational funding was \$2,089,990. In '24-25 the operational funding was \$2,089,990. In 2024-25 the one-time mandate commitment of \$263,849 was paid in two equal installments in March 2025 and October of 2025. The total one-time wait-list investment info that the member talked about pertains to that in March 2023 Alberta's government provided \$3.8 million in one-time funding over two years to sexual assault centres to address counselling wait-lists. Again, this was as a clear result and asked for by sexual assault centres throughout the entire province in terms of getting immediate dollars to help stabilize the system, which we have done.

From this funding SACE received \$1.853 million to fund the wait-list investment over two years. While the specific one-time grant has not been renewed, programs can use our funding flexibility to meet their own priorities. Again, this came out loud and clear both from the association as well as sexual assault centres throughout the entire province, that they wanted to have more flexibility when it comes to the funding arrangements, which as a ministry we're happy to meet that call.

CFS is also providing additional funds for sexual assault centres in terms of capital, specifically referring to two shelters in other locations such as Stepping Stones in Cold Lake as well as the YW centre down in Calgary. Again, we recognize that there is more to be done, and we have been engaging and will continue to engage with survivors and stakeholders to look for additional ways that we can help prevent gender-based violence.

The other question that the member talked about has to deal with prevention of family violence grant programs. Again, this is on the preventative nature that the member talked about because not only do we deal with and support the emergency services such as sexual assault centres and women shelters . . . [Mr. Turton's speaking time expired] I guess I'll talk about that in the next block.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister. That's our time.

We'll head over to the government side. Member Johnson, please proceed.

Mrs. Johnson: Well, thank you, Madam Chair and through you to the minister and to his staff for all the hard work that you do.

The Chair: Shared or block time, member?

Mrs. Johnson: I would prefer shared, but if the minister is okay with block, that's fine.

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Turton: We'll do block.

Mrs. Johnson: Okay. Thank you.

Yes, and thank you to the minister and his staff for all the hard work in preparing for today and all the hard work that they do throughout the year as well.

I know in my own constituency there was an adoptive family trying to adopt a little boy, the sweetest little guy, and they were having trouble. They called into my office and asked that I would look into it. It had been not weeks or months, but it had gone over a year now that they were having trouble. It was supposed to be done, and it just wasn't done. So I made a call into the minister's office, and within the week they realized it had just sort of fallen through the cracks. Sometimes that happens. It was done within the week. I just so appreciated that and want to, you know, send my thanks to the minister and to his staff for the hard work in looking into things so quickly. It's really important when you're dealing with issues like this. We talk about the most vulnerable of Alberta, and I know we spent time with the minister of social services yesterday for six hours, and we were talking about vulnerable people there. They're maybe even more vulnerable here, when we're talking about children. So again, my thanks to the department and to the ministry.

We have heard a little bit about violence with women's sexual assault centres just now. If I could, I'd like to talk a little bit more about that and focus on the review and long-term vision for women's shelters and the programming review. That is on key objective 1.4, which involves review and update for four women's shelters. More specifically, it charges the ministry to review and update government's investment and long-term vision for women's shelters programming for individuals, women, children, and families experiencing family violence and abuse. Could the minister please explain how Budget 2025 will work to implement key objective 1.4 as it relates to the review and long-term vision? Through Budget 2025 how many shelter programs will be in support in '25-26? Is the ministry providing any other supports to this sector? Then, how is the ministry ensuring the best use of these funds to support the women's shelter sector?

As a former registered nurse and working with some of the vulnerable sector, I saw how important these women's shelters were. Again, thank you for your work with that. If you could address some of those issues, that would be great, and then we'll move on to the prevention of family and sexual abuse.

9:40

I would like to take a look at a reduced investment on page 63 of the main estimates. Line 4.2 deals with the prevention of family and sexual abuse. I read in the description on page 62 that this line item, provides grant funding to community-based organizations to prevent family violence, sexual violence and abuse, and to promote healthy relationships in Alberta.

Funding stood at a little over \$26.2 million in Budget 2024, and in the 2025 estimate it stands at a little over \$25 million. Could the minister explain the factors for this reduced investment? And then how does this align to the government's mandate commitment to

support sexual assault centres? Through Budget 2025 how will the ministry work to prevent family and sexual violence in 2025-26?

And in this final minute if I could go into the healthy development of Indigenous children and youth. The ministry business plan identifies a commitment to working with Indigenous communities and governing bodies. Key objective 2.6 on page 36 shows the ministry's commitment to work closely with First Nations, with Métis, Inuit, and urban Indigenous communities to support the healthy development of Indigenous children and youth in care. It goes on to indicate this will be done by, "Providing opportunities to maintain and enhance connections with family, community and culture." Additionally, key objective 2.7 outlines the commitment to work with First Nations and the government of Canada to implement An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families, which would enable transfer of authority over child and family service delivery. Would the minister please explain what this commitment means in relation to Budget 2025? And could the minister provide this committee some specifics on what the ministry is doing about this in 2025 and 2026?

With that, I will end my time and pass it over to the minister for this, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member. We'll move now over to the minister for his block of time.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Happy to talk about women's shelters, which is another key aspect of my ministry, which I know numerous members have been asking questions about.

Budget 2025 invests \$60.6 million for women's shelters to help individuals and families get the support that they need. This is an increase of \$3.6 million to support maintenance and increase capacity in places where it is needed the most. We recognize that there is more to be done and have been engaging with women's shelter and family violence agency partners on an initiative to renew women's shelter programming and reimagine service delivery to better meet the evolving needs of families and individuals impacted by family violence. Through the renewal of women's shelter programming we will work together to reimagine how women's shelters and other family violence services are delivered here in Alberta. We know that this work is important because women and children and men and boys are relying upon it.

My ministry is proud to support women's shelters. Again, I just want to give a bit of a shout-out to the leadership of the two chairs of Alberta Council of Women's Shelters that I have had the privilege to meet with and work with, Jan Reimer, who was in that position for many years, which many people in this room know, as well as Cat Champagne, the current chair. I appreciated their leadership and their advice and guidance, providing advice to government about how we can help support women's shelters and women that are fleeing domestic violence.

Through Budget 2025 the Ministry of Children and Family Services is providing 32 women's emergency shelters, 19 stage shelters, five fee-for-service shelters in Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. This year's funding builds upon \$8 million in investments over the last two years, including \$5 million in 2023-24 to help support services already in place and another \$3 million through Budget 2024.

In '24-25 currently funded women's shelters received a one-time payment in the amount of 3.5 per cent of current operational funding to help shelters with cost pressures. Funding was also provided for three programs – the YW Calgary, YWCA Banff, and Wellspring Family Resource and Crisis Centre Society in Whitecourt – to help maintain increased capacity in these

organizations. I understand that was also another question about capacity building from a prior member's question.

Children and Family Services is also receiving funding through the Ministry of Arts, Culture and the Status of Women through the national action plan to end gender-based violence to provide additional funding for women's shelters in '25-26. In 2024-25 \$7.2 million in total was provided, including \$100,000 for women's shelter renewal and \$3 million for women's shelter programming and support. Again, we realize so much more, that the wraparound supports to help look after women and children that are in these horrific situations are so vitally important for their long-term health and healing. We know women's shelters provide so much more than just a bed. They provide the loving, caring, and support that many of our most vulnerable Albertans need to begin that next stage of their healing journey.

Building on changes made to the women's shelter grant agreement in '24-25, the ministry is continuing to reduce red tape and administrative burden by making grant agreements more flexible, which will help shelters to allocate funding to best meet local needs. Again, this came about as a clear conversation item from the round-tables we had with women's shelters throughout the entire province. They wanted more flexibility when it comes to their grant agreements. They wanted more flexibility and less strenuous reporting requirements of the provincial government, which we were very happy to help alleviate.

We know that there's a lot more work to be done in this regard. I know, from the feedback that we have received from women's shelters, that they have appreciated the positive effects and steps forward which we have been able to undertake to lessen the administrative burden that so many shelters are doing. In that way they can focus on women and kids that need help and not worry as much about administrative and reporting requirements to the province of Alberta.

This renewal of women's shelter programming will do a number of things. Number one, it will streamline how grants are delivered. It will increase access to more family-oriented co-ordinated supports to help anyone impacted by family violence and develop tools to inform future government investment and funding decisions. The engagement that we've been doing with women's shelters over the last year, which has really helped form these conversations, is that I have met with multiple round-tables over the last 12 months all over the province. As well, I think I visited almost every single shelter in the province, talking with survivors, talking with the shelter directors, again finding out and looking for those best practices that we can utilize that will help these women and kids receive the supports that they need to again begin their healing journey.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll move now over to the Official Opposition.

Member Batten: Thank you, Madam Chair and to, of course, the minister and the ministry for all the lovely answers we received today. I'd like to just give a quick little summary about the youth support the government is providing in this Budget 2025-26. It fails youth at the prevention stage, budget line 4; the early intervention stage, budget line 3; intervention, budget line 2. This budget does nothing to address the disproportionate number of Indigenous children and youth in the system. Twenty-five Indigenous lives were lost from April 2024 till January 31 of this year, and this budget cuts that funding by 5 per cent. To the minister. Thirteen of the 35 lives lost were 18 years or older at the time of death. If Bill 38, which is currently being debated in the House, passes, these lives will no longer be counted or investigated, and the

government's horrific track record for children and youth dying while in care of the government will suddenly improve.

The strat plan, page 7, bullet 4, indicates a focus on outcomes. Madam Chair, can the minister explain how the ministry will account for outcomes for these children and youth if Bill 38 passes? I've heard that this change will enable the office of the Child and Youth Advocate to focus on children under the age of 18. I've heard that these same focused resources will also be used in consideration of a private member's bill that looks to increase the workload of the office of the Child and Youth Advocate by 98 per cent without adding a single dollar. Can the ministry provide specific action the ministry is taking to ensure that the introduction of Bill 38 or any other bill will not decrease the vital services provided to the fewer than 2 per cent of all Albertan children and youth for whom this independent office serves?

Indigenous partnerships, pages 62, 63, budget line 5. Madam Chair, the budget lines captured here speak to partnership and connections between the Alberta government and Indigenous people, who have called Alberta home way longer than Alberta has had an English name. I would expect to see heavy investment in this area, particularly inside this ministry, given the disproportionate number of Indigenous children and youth involved with children intervention services and the disproportionate number of deaths and serious injuries occurring within the same cohort. The most recent statistics indicate that over 70 per cent of children and youth in care identify as Indigenous. To the minister through the chair: what is the specific plan to address this very real ongoing tragedy?

Madam Chair, these are massive changes being proposed in regard to notification, investigation, and public reporting of the outcomes for children and youth in care here in Alberta. To the minister through the chair: what is the specific plan to address this colossal, deliberate gap in outcome data? How many dollars will be saved through this intentional disregarding of the serious incidents and deaths of young people who have been in government care? How many young adults does this ministry feel are appropriate to devalue, disregard, and ignore in order to achieve the refocus?

Madam Chair, drawing your attention to budget line 5, this line will see more than a 5 per cent cut. Budget line 5.1 shows negative investment in policy and partnerships. To this ministry: given the negative investment, how is the ministry going to address the disproportionate number of Indigenous children and youth in care? What specific initiatives is the ministry bringing forward? What evidence is this initiative based on? And when can Albertans start to see the fruits from this initiative?

9:50

Fortunately, Madam Chair, children and youth in Alberta do have other advocates. The office of the Child and Youth Advocate, the OCYA, provides representation for the rights, interests, and viewpoints of young people involved with child intervention services or the justice system. This dedicated independent office is focused on a very small sliver of children and youth in Alberta. In fact, the vulnerable Albertans served by the OCYA represent less than 2 per cent of the total population of children and youth in Alberta, or less than .5 per cent of all Albertans. This is a highly specific resource for children and youth who've been in care of the government or the justice system.

Given that budget line 5, page 63, shows negative investment in Indigenous connections as well as a true cut of more than 5 per cent, Madam Chair to the minister: what specific initiatives is the ministry using to support advocates for the children and youth in care? What outcome measurements is the ministry taking to ensure that all children in Alberta and those who are in care of the

government, regardless of when the government stops recording their existence, will have positive results?

In my last 30 seconds here I'd like to just speak very briefly to addressing – let's see – page 9, last paragraph. A key focus to address the labour market gaps indicates that we need to empower more young Albertans. Currently the unemployment rate for young Albertans stands at over 20 per cent and almost 30 per cent when looking at part-time workers. I'd love to hear from the ministry what the ministry is hoping to do to change that.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right. Thank you so much, Member.

I see that we have another member who has joined us here. Member, if you would kindly introduce yourself.

Mr. Cyr: Scott Cyr, MLA, Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

The Chair: Fantastic.

Minister, your response.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Thank you to the new member for being here as well as thank you to the member for the question. I will obviously be focusing these next couple of minutes on Indigenous connections and how we are supporting Indigenous youth throughout the entire province of Alberta.

Indigenous partnerships and strategic services in Children and Family Services works with several Indigenous learning institutions, organizations, and communities to develop and deliver Indigenous cultural understanding, learning opportunities, and resources to children and family staff. We know that this is going to have a positive impact on so many of the children that are within care of Children and Family Services. Children and Family Services also works together on child and family services matters with Indigenous communities through subtables that are part of larger formal agreements between the government of Alberta and Indigenous communities.

Regarding some of the horrific incidents of children that have died in care, again, I just want to send thoughts and prayers with any of the families that are affected. The loss of any child is a horrible incident. The safety of vulnerable children and youth here in our province is my top priority as the Minister of Children and Family Services, and we will not stop in our work to make a meaningful difference in the lives of some of these amazing but complex and vulnerable children. Our first priority is to ensure that vulnerable children and youth are safe and supported. Children, youth, and young adults who are receiving services have often experienced complex trauma, which many of the members around this table have talked about. When a child receiving intervention services dies or is seriously injured, we conduct a rigorous examination of what has happened.

We are focused on helping Indigenous families stay together whenever possible and providing culturally appropriate prevention and early intervention services. Work is ongoing within ministry to recruit, train, and support kinship caregivers, which I talked about in an earlier block, who can keep Indigenous children connected to their communities and culture. We continue to ensure our staff have the skills and cultural understanding they need to serve Indigenous families well.

We are working closely with the federal government, having established a streamlined process that expedites early identification and registration of children and youth in care. By dedicating resources, we are ensuring earlier involvement of Indigenous

communities in planning, enhanced family searching, cultural engagement, and access to rights under federal legislation from specific First Nations.

We strive to ensure that children and youth in care maintain and build connections with extended family and community, respecting their cultural identity by ensuring a cultural plan is developed and adhered to for all children and youth in care. We are also taking steps through tendering activities to ensure that all contracted child intervention services supporting children, youth, and families are culturally responsive and appropriate.

Just regarding some of the questions regarding transitional supports for Indigenous children. We continue to address the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in child intervention through policies and practices to prioritize children, youth, and young adults being connected to their families. Child intervention and TAP practitioners are guided by the child intervention practice framework, which includes six core principles: Indigenous experience, preserve family, strengths based, connection, collaboration, and continuous improvement.

Indigenous experience. We understand that Indigenous peoples have always had their own ways of ensuring that vulnerable members, including their children, are safe, protected, and nurtured. We honour this by recognizing their expertise in matters concerning their individual families. With connection we understand that young adults are supposed to maintain relationships that are important to them to be connected to their own culture, practice their religious or spiritual beliefs, and, for those with involvement, have a plan for their care where they are included in the decision-making process.

The child intervention practice framework principles are woven through the enhancement policy manual and the transition to adulthood advancing futures policy manual, which has a robust policy and practice procedures relating to case planning that ensures cultural connections and several that are dedicated specifically to ensuring Indigenous children and youth in care and young adults formerly in care have connections to their family, community, and culture.

We understand that our families and the long-term positive effects that children will have by having those strong family and cultural connections – we have seen the positive effects in ending generational trauma in those regards and making sure that we can stop the cycle of abuse that is affecting so many families within the province of Alberta. That is why we know that by investing at earlier ages with our family resource networks and also by having enhanced training to many of our staff, we can make positive strides and enhance the ability for our caregivers to look after Indigenous children.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll move now to Member Petrovic. Shared or block time?

Mrs. Petrovic: Block time.

The Chair: Okay.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Madam Chair and through you to the minister. A big fan of your ministry and the work that you guys do, so thank you for that. We've chatted a lot today, and I just have kind of one question, then I'll cede my time over to you, Minister, for the last word. Through the lens of Budget 2025 would the minister highlight what he's most looking forward to addressing in 2025-2026?

From there, Chair, if you're okay with it, I'm happy to end my time.

The Chair: Thank you.
Minister.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Well, thank you very much for that question about the areas that I'm most excited in this budget. Again, as I talked about earlier, I truly do consider this my ministry of hope because, as I mentioned before, there are so many families that have nowhere else to turn to, and when they are going through their darkest days, the times when they need the greatest amount of support, I understand that we are supporting programs and services that will be able to help out these women and children fleeing domestic violence. We will be able to provide the supports at our sexual assault centres, and we will have the adequate training for caregivers within the child intervention system to provide that loving attention that so many of these kids require.

But, I guess, just to kind of narrow in a little bit on your question, one of the areas that I'm most proud about is really about the investments into our foster and kinship caregivers with the increases that we have been able to put forth over the last 12 months. These are amazing families that are opening up their hearts and their homes, and they see some of these kids when they're truly

having their worst days. By providing that one-on-one attention that these parents or these caregivers are doing to these amazing kids, we know it's making a difference.

We know it's going to make a difference so we won't have to deal with situations like I had with my friend Rob, where just even the sight of a garbage bag on the front steps can bring about recurring PTSD. We could stop these cycles of generational trauma. We can have these amazing individuals transition into adulthood to lead healthy and fruitful lives, and it all starts with those preventative services, which as the minister I'm very happy to support.

The Chair: Well, thank you so much, Minister.

I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded. I'd like to remind the committee members that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, March 20, at 9 a.m. to consider the estimates for the Ministry of Justice.

This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10 a.m.]

