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

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Department of Labrador Affairs

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Honourable Derek Bennett, MHA

## **GOVERNMENT SERVICES COMMITTEE**

Department of Labrador Affairs

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Chair: Paul Pike, MHA

Vice-Chair: Loyola O'Driscoll, MHA

Members: Brian Warr, MHA  
Chris Tibbs, MHA  
Jordan Brown, MHA  
Lucy Stoyles, MHA  
Scott Reid, MHA

Clerk of the Committee: Bobbi Russell

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Appearing:

### **Department of Labrador Affairs**

Hon. Lisa Dempster, MHA, Minister

Tracy King, Deputy Minister

Sheree Snow, Assistant Deputy Minister, Medical Transportation Assistance Program

Michelle Watkins, Assistant Deputy Minister, Labrador Affairs

Wanda Trickett, Department Controller

Allison Corcoran, Manager of Finance

Allan Bock, Director of Communications

Nicole Kieley, Executive Assistant

### **Also Present**

Hon. Andrew Parsons, MHA, Minister of Industry, Energy and Technology

Hon. Derrick Bragg, MHA, Minister of Fisheries, Forestry and Agriculture

Helen Conway Ottenheimer, MHA

Lela Evans, MHA

Jim Locke, Government Members' Caucus

Bradley Russell, Official Opposition Caucus

Scott Fleming, Third Party Caucus

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Helen Conway Ottenheimer, MHA for Harbour Main, substitutes for Loyola O'Driscoll, MHA for Ferryland.

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Andrew Parsons, MHA for Burgeo - La Poile, substitutes for Lucy Stoyles, MHA for Mount Pearl North.

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Derrick Bragg, MHA for Fogo Island - Cape Freels, substitutes for Scott Reid, MHA for St. George's - Humber.

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Lela Evans, MHA for Torngat Mountains, substitutes for Jordan Brown, MHA for Labrador West.

The Committee met at 5:34 p.m. in the Assembly Chamber.

**CHAIR (Pike):** Okay, I'm going to call the meeting to order.

As I was telling someone earlier, *Survivor* starts 9:30. Please bear that in mind.

First of all, I have to announce the substitutions. So we have MHA Conway Ottenheimer in for MHA O'Driscoll. We have MHA Evans in for MHA Brown. We have MHA Parsons in for MHA Stoyles. We have MHA Bragg in for MHA Reid.

There are no unaffiliated Members here, so we don't need to do that. Do you want a break? Be back in 10.

**OFFICIAL:** (Inaudible.)

**CHAIR:** Okay, that would be great.

First of all, when you're speaking, please identify yourself and wait for the tally light each time you speak. Members and officials are asked not to adjust the seats. So, I guess, that is because one of us might go down too low tomorrow and we might not like that in the House. Not good for the camera. Water coolers are located in each

end here and if you don't have a water bottle, glasses are provided. I feel like an airline stewardess.

First of all, I'll ask the Members of the Committee and any staff attending with them to introduce themselves.

We'll start here.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Okay.

**CHAIR:** They can acknowledge themselves. You don't have to do it.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Yes, I was going to just say a few opening remarks and then have them introduce themselves.

**CLERK (Russell):** We do opening remarks after.

**CHAIR:** We do it after the –

**L. DEMPSTER:** So that's fine, okay.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Bobbi.

**L. DEMPSTER:** So I'll start right here on my left.

**T. KING:** Tracy King, Deputy Minister of Labrador Affairs.

**W. TRICKETT:** Wanda Trickett, Departmental Controller.

**A. CORCORAN:** Allison Corcoran, Manager of Finance, Budget and General Operations.

**N. KIELEY:** Nicole Kieley, Executive Assistant with Minister Lisa Dempster.

**A. BOCK:** Allan Bock, Director of Communications.

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

**S. SNOW:** Sheree Snow, ADM for Medical Transportation Assistance Program.

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

**CHAIR:** All right. Now we're going to ask the Members over here to identify yourselves, please.

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

**B. WARR:** Brian Warr, Baie Verte - Green Bay.

**J. LOCKE:** Jim Locke, Government Members' Office.

**C. TIBBS:** Chris Tibbs, MHA for Grand Falls-Windsor - Buchans.

**D. BRAGG:** Derrick Bragg, Fogo Island - Cape Freels.

**L. EVANS:** Lela Evans, MHA for Torngat Mountains.

**B. RUSSELL:** Brad Russell, Office of the Official Opposition.

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

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

**CHAIR:** Okay.

Clerk, we're going to call for the first subhead.

**CLERK:** Can we approve the minutes from the last meeting first?

**CHAIR:** There are minutes?

**CLERK:** Yeah, from the last meeting.

**CHAIR:** Okay.

So we'll ask for approval of the minutes.

**CLERK:** For April 25. Members of the Committee have a copy.

**CHAIR:** Members of the Committee have it? Okay.

So we'll ask for a mover.

**B. WARR:** So moved.

**CHAIR:** Moved by MHA Warr.

Seconded?

Seconded by MHA Conway Ottenheimer.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

**SOME HON. MEMBERS:** Aye.

**CHAIR:** Contra-minded, 'nay.'

Motion carried.

On motion, minutes adopted as circulated.

**CHAIR:** So I'm going to ask the Clerk now to call the first subhead grouping.

**CLERK:** 1.1.01, Executive and Support Services.

**CHAIR:** Shall 1.1.01 carry?

All right, Minister, now it's your turn finally.

**L. DEMPSTER:** I'll wait a minute for my light to come on.

Good evening, everyone. I know some have had a long day already, so we may not take too long here tonight, but we'll be here as long as you need. I just want to take the opportunity to make a few introductory remarks. Estimates is a very important part of budget process, and this is probably my fifth or sixth time around in different Committees.

I want to say thank you to the Members of the Government Services Committee for

your work in scrutinizing the budget expenditures of '23-'24. I do have members here of the Labrador Affairs team with me and they've already introduced themselves. I will do my best, as the minister, to answer your questions but should you ask something I'm not able to answer, I'm sure that one of my capable staff can certainly chime in.

I'm just going to speak for a minute or two a little bit about Labrador Affairs and recent developments. So most of you here in the Chamber tonight would be aware that effective April '23, Labrador Affairs became a stand-alone department. So there was a little swearing in down at Government House and I was pleased that my mom, who lives on the other end of the country, just by chance was able to be there.

All functions and programs previously administered by the Labrador Affairs Secretariat now fall within the jurisdiction of the Department of Labrador Affairs. So everything that was there prior is certainly still there but, in addition to Labrador Affairs, the department has the responsibility for Medical Transportation Assistance Programs. The MTAPs were transferred in during the budget from the Department of Health and Community Services and when we talk about medical transportation, we're referencing two programs. There's the Medical Transportation Assistance Program and the Medical Transportation program for income support clients or you may hear me refer to ISMT.

The decision to transfer Medical Transportation Assistance from Health and Community Services to Labrador Affairs certainly, I would argue, places a heightened focus on the value of these programs and probably is part of the province's reimagined health care system.

MTAP, although when you look at other jurisdictions, the program here in Newfoundland and Labrador is recognized as far-reaching but I will tell you I've only

been close to it for a few weeks now and already I can certainly see that there are challenges and there are areas that we need reviewed. We're aware of questions and concerns that have been raised by users of the program who have to travel from rural and remote areas to larger centres to access specialized health services.

I'm also confident in saying Labrador Affairs as a perspective on the unique needs of Labradorians and, in particular, residents from around the Island who may live in rural areas that have to rely on the medical transportation service.

So I do want to share with folks here tonight that with this perspective, we are, we have launched in straightway to finalizing a review of the programs. You know, some of the initiatives that were started by Health and Community Services to improve Medical Transportation Assistance and for me, as the minister now, I want to ensure that programs operate as effectively as possible.

A part of this review involves an outreach to stakeholders who have experience with the Medical Transportation Assistance Program. I am looking at MHAs here tonight and who really knows better where some of the areas – a focus that we should be looking in terms of making improvements to the programs as the part of our review. We have reached out to all other 39 MHAs in this Chamber and we will be setting up sessions to hear feedback from any of you that wish to avail.

*Budget 2023*, under that program, also included an additional \$1 million as an objective to improve Medical Transportation Assistance.

Just in closing, when I think about *Budget 2023*, I'll say a couple of things as it relates, again, to Labrador Affairs. One of the department's priority areas is the Labrador Transportation Grooming Subsidy. So while

many of us drive on 10,000 kilometres, some of the 10,000 kilometres of road in the province, up where my colleague in particular would live, in the area she would represent in Torngat, we maintain 750 kilometres of groomed trail. Some areas in the district I represent as well, Cartwright, Black Tickle, areas that don't have a road connection.

So in *Budget 2023* there was an allocation of \$3.3 million to enhance snowmobile travel for residents of Labrador's coastal communities and a part of that investment – and I'll be happy to answer more question later – will be used to replace or repair grooming machines, garages, emergency shelters and adding reflective trail markers.

Also you would have noted in *Budget 2023* that more than \$800,000 is allocated for the Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy. If you're not familiar, basically, that's a subsidy that provides air travel support to Labrador athletes 18 years of age and under, Special Olympians, sport organizations, et cetera to participate in provincial competitions, development camps, Indigenous games and junior varsity sports school athletes. We also placed an increase of \$100,000 in this area during the budget as well.

There were some other things in the interest of time I'm just going to skim quickly. The MOU that the Premier and I signed with the Premier and his deputy of Nunavut in Ottawa in February was another exciting noteworthy mention, I believe. The people of Newfoundland and Labrador and Nunavut, there are lots of commonalities so we look forward to working closely with Nunavut to learn from each other and build on those commonalities and share some of our challenges as we move forward.

It's been an active year for Labrador Affairs. I only mentioned a couple, but some other events that happened during the last year that we would've played a role in some way, shape or form or funded was the Labrador Winter Games, which happens every three

years; Cain's Quest, which happens every two years. We had a great delegation at the Northern Lights Conference in Ottawa certainly showcasing the opportunities that we have here in the North.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention on July 5 walking the last kilometre of the Trans-Labrador Highway from border to border. I won't say complete because we're moving forward on looking at the North Coast, but 30 years and a billion dollars later, it was pretty phenomenal, actually, to be there and share in that.

I'm looking at my colleague across the way. There are lots of things happening in the underground mine at Voisey's Bay. There's the new school coming in Cartwright, highway improvements under way this summer in North West River, Sheshatshiu and then, of course, the work around the pre-feasibility.

My colleague for Lab West isn't here, but I will say that 2024 will be the 70th anniversary of IOC, so we're already eagerly anticipating some exciting things there in a year.

With that, that was a little bit more than I planned to say, but I'll now turn it back to the Chair.

**CHAIR:** Thank you.

We're now going to call on the first question from the Committee.

MHA Conway Ottenheimer.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** First of all, I want to thank the minister for the overview of the recent developments in this new department. I can also add that is a new portfolio for me as the shadow minister for this department. I'm very excited about that and I look forward to tonight to learn as much as I can from your staff. I want to thank the Labrador Affairs team for being here.

It's truly an honour to be in this particular department. It's a very important one and I am glad, too, as you are, that Labrador Affairs has become a stand-alone department, which as you indicate does represent the heightened value and importance of this department.

On that note, I'll get in to my first question.

If we could please have copy of the minister's briefing binder.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Absolutely. Happy to provide you with a copy. .

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Pardon?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Did you ask for a copy of the binder?

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Yes.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Yeah, you're speaking a little bit low. I'd be more than happy to provide you with a copy of the binder.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Are there are any errors in the published Estimates book?

**L. DEMPSTER:** None that I'm aware of.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Just wondering if there have been any positions eliminated? If so, what are those positions?

**L. DEMPSTER:** No positions eliminated.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Thank you.

Now, I understand there are employed in the department, I see that there were 10 people employed in the department, is that the case?

**L. DEMPSTER:** In Labrador Affairs?

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Yes.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Eleven. Is it? It's 15 employed in the department. So we had 15 and now that we've brought over the medical transportation, there's an increase of 43 that came with that program.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Now, most of the people are located where in the department? Are there in Labrador?

**L. DEMPSTER:** For Labrador Affairs?

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Yes.

**L. DEMPSTER:** So the deputy minister is with me and my EA, the comms is back and forth, but the Labrador Affairs office is in Happy Valley-Goose Bay and that's where Michelle Watkins, the ADM would be the lead on the number of staff there. The MTAP ADM, Sheree Snow is with me on the sixth floor and most of the MTAP staff are either, if it's the regular medical transportation program, they're out on Major's Path. If it's Income Support, it's over in Health and Community Services.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay.

**L. DEMPSTER:** In the West Block.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

How many retirements occurred in the last year?

**L. DEMPSTER:** There was at least one at Labrador Affairs and that was the only one?

**OFFICIAL:** (Inaudible.)

**L. DEMPSTER:** There was one in MTAP and there was one at the office in Goose Bay.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

How many vacancies are not filled in the department?

**L. DEMPSTER:** So there are two branches. I don't think there's any here, but we did have – bearing in mind when I answer the questions, of course, MTAP just came to me. So I'm answering questions probably for the last 12 months looking back. We did have 10 vacancies with MTAP that are going through the HR process, as you would appreciate, and work is happening actively to fill those. I don't know if it's still 10, is it?

**OFFICIAL:** Yes.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Yes, it's still 10. There are a number of positions are at different stages there of being filled and one vacancy at Labrador Affairs.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** With respect to the 10 vacancies in MTAP, you know, would you describe that as being seriously understaffed? Is that causing any problems, would you say?

**L. DEMPSTER:** It's definitely concerning when you have a program that's really, really valued to the people of this province. The further out you go, I think, it's fair to say, the more people rely if they have to travel for specialized service. At the same time, we work within an HR system of, you know, there's a process that they go through.

I'm having been in a number of departments in government, as I become aware, sometimes you eventually get people into a position and then they go off to another department and you start all over. So there is a little bit of a turnover that happens there as well. I'm just learning as I've been briefed the last couple of weeks.

But we absolutely need those 10 positions filled in as short a time as possible because it will help with processing times of claims, turnarounds, et cetera.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay. Thank you.

How many layoffs occurred in the department last year?

**L. DEMPSTER:** None.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** None.

And new hires? Have there been any new hires that have taken place in the last year?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Medical Transportation, MTAP, it's been an ongoing, you know, some being hired, some going to other departments and in the process starting again. I don't know if the ADM would have a number on that.

**S. SNOW:** It depends. We could fill a position three times over in the same year because we've had a number of turnovers. So it's very hard, at this point, you know, without going back and adding up how many new positions we've filled.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay. Thank you.

How many contractual and short-term employees are there in the department?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Did you ask me what they were?

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** No, just how many. So it's three is it?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Four.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Four. Thank you.

How many employees are working from home versus in the government office?



**L. DEMPSTER:** There's none, but there may be some with an accommodation previously approved. There's none in the office in Goose that I'm aware of. There's none here in our department. But with MTAP there may be two that were accommodated. So a pretty small number.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Thank you.

Did your department receive any funds from the contingency fund?

No. Thank you.

There's a restated amount of –

**L. DEMPSTER:** I should state no for the record. Sorry, I nodded my head. Hansard can't pick that up.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Thank you.

There is a restated amount of \$14,780,900. I'm just wondering if you could explain this, please.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Can you just tell me the number?

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** It's \$14,780,900. That's actually referred to in the budget Estimates on the very last page, A-7 in the budget document.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Can you repeat that number again?

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Sure, it's –

**L. DEMPSTER:** In the Estimates, it's 2. –

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** No, it's \$14,780,900. So \$14,780,900. It's a restated amount. It's actually referenced in the budget document on the very last page, A-7 in the Appendix.

**L. DEMPSTER:** So it's two things. It's MTAP, the program that came in, and then bringing Labrador Affairs out from Executive

Council and into this stand-alone department.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

The decision to establish Labrador Affairs as its own department, I know in your opening statement, the minister indicated that because it's heightened value. What actually informed this decision?

**L. DEMPSTER:** My thought is there was an increased value placed on Labrador Affairs. It became much bigger once MTAP came in, that was about 45 staff that came. That's a lot of people to be housed in Executive Council; it's usually the small shops, Women and Gender Equality, the Office of Indigenous Affairs, et cetera. No doubt some are unionized employees that are with MTAP. That probably historically wouldn't have been housed in Executive Council.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Going on to some more general questions, specifically with respect to the pre-feasibility study contract for a road to Northern Labrador. That was awarded in January. I'm wondering when will this study be made public.

**L. DEMPSTER:** There is a consultant, Transportation and Infrastructure would be the lead. They went out with an RFP and a contract was awarded. That consultant is moving through communities and I understand that it's going really well. Initially, he started with a certain plan of how he would do it. He heard feedback from the AngajukKâks, the leadership in the area. He's certainly, I think, been working with the folks.

I'm sure it's totally coincidental, but the consultant doing the work is an Inuit beneficiary, so a long relationship is already built, I would argue, and understands the

region and the people. My understanding is that it's going well.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** I guess we can assume the study will be made public sooner than later?

**L. DEMPSTER:** I don't have a timeline. I don't know, I don't want to speak for my colleague in TI. I can endeavour to get an answer to that.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Is a road the only form of transportation that is being looked at or are you considering a train route, for example? Would that be something (inaudible)?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Well, this is a prefeasibility, so it's – and again, I'm not an engineer and I don't want to speak for the lead department, but a prefeasibility, you're hearing from community down to the basic level of even do the communities in that region – is it their desire that they want a road or they don't want a road? Do they have an idea on what proposed routes would be?

I did meet with the consultant myself when I was in Ottawa in February and he gave me a high level of what he planned to do, just because I was curious. I'm not the lead department, but it was pretty simple. Going into communities, he had his maps and he's very interested in the local knowledge from the people that might have different opinions of different routes, et cetera. Then he'll take all that information back and I guess the next phase will be a full feasibility, which would certainly look at things in a more fulsome way.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** So I guess it's safe to say the answer to that question that I asked will really depend upon the outcome of the study, perhaps.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Pardon me?

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** I guess the answer to the question that I asked will basically depend upon the outcome of the feasibility study.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Yes.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Could the minister update us of feedback on the North Coast ferry route and is the local population pleased with this option or are there any plans to re-engage a freight boat from the Island?

**L. DEMPSTER:** So, again, you're asking me a question from Transportation and Infrastructure. I do know there was a meeting. The service provider currently contracted does have an annual meeting and it's with a broad range of stakeholders. The MHA for that region, Labrador Affairs staff, Transportation and Infrastructure and they give an overview each year. From what I have seen in data is that the – and we can certainly endeavour to get that for you – number of passenger travel is up substantially. The number of vehicles is up. The numbers of freight because they're now able to take a vehicle for the first time.

What we've also recently heard from a couple of the main grocery stores in Happy Valley-Goose Bay is that there's a larger number of people that are coming with their vehicle and then their groceries and things are going back in their vehicle, which is something new they're able to do so there seems to continue to be an increase in that area.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Outside of the Labrador Aboriginal Nutritional and Artistic Assistance Program, is there any new funding dedicated from this budget to reduce the price of food and essentials for the North Coast?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Food insecurity is a concern on the North Coast. The poverty

reduction file is housed under the Minister of CSSD so he would have definitely more details than I would, but I can tell you that when we travelled the North Coast, most of the communities last fall, and we did visit Nain in January, my colleague, Minister Abbott and I, sat down with the Nunatsiavut Government and we actually looked at some of the prices. There is a federal Nutrition North program, I've actually been to Ottawa on two different occasions looking for an increase into the items that you can claim subsidy for with that program.

I believe there is now – I forget the name, it's called a harvester – a cheque amount that if someone wanted to go out on the land. When we sat down with the Nunatsiavut Government, they actually told us that they have snow machines as well so if somebody doesn't have a snowmobile and they want to go out and hunt and harvest, I believe that resource is there is what they shared with us in January.

With all that said, we saw prices there that were extremely high that was concerning. So myself and Minister Abbott, we came back, we're taking a deeper look and we've written the federal government again on our concerns on that matter.

I will say interestingly enough for the record here in *Hansard* that it was quite striking for me to go into a number of communities where there were northern stores where the cost was extremely high, but in the little community of Postville, where Winston Sheppard has a long-standing family business. When you walk in there's a little sign that says this retailer is a participant in the Air Foodlift Subsidy, the prices were significantly lower. Actually, they told us that in the winter, people come from other towns to shop at that store in Postville.

So those conversations are happening because I'm just curious myself as to why the northern stores up and down the coast would be so much higher.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay.

Thank you, Minister.

**CHAIR:** Thank you.

MHA Evans.

**L. EVANS:** Thank you.

Just a couple of things. I'd like to thank everyone for being here.

**L. DEMPSTER:** I'm going to look for my earpiece because Lela's really, really low.

**L. EVANS:** It's not often that she says she can't hear me.

Just to start off, I'd like to thank you all for your time and your energy tonight, sitting late. I'd also like to acknowledge the role that my colleague plays here from Harbour Main. We shared many stories about Northern Labrador and Labrador as a whole and all the issues while we worked together. I really appreciate her integrity and also her interest in Labrador. So I really appreciate the role you play, Helen.

With that being said, most of my general questions I'm going to save for the next section, which is Labrador Affairs. But I will ask some general questions on points that were raised here already.

So just looking at – I've got to follow the questions because my colleague asked a lot of the questions that I was going to ask. She did mention, she did ask about, I guess, the rationale of having Labrador Affairs as its own separate department. I believe, Minister, you answered that but, also, I guess, the same question could be asked for putting MTAP, which is the Medical Transportation Assistance Program, under Labrador Affairs because when we look at who accesses it, it's basically everyone in the province that has to travel for medical services.

So I was just wondering along those lines, what was the rationale to bring it under Labrador Affairs as opposed to leaving it where it was.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Thank you, that's an important question.

It is a program that's very valuable to many people around the province. The only reason I know is that most of us know that Health and Community Services is a very, very large department, almost half of the provincial budget. The MTAP program certainly does need attention.

What I can tell you, and what my Executive Assistant Nicole will tell you, is since it came under us, it's absolutely unbelievable the volume of emails. So I think if the Health Minister and the calls coming in under him, it was four health authorities, and now it's one and all he would have been dealing with, he would not have had the time to give this program the attention that it needs, like right now this review and things.

In addition to that, Labradorians that would have to travel the furthest to see a specialist, places like Labrador City, Goose Bay, I would say most of the beneficiaries your way maybe would be in a different category.

So we certainly have an understanding of the needs of that and what policies that might be in place right now that might be working and what aren't.

**L. EVANS:** Okay.

It's just puzzling because you would think that the Department of Health would be able to look after the travel health needs for their people. Putting it under Labrador Affairs, because they couldn't meet the needs, really signals to us that in actual fact maybe they should expanded their department and maybe even went into a sub-department, because it is about health, it's not about Labrador. That's the most important issue.

Yes, Labradorians have to travel for a lot of their health needs, but so does rural Newfoundland as well. I think it's a good to sort of ask the question and get the answer.

Also, Minister, just in terms of the general comments there about the marine service for Labrador. Yes, there is an annual meeting that the department holds, but for this year – I look at the deputy minister in the back there – in actual fact, I didn't participate in the meeting because I couldn't call in on a phone line. The AngajukKâks in my six communities didn't get to call in either. So we're looking at rescheduling, but it does show – also the Minister of Transportation wasn't present as well. There is a need for that annual meeting and there is a need to make sure transportation needs are being addressed. It's not a general question, but I just wanted to comment on that as well.

I also want to comment on the cost of the foods in the store. It's not just northern stores. I do appreciate the minister travelling into the district and looking at it, but it's not just the northern stores as well. The price of food is really out of reach of a lot of the low-income people. Even people who have fairly good incomes suffer.

I do want to add a comment regarding the community of Postville and Winston Sheppard because every time I'm in Postville, I talk to Winston Sheppard. One of the things that Winston tells me is sometimes he doesn't do his regular markup on certain items that people really need. He doesn't put it on. So what he has to do is he has to find something else in his store to mark up higher to compensate. It's not about one store being able to give everyone a reasonable price because businesses should not have to do that.

So getting back to the questions, section 1.1.01, Executive Support, I'll just ask the question there. I'm not sure if my colleague had asked it for Salaries. So the line item for Salaries, last year's revised value was

\$79,500 over budget. I was just wondering why that was. This year's Estimate has increased by \$161,000. So I was just looking for an explanation on the changes in these values.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Thank you, MHA Evans.

Just as a part of your preamble, the comment about health and MTAP and health needs needing to stay there, this is a program, so people make an application. We are in no way down into the health programs or things in there. It's a program that provides financial assistance so the 45 people that work in MTAP are accepting claims and processing claims, et cetera. There are no health decisions being made there. I just want to clarify that.

I was aware that the AngajukKâks had asked for a separate meeting and we have said to the service provider we want to ensure that that happens. It's very important that the leadership in Torngat and MFN have an opportunity to give their feedback.

On the 1.1.01, the \$79,500 it reflects an overrun due to executive position moving from MTAP to Executive Support and also due to salary increase and the \$161,600 that you reference would have been the same. It reflects an increase, primarily, due to the executive position moving from MTAP to Executive Support. Then the salary increase is like a step, year over year. You see a little difference there across government departments – a 2 per cent increase.

**L. EVANS:** Most of my general questions that I do have, I am going to save for the next section.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Okay.

**L. EVANS:** So I'm done this section.

**CHAIR:** MHA Ottenheimer.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Thank you.

I still have a few questions regarding the North Coast. Are there any strategies being worked on by the department to reduce the cost of food and essentials on the North Coast?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Well, certainly, the transportation system, the ferries that the – *Kamutik*. I was trying to think of the name. It runs from Goose Bay. I think it's subsidized almost 100 per cent. Again, that's questions that my colleague in Transportation would be better able to answer.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Can we get an update on the Nain Airport and is there a funding commitment from the province or the federal government to pay for this piece of infrastructure?

**L. DEMPSTER:** So the Nain Airport is a file that's been, you know, in need for a long time and there is a commitment both from the provincial and the federal government. There have been a number of studies done. It's a pretty monumental endeavour. I think there are about maybe 10 kilometres of road that will have to be built to that new location but that file is moving forward. I believe the commitment from the province is \$3.5 million – it's a \$7-million project and the commitment from the province is \$3.5 million.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay. So it's moving along.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Yes, it is. At long last.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** The minister announced high-speed Internet funding for households on the North Coast last year and there was criticism around the cost compared to Starlink which some people are using on the North Coast. Can the minister elaborate on the decision to use Bell versus Starlink?

**L. DEMPSTER:** So, again, I won't speak as eloquently to this as my colleague in IET could but it is my understanding – and he's here so he can correct the record if he needs to tonight – that each time we have rolled out fibre to homes, Wi-Fi, cellular, the lion's share have come from the feds. I joined our MP for both the North Coast, I believe it was \$22 million perhaps that was one year ago in February or it might have been two, and then there was \$8 million or \$10 million on the South Coast. It's taking a little bit longer to see it happen than we would have liked, but I believe, and I don't want to speak for her, but Starlink had certainly been looked at. Unless you hardwire into homes, I don't think it's as reliable a system. Could someone then take that and sell it or remove it?

I've become recently quite familiar with Starlink because many, many people in my own constituency are now using Starlink and they're able to take it and have contact when they go to their cabins on the weekend, et cetera. But again, there's certainly a big difference and you're giving a mobile unit that you can carry versus something hardwired in that it's more longer term and permanent may have been the thinking of the federal government who certainly was the biggest financial provider.

I know one of the announcements, it was \$12 million and I think the provincial portion was \$500,000. So they were certainly the lead on that.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Now moving along to the relocation assistance program that residents of Mud Lake could avail of; can you please give us an update on that program?

**L. DEMPSTER:** The details of that would definitely be best answered by my colleague, the Minister of Municipal and Provincial Affairs.

I will say that we do have a relocation policy in the province still offering to residents in certain areas. The first line of the relocation policy is it must be community initiated and community driven. It's important to say that because the old days of relocation, sometimes forced, did not go well.

So I am aware that my colleague, the MHA for Lake Melville, have been working closely with some of the residents of Mud Lake and they expressed a desire that they now prefer to leave, so him and the Minister of Municipal and Provincial Affairs have been working with them and have offered them an amount of money that is in the program to go. I believe – it's just coming to me now – that money is now with legal and is being paid out actually now or within the next week or so. It's fairly far along, this is my understanding.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Yes, because one of the concerns or criticisms of this funding program that I've heard is that it wouldn't be enough to purchase a comparable house in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, for example. I just wondered if you, as the minister, would have concerns about this?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Well, when someone accepts the relocation money, if it's \$250,000 or \$270,000, they may not necessarily want to go to Goose Bay or any other place. I can speak with first-hand familiarity from William's Harbour, my constituency that relocated since I have been the MHA. When the people relocated from that community, they actually spread into different communities. Some chose Port Hope Simpson because they had family or some chose Charlottetown.

I can just say that on the coast, \$250,000 can probably build you a nice bungalow and have some money left over to put in the bank and seasonal employment offered at plants and things like that. Mud Lake, I really don't know where the residents plan to go.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

The Town of Happy Valley-Goose Bay recently released a statement and they indicated – quote – reports of loitering, panhandling, mischief, littering, public intoxication, threats, lewd acts, sexual and physical abuse, vandalism, break and enters and increased drug-related and other serious crimes have become common in our neighbourhoods.

I'm just wondering, Minister, if you can walk us through what actions are being taken or what is being done by the provincial government to address these concerns?

**L. DEMPSTER:** There are many, many things, I would argue, that's happening. I would say that, first of all, the situation in Central Labrador is very concerning. I think it's important to differentiate that we have a homeless population, the numbers may be smaller, and we have a transient population that tends to go up in the summers; people move in from other communities into Central and when the temperatures drop and the weather is colder they go home. As a province, this file has been a top priority for us and there is actually a litany of things that we have been doing. We can certainly provide you with the list of that.

But we set-up an action team. It's really important to have Indigenous leadership and community stakeholders involved in working collectively to try and move to a better place. They have been working on some medium- and longer-term goals.

Last June, the Premier actually set up an acute response team made up of four ministers, the mayor in the community, the MHA and the Indigenous leaders. Basically, I guess the difference is the acute response team was a little bit smaller and it was folks at a decision-making level. So we would go into a meeting, we were meeting weekly for a long, long time. When there was an ask, you know, if public safety was identified as a

need, we need more RCMP or we need more security money, we were able to actually turn that around very, very quickly.

So I have been working very closely with my colleague in Justice and Public Safety, with my colleague in Housing, because it's complex and it's not just housed in one department.

We are, as a government, moving forward to make a very substantive investment in that community to provide increased support of housing units and increase in shelter beds and then to look at wraparound supports and things like that.

I should mention as well that the Health Authority has been a very key player as well in terms of a mobile crisis response unit, et cetera. We've got maybe half a dozen or seven outreach workers across, it could be the Salvation Army; it could be the Hub; it could be IRT, the Innu Round Table. Quite a lot of things happening, but we'd be happy to provide you with a list of exactly some of the services there.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Thank you.

I'll ask this question because it relates as well to this issue. The government issued a press release shortly afterward stating: "The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador is disappointed with the position the town council of Happy Valley-Goose Bay has taken on public safety concerns and response efforts in recent weeks."

Do you as the minister share this disappointment?

**L. DEMPSTER:** I think it's really important that, as a province, we have a great working relationship with the Town of Happy Valley. We understand that there are concerns around public safety in the community right now as a result of that. Kudos to my colleague in Justice who actually went to bat and got an extra \$500,000 in the budget, which is pretty substantive. That is

sitting there and when the Town of Happy Valley is ready to reach out, we've let them know that money is there and we want to continue to work with them. We certainly value the relationship that we have.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Thank you, Minister.

**CHAIR:** Okay.

MHA Evans.

**L. EVANS:** My questions I'm going to ask in the next section.

**CHAIR:** Okay.

It's back to you.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** The town council in their statement had indicated that the Happy Valley-Goose Bay RCMP detachment is grossly under resourced to deal with the current situation.

Do you also agree with that statement from the town council, Minister?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Well, we're certainly off the line by line, here. I will help you as much as I can. I cannot speak for Justice, the Minister of Justice or Attorney General, and I know, from my time as a Cabinet Minister, that government does not direct the RCMP for sure, nor should. You have elected officials, politicians directing the day-to-day operations of government, but I do believe, if he was here, he would tell you that is the only detachment in the province that he's reached in at least twice asking for extra resources to be there.

I'm sharing that because he shared it in the Committee and on the meetings that we've had. He's actually gone above and beyond and asked for extra staff and extra officers have been sent into that community.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Thank you.

As well, you mentioned the \$500,000 investment. Can you provide some details as to how that will be rolled out?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Should the Town of Happy Valley avail of the \$500,000, then they will decide, but it's my understanding that they would use it for extra security in the community. Last year, one of the early initiatives on our acute response team ask that came in was for extra security in the community. There was money rolled out through Municipal Affairs and Environment and we did hear very positive feedback, not just from the Town of Happy Valley, but from businesses within the community that felt the security around the community was positive and was helping. They saw a need for it.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Now on the issue of the homeless population in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, *The Telegram* had reported last fall that the homeless population was around 80.

Do you have any updated estimates on the scale of this particular issue?

**L. DEMPSTER:** I don't have any numbers but I was just in Happy Valley. I spent some time last Thursday morning and had some meetings. I spent some time at places like the Friendship Centre and the number that I was given there by people on the ground was 18 but I'm seeing 20, 25. Certainly substantially lower than 80.

But it's like a point in time count. From my time in CSSD, we would do a point in time and I'm sure that it changes from the number that's there one month, it may be a different number than what's there next month.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Thank you.

That concludes my general questions so I'm going to Labrador Affairs, Executive and



Support Services, 1.1.01, Executive Support. I'm wondering if you could give us a breakdown of the Transportation and Communications line from last year and this coming year. That's under Salaries, Transportation and Communication line.

**L. DEMPSTER:** I'm not sure what the question was.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Just a breakdown of the Transportation and Communication line from last year and this coming year.

**T. KING:** So this funding is used of course for the travel for the assistant deputy minister of Labrador Affairs, as well as the director of Communications. So it would include things like the director of communications travelling for House of Assembly events, the assistant deputy minister travelling to attend meetings in St. John's or to go to the Northern Lights Conference or just the regular business of the executive in the department.

From one year to the next, we have not really seen a whole lot of difference. I think we're under budget this year by \$1,400. But that's the type of thing. Is that what you're asking?

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Yes, it is.

**T. KING:** Okay.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** That concludes my questions for this subhead.

**CHAIR:** Thank you.

Recall the grouping.

**CLERK:** 1.1.01, Executive and Support Services.

**CHAIR:** Shall 1.1.01 inclusive carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

**SOME HON. MEMBERS:** Aye.

**CHAIR:** Carried.

On motion, subhead 1.1.01 carried.

**CHAIR:** Okay, could you call the next subhead please?

**CLERK:** 2.1.01 to 2.1.02 inclusive, Labrador Affairs.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** So under 2.1.01, Salaries, last year \$596,900 was budgeted but \$678,200 was spent. Why is that?

**L. DEMPSTER:** The \$81,300 difference reflects an overrun due to annual leave payout and that was the individual I referenced earlier that retired.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Under Transportation and Communications, can you give us a breakdown of the Transportation and Communications line from last year and this coming year?

**L. DEMPSTER:** The \$4,900 in saving. Is that the one you're referencing?

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Yes, it is.

**L. DEMPSTER:** So my deputy would have outlined the types of things that we spend, using the director of Communications travelling with me; the ADM travelling for conferences like the Expo, Northern Lights in Ottawa, MINEx in Labrador City, et cetera. It would also include staff participation on bilateral meetings with the federal government, et cetera.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Thank you.

**L. DEMPSTER:** And cell phones would be in there, as well, MHA Ottenheimer.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, perfect. Thank you.

Under 10, Grants and Subsidies, can you give a breakdown of what was spent last year?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Grants and Subsidies, yes, that would have been the Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy, \$730,000; Combined Councils of Labrador, \$100,000; the Labrador Aboriginal Nutritional Artistic and Assistance Program, \$50,000; the Labrador Transportation Grooming Subsidy, \$471,000; \$7,500 community-based funding; and school sport would be the \$7,500.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

And I see that there's a significant increase in the budget line for this coming year. Can the minister explain what this is budgeted for?

**L. DEMPSTER:** So I did go to bat for a number of things and was successful with all of it. I should ask for more.

The Labrador Sport Travel Subsidy has an increase of \$100,000. We've really been hearing from students in Labrador who travel out, the increased cost in airfare, et cetera. We fund 75 per cent of the travel and that was becoming more and more.

We do have a one-time funding of \$3.2 million for our Labrador trails. In my meetings with the AngajukKâk, on the North Coast, we had heard about a need for replacements and upgrades to groomer garages, emergency shelters. Also a need for new grooming machines, \$1.6 million for that, and the \$100,000 for reflective trail markers. Also, since I have become the minister here, we saw that the annual operating budget really wasn't enough any more when it came to the cost of fuel that has gone up. It was hard on the North Coast to obtain employees with the money that

was available for salaries. So the annual operating budget has increased by \$140,000 year over year and the total annual operating is \$671,000.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Subhead 2.1.02, Medical Transportation Program, I have some general questions under this area. Can you, Minister, please walk us through the decision to move MTAP from Health and Community Services to Labrador Affairs? I know that my colleague, MHA for Torngat Mountains, touched on this but, can you just elaborate on that for us, please?

**L. DEMPSTER:** I was just pausing for a moment to see what I'd say because I feel I've answered that to the best of my ability other than it's a very important program to residents in this province. I think we had all heard, based on questions in the House, that the program certainly needed more attention. We also recognize that potentially there are areas of the program that need an increase. Labrador, certainly, has a keen perspective on the program because all of our residents that are coming out are incurring very high airfare and having to spend multiple nights away to see a specialist, et cetera.

So taking that knowledge, you can certainly relate to other challenges that other, in particular, rural MHAs would be experiencing. I know of no other reason than to give the program the attention that it needed to give it a timely review and to get it in a better place. Ultimately, a place that would be more beneficial for the residents of Newfoundland and Labrador that rely on the program.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay.

Now, I'm just wondering if you were aware of what other jurisdictions have done. For example, are there any other provinces that have moved their program, their medical

transportation program out of Health, for example? Did that inform your decision? Was there any analysis of other jurisdictions that you're aware of?

**L. DEMPSTER:** I actually haven't done a jurisdictional scan, I will say that. I will say that I was always a very loud voice on this side. It's important to me that the people of the province, if a program is there, that they get access to what they're entitled to. Labradorians really have high claims, if you're coming from Lab West or Goose Bay, in particular.

I was asked would I take the program. It's a program that's important to many people that I represent and people that many of colleagues in the Chamber represent. I suggested we'll take it and we'll start a review process immediately and hopefully in the coming weeks we'll see some positive changes as a result.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Yes, I hope so, too.

How many individuals have used the MTAP in the last year?

**L. DEMPSTER:** There are two, right, as I mentioned.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Yes.

**L. DEMPSTER:** There's the medical transportation program and then, if you're on income support, there's the income support medical program.

Under the MTAP, the total claims in the '22-'23 year would be – we're looking at the wrong number here. There are a lot of numbers here. The total claims in '22-'23 would be 7,320 and the number of patients attached to those claims would be 4,449.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay.

**L. DEMPSTER:** That's under the MTAP. Under the income support, applications would be 13,264.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Do you have any explanation as to why it would have increased?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Why it would've increased?

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Yeah.

**L. DEMPSTER:** I don't know. I don't know, during COVID, if more people became aware of the program. Then there was – I'm just speaking even as an MHA, taking off my ministerial hat – during the cyberattack, when there were people who – and this is just my view – came in for appointments that got cancelled, et cetera. There were lots of conversations happening in media: we will reimburse you. I had actually heard some folks say: Oh I wasn't aware of this program until all of that played out. But we've certainly seen an increase in the program over the last year.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay.

How many individuals would you estimate will be using the MTAP in the coming year? Have you had any estimates, predictions or strategic planning?

**L. DEMPSTER:** It's definitely too early for me to say because I'm like a couple of weeks in.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** I'm out of time there now, I think.

**CHAIR:** Okay.

MHA Evans.

**L. EVANS:** Thank you.

I'll start off with some general questions.

We see a number of initiatives aimed at lowering the cost of living from this

government and I do applaud the initiative, but, of course, coming from a district where there are very substantive, vulnerable populations, I will draw attention to some of the design flaws that leave people out in Labrador, especially in my district. It's something that I brought up in the House as well. Like, for example, residents trying to get the home heating rebate, even people who had kept their receipts for the purchase of stove oil, the receipts weren't itemized and sometimes they weren't actually official, on official receipts.

But I do draw attention to past successful rebate programs that this government has put forward to lower the cost, to help people out with the cost of living, such as the rebate we had for construction, basically, people building extensions on their houses, repairing their windows. My entire district was excluded from accessing that rebate where you got 25 per cent off the overall cost, up to, I think, it was \$25,000 was it or \$40,000? The construction rebate back during COVID. Anyway, that was a significant amount of money, but for my district they couldn't access having somebody with the homebuilder's affiliation, the work had to be done.

So for me, I have to ask the Department of Labrador Affairs, what the department is doing to ensure unique circumstances for Labradorians, especially in rural, remote regions such as Torngat Mountains, can avail of any more new initiatives the government puts forward in terms of the rebates?

So, basically, I'm asking Labrador Affairs: What are you doing to make sure regions of Labrador, who suffer unique geographic isolation issues, are included with these rebates because it's supposed to lower the cost of living and make quality of life much better for everybody. Right?

**L. DEMPSTER:** So the home heat rebate, and I know that you had some constituents that there were different issues with their

invoices. I went through the same thing, and I might say that's still going through the same thing with some people that live in coastal communities in the south that I represent. It is unfortunate that we might have, you know, a truck that will go down the road and gas people up and maybe did it for years and years and didn't have a civic address and that delayed people, but, on that particular note, it's my understanding that the Finance Minister was working with you. I believe you acknowledged that and trying to support you there.

We were also happy – it was the former Finance Minister, as you recall, during COVID when we were concerned about cost of living to isolated communities, mostly yours. I think I did have two in the south that received a cheque to each household.

All I can tell you is that, as the Minister for Labrador Affairs, when I'm at a table, whenever there is money going to be rolling out into the province, I am certainly educating my colleagues on the unique needs of Labrador that need to be addressed there.

There are some instances where there may be incentives for people to turn to electricity, but we do have a disadvantage that's greater than you or I, and the same thing for our Member that's here in the back that represents Burgeo - La Poile, in that if you're operating on diesel, some of those incentives didn't apply because it's not going to reduce the use of diesel, is my understanding. But, again, I don't want to speak for my colleague, for example, the Minister of Environment and Conservation.

**L. EVANS:** Okay. Another general question.

Just looking at the uniqueness of Labrador and especially my district, what work is Labrador Affairs doing in terms of working with the Department of Environment to sort of address some of the specific issues and

challenges that climate change is having in my Northern Labrador district?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Well, I would say that in terms of Labrador Affairs directly some of that extra more than \$3 million that we got would have been, for me, coming out of conversations that I've had with the AngajukKâks, with people working on the trails, working with SmartICE, talking about climate change and no longer having temperatures as cold as we were once used to and routes that need to be changed, shelters that need to be moved in different locations, et cetera, on the bigger picture, across government, I know that some communities if they're concerned about erosion and things like that, that would be a bigger infrastructure program that they would have to apply to meet the specific need or challenge that they're experiencing.

**L. EVANS:** Thank you.

I do have hope that the two departments can work together, especially with the knowledge that Labrador Affairs obtains of the unique geography that my region is facing. So I am pleased and I do have hope for that, that you'll be able to influence the department.

In terms of Labrador Affairs, I was just wondering, I know the Department of Education has the file, but what's your department doing to help improve recruitment and retention of teachers in my district, especially where we saw a huge hardship to the high school students of Nain where they lost their teachers to the junior high students and were forced to go online? I was just wondering, what's your department doing in terms of helping with the recruitment and retention of teachers?

Also, we have the same issue with health care professionals in my district of Northern Labrador, but Labrador as a whole, really, really is impacted by the lack of health care professionals.

**L. DEMPSTER:** So those are very important questions. Any time that I become aware of vacancies, of challenges, anywhere in Labrador, North Coast, Labrador City, has had some issues as well, I guess I could start by saying all across the sectors right now there are tremendous labour market challenges, as I'm sure you are aware. First, it's to gain an understanding of where the gaps are and the challenges are, and then it's to lobby for improvements.

I actually did meet with Trent Langdon, the president of NLTA. We had some great discussion. I wanted to gain a better understanding. Conversations for me in education are always ongoing. No doubt that health has been challenged across our province, across our country, and beyond as we navigate through, I guess, right now what we would say is post-global pandemic. One of the layers of challenges for communities like you represent and like I'm responsible for as a minister is, historically, often we would have retired people that came for the experience to practise in the North and then COVID happened and they didn't want to expose themselves. So that added an extra challenge.

But I know all during COVID, the last two or three years, I met very, very regularly with the CEO of the health authority to find out. I kept a very close pulse – even though I'm not in the operations of health – on what the staffing numbers were in each of the clinics, what was full capacity, what should be there and there really was a monumental effort. On the South Coast, we closed down clinics quite often and had people driving to neighbouring towns even in the winter, seniors. But we saw the value and the necessity of having a better complement of nurses in places like Nain for example.

We'll continue, as you saw in *Budget 2023*, there's substantive investment in funding both in the recruitment fund and in the retention fund in terms of initiatives. So there is what I would call a very mighty effort by the government to try and get us

back to better numbers in all our communities, but in particular isolated communities like you represent.

**L. EVANS:** Minister, that brings me to my next question. Do you support extra incentives for Northern Labrador especially in terms of the recruitment and retention of teachers falling under one provincial school board? They seem to say one fits all, so you can't give anything extra to try and recruit for Northern Labrador because everybody got to be treated equally. So do you support extra incentives for retention and recruitment of teachers and also the same for the health care professionals?

**L. DEMPSTER:** We can certainly endeavour to find this out from Education and Health, but it is my understanding that we actually have increased incentives, signing bonuses, et cetera, for recruitment for the North, for Labrador.

**L. EVANS:** Thank you.

**L. DEMPSTER:** We can try to get that for you.

**L. EVANS:** Thank you.

**CHAIR:** Thank you.

MHA Conway Ottenheimer.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Thank you.

I just want to go back to the question that I had asked about how many individuals have used the MTAP program in the last year. I believe it was stated that in 2022-23, the number was approximately 4,449 people. You said that this was an increase. I'm just curious as to how many more people did it increase by?

**L. DEMPSTER:** So in '21-'22, the patient number was 3,545 and then it increased to the 4,449. That's the regular MTAP. In the income support, we actually saw the number go down a little bit. Yes, I'm getting

the nod from the lady who's been dealing with this longer than me. In the previous year under the income support, the total was 14,723. That dropped to 13,264. But I believe it's directly related to the fact that we have – I don't have the numbers, because income support's not under my department – lower numbers of people in the province right now on income support, which is a positive.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, that is good. Thank you.

In March, the Department of Health and Community Services said it's reviewing MTAP, including its policies, procedures and forms. Can you, Minister, tell us when this review will be released publicly? You referenced it earlier. I assume that it's under your purview now, doing the review. Could you please tell me when that would be released publicly?

**L. DEMPSTER:** I can't give you a date other than it won't be a long, drawn-out process. We do have some extra money and it's really, really important that we get that into the program and out for the benefit of the user in as timely a manner as possible.

Whether that is increased rates of mileage or increase in airfare allowables or overnight accommodations or how that money will be spent. We are collectively looking for feedback. We've reached out to all of the MHAs. I know that some offices deal with MTAP quite a lot and some that probably don't get any calls on MTAP.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Has any consideration been made for government to pay for travel expenses upfront for individuals and families that need it?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Provision is there right now for that from Labrador, again, airfare being

so high in particular in areas like Labrador West and Goose Bay.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** The provision is there and is it being utilized?

**L. DEMPSTER:** The numbers I saw the other day actually surprised me a little bit, because I would have anticipated, given the high cost of airfare, that more people would've been availing instead of paying upfront and claiming. I believe in the last fiscal year there were 40 people who availed to receive the payment upfront.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Are there any plans to increase the amount that subsidy will cover?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Everything right now is under review.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** As they say, everything is on the table.

Does government have an estimate on how many people have to rely on community fundraisers to pay for the gap in funding between MTAP and the total cost? As an MHA, I hear about this from my constituents and I'm sure that most MHAs hear this. Would you have any estimate?

**L. DEMPSTER:** I'm sure you know the answer to the question you asked.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** I still have to ask it.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Over 400 communities in the province, I'm sure we never know. There's a fundraiser every night for something or a dart tournament. I don't know if it's necessarily MTAP. There's always a need somewhere, I know that.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Will there be any assessment of that factor in your review

to see how much the community has to shoulder the responsibility here?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Given the needs that we hear right now out in community from MTAP users, certainly it's not my intent to launch into a very long drawn out process. I'm not sure what that would do right now to the process, if a community is having 10 fundraisers and how do you measure that need.

I know in areas I represent there are lots of fundraisers that probably were never asked for, people feel helpless when they see a need and they want to do something. It's a lot of grey there. I can't speak to that with any level of – but our intent right now is to receive feedback, feedback that we get directly to the 45 staff on the phone lines, the offices that receive the calls. I mean, I'm looking at MHAs here tonight that certainly reach out to me on MTAP on a regular basis since it's come in. We'll be hearing that input and then we'll try and utilize the money to get the best benefit for the user.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Under 01 Salaries, last year \$2,550,200 was budgeted but only \$1,750,200 was spent. Can you explain this, please?

**L. DEMPSTER:** That would have been directly related to the vacancies that I referenced earlier.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay.

With respect to that point, because of the vacant positions, does the minister feel that you can fill these vacant positions, if they couldn't be filled in the previous year? What is it that gives you that confidence that you can fill these vacant positions since they couldn't be filled in the previous year?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Again, I'll go back to my earlier comments. I can't speak to the program when it wasn't under me, but I do

know that in my time here, generally when I'm on a mission to make something happen, I've had success. I am determined that those positions will be filled and they'll be filled in as timely a manner as possible.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay, thank you.

Under 09, Allowances and Assistance, this year, as you've indicated, there's an additional \$1 million budgeted for this line item. Can you please explain this?

**L. DEMPSTER:** For the MTAP?

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Yes.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Well, we were hearing from users that the amount that they are receiving is not sufficient. It's no secret that we're at a 41-year cost of living high. That's not because we have a Liberal government in Newfoundland and Labrador or a PC government in the Maritimes or an NDP government in BC. It's the war in the Ukraine, it's COVID, it's all these reasons, sanctions on Russia, that we've had this high cost of living. So I would give accolades to the Premier who said we will give you the program, do the review and, to start, here is \$1 million to put in a very timely manner toward where you are seeing the greatest need is.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** I assume that will be determined after the review is completed?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Yes.

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Okay.

All right, that completes my questions.

Thank you.

**CHAIR:** MHA Evans.

**L. EVANS:** Yes, thank you.

So I'll just continue with my general questions. Looking at transportation for, let's say, my district and a lot of the rural areas. Quebec has airfare travel subsidy for rural and remote areas in their province and it seems to be working quite well. When I looked into it, it seems to have quite a substantial history. I thought it was just something new in the last two years, I thought it was an election campaign actually. But it existed in different forms.

So my question is sort of a direct one for air transportation for the region of Torngat Mountains and also Black Tickle, who doesn't have road access, is there any work being done to sort of bring a subsidy similar to what Quebec has in place for the isolated communities?

**L. DEMPSTER:** So the minister directly responsible for air access and those things actually took a number of questions in the House today. What I'll say is a couple of things with regard to Labrador and the high cost is – and you mentioned Black Tickle – we were able to work out a partnership for that particular community with a schedevac flight under the Health Authority that goes in there, two or three times a week, usually with lots of empty seats.

So the government pays for, sort of like a voucher program for people. We worked out a much cheaper rate and people traveling for medical, as you would know, there is a voucher, I think it's \$80 for an individual for getting off the Coast of Labrador into, whether it's St. Anthony or on the North Coast, it's primarily Goose Bay.

**L. EVANS:** What about a travel subsidy for people, not patients? Quebec has one for everybody in rural, remote, isolated communities to travel, actually, from major centres to and from those areas – a straight subsidy of a cost of \$500 or for travel outside of those three major centres, a 30 per cent subsidy of the travel.



So in my communities we only have air transportation, air travel and the same thing with Black Tickle. That's why I mentioned Black Tickle. So would Labrador Affairs and this government consider a similar airfare subsidy for my districts and any other rural place on the Island that's not connected by road?

**L. DEMPSTER:** That's not something I can speak to here tonight. It's not connected with any of the line items. I certainly can appreciate the high cost of travel around the province and, in particular, Labrador, but I've not been a part of a conversation of a subsidy that Quebec provides.

**L. EVANS:** So my second question, as Labrador Affairs, would you consider advocating for an air travel subsidy for Labrador for isolated communities?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Even now, always advocating for isolated communities and I understand that, thankfully some of the Nunatsiavut beneficiaries, somebody was just telling me at the airport in Goose Bay, that they are able to book their travel, if they are a beneficiary, at a little bit of a reduced cost, which I'm sure is a help when the cost of everything is so high.

Always interested in looking at ways that we can provide a service to better help the people that live there.

**L. EVANS:** Yes and a Nunatsiavut beneficiary or an Innu Nation beneficiary can actually book a return ticket from Nain or Natuashish for \$1,000 as opposed to \$1,200. So it does help a little, but still who has \$1,000 to travel within your province, within your region?

Mining companies – now just getting to the next topic – have been asking for more electricity to support and potentially expand their operations in Labrador. In actual fact what I've been hearing is it's impacted the growth of Lab West. What's Labrador Affairs done to advance this issue?

**L. DEMPSTER:** The lead department on mining and industry needs would certainly be IET, and I can't speak for them. But I can tell you that Labrador Affairs, we do meet regularly with groups like NL Hydro and I believe it was just last week that I would've had the CEO of Hydro and a team in my office. It is certainly an active file. We are very aware of the needs around the increased needs in Labrador West. I believe that a very competent minister is on top of that file and working with Hydro and working with the different players in the mining industry to address that going forward.

**L. EVANS:** Thank you for that answer.

We have had some tremendous announcements in this budget and you did refer to \$3.2 million as a one time for this budget and you did talk about listening to the AngajukKâks regarding their equipment. I was just wondering, how much of the money is going towards the equipment? Is it the \$1.6 million? Is that for replacing equipment?

**L. DEMPSTER:** The \$1.5 million is for replacements, upgrades to groomer garages and emergency shelters. The \$1.6 million is for new grooming machines. We did hear that when we would have our meetings with the AngajukKâks, there's at least one community in particular in need of a new groomer. There may be three communities, yes. We recognize that that's their highway in the wintertime, so we have to ensure that they have good working equipment to keep the trails groomed.

**L. EVANS:** Minister, I really, really thank you for your answer and I really thank you for listening to the people when we have our meetings regarding the trails. Equipment replacement and garages were an issue that was brought forward. We did talk about the trails as our highway; we don't have a highway. I really want to acknowledge the fact that in this budget it looks like you are coming through. I will say I appreciate it and I know my constituents and the

AngajukKâks will appreciate that as well. That's really, really good news. In a world where we don't actually get much good news and we don't get many people listening to us, I do want to thank you for that.

The most important thing I have left to say in terms of the groomers, you did speak about the annual operations and you said there's a \$140,000 year-over-year increase now and that is because you've heard about the salary problems. That \$140,000, is that going to actually help increase the salaries and the benefits so we can attract stable members for groomer operators?

**L. DEMPSTER:** So, first, to your earlier point, thank you for that. I'm always listening. Sometimes when we don't deliver, it doesn't mean I'm not trying on this side. But I did appreciate the support of my Cabinet team in getting the extra \$3.5 million. I also want to say it was troubling to hear from some of the AngajukKâks that they had very large, heavy groomers and now with climate change that you referenced earlier and the ice not freezing as deeply, that they were looking for in some cases smaller groomers. So it was a safety issue, which in my mind nothing trumps safety. So it was imperative that we get that extra money.

Yes, another thing that I did hear from the AngajukKâks is that with a lot of your workforce, as you would know working in places like Voisey's Bay, that it's very difficult to attract workers with the operational budget that we did have there and also the cost of fuel had gone up. So that is a permanent increase to the operating base and so in the not-too-distant future, we'll actually be meeting again with all of our partners that we service there in your district in particular, and then in a couple of towns in the southern part, to have discussion around what the next season will look like and other seasons going forward.

**L. EVANS:** Okay, thank you. That's really good to hear in terms of the commitment.

I'm just about out of time, so I'll try to sneak in another question. Sorry about that – I'm just going through my questions now. Regarding the MOU signed between the province and Nunavut back in February, in the MOU it mentions a need to advance the movement of goods and people and to work together to explore the potential to strengthen transportation links. Has there been any discussion yet on this front?

**L. DEMPSTER:** No, no discussion yet. But it was pretty exciting to be a part of this and we drew such a large crowd. I'm sure it was the two premiers. It wasn't me or the deputy out there, but in Ottawa in February – and both jurisdictions, as you would know, have a strong Indigenous population. Some of the things that you and I are discussing here tonight, certainly with Nunavut, we share a like-minded approach to safe and sustainable Arctic development.

I'm actually hoping to be going to Nunavut sometime in the not-too-distant future and we've extended an invite for the premier from up there and, as matter of fact, I believe there was also an invite extended for the premier of Nunavut to come to Expo in Goose Bay in June, if you're around at that time. We've actually not yet had a face-to-face meeting but there's been lots of collaboration between officials in Labrador Affairs and officials with the Nunavut government long before February and ongoing since February.

**CHAIR:** Okay.

MHA Conway Ottenheimer, are you finished?

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** I'm finished questions, yes.

**CHAIR:** Okay.

MHA Evans.

**L. EVANS:** I basically saved all my Labrador general questions for this section. So I'll continue on.

Going back to the MOU signed between Nunavut. Nunavut is an Inuit territory now and I was just wondering, in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Nunatsiavut Government, Labrador Inuit, they have their own land claims, so will this province be engaging Nunatsiavut Government with any of the talks that they have with Nunavut?

**L. DEMPSTER:** So I can tell you, this is putting on a little bit my Indigenous Affairs and Reconciliation hat, but we certainly value the relationship that we have with Nunatsiavut Government. We always, I think, learn from each other when we share space. As you would know, the Premier and I meet regularly with Indigenous leaders. So we've built that relationship now over a period of time, whether it's President Lampe or one of his ministers, usually, always on the call and the door is open for a two-way relationship.

Exactly what this will look like going forward, I can't speak to that in any detail right now because I don't want to misspeak, but I will say that the MOU was between the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Government of Nunavut, but we're always open and certainly welcome to continue to build on the relationship with Nunatsiavut, for sure.

**L. EVANS:** My next general question will be: Has the Newfoundland and Labrador - Nunavut Co-operation Implementation Committee developed its two-year work plan and will this be released to the public once it's completed?

**L. DEMPSTER:** The work plan is not completed yet.

**L. EVANS:** Okay, so it's not completed. Part two of the question is once it's completed, will it be released to the public? Will it be shared with the public?

**L. DEMPSTER:** That's something that we would have to discuss with Nunavut, as we work with them moving forward together.

**L. EVANS:** Okay, thank you.

Just looking back at a question that I missed here: Are there plans to increase the provincial travel subsidy for sports? I know you did talk about some of the monies in the budget and I'm sure you would like to answer that question.

**L. DEMPSTER:** That was another area that I was successful in getting some extra money in. So recognizing the increased cost of airfare, in particular, we did get an extra \$100,000 for that program.

We've actually, again, in listening with a big ear to the ground, as some of the things that we heard, and I'm not sure if you were in the meeting but MHA Brown and MHA Trimper, I met with them and there was some discussion around junior varsity program, centralized sporting events, Indigenous games, some thing that weren't covered. We've now sort of expanded the funding rationale a little bit, as a direct result of listening to the representatives on the ground.

**L. EVANS:** Yes, actually, I was at that meeting because –

**L. DEMPSTER:** Yes, I though you were.

**L. EVANS:** Yeah, we were trying to get some of the subsidy for travel that was taken away back a few years ago. It's really good to see.

Moving on to the next general question: Has the department seen improvements in public health as a result of the harm reduction efforts taken by the action team, you mentioned earlier, in Happy Valley-Goose Bay?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Given the complexities around vulnerable populations and this

being directly related to health, I wouldn't want to misspeak and be quoted in *Hansard*, so that's a question I would leave for the Health Minister.

**L. EVANS:** So that leads to my second question: Do you have sort of a means to actually measure, I guess, improvements in public health in terms of harm reduction? Do you have any parameters, any indicators that you'll be measuring and following?

**L. DEMPSTER:** I'm quite certain that there are a number of indicators that Public Health – it's a pretty massive ship over in the Health and Community Services – use as indicators, but it's not something that I can speak to specifically as the Minister of Labrador Affairs.

**L. EVANS:** Okay, thank you.

What new initiatives can we expect to see in the upcoming year as a result of the community needs assessment conducted for the action team?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Well, housing is the lead on the file and you would have seen in the budget that this government is committed to making a substantive investment into a facility to go toward addressing some of the need that we're seeing right now in Central Labrador; a facility that will include supportive housing units, shelter and wraparound services. So plans are moving forward for that.

**L. EVANS:** Have you come up –

**L. DEMPSTER:** Substantive amount of work, I should say, gone into that across departments at the official level in particular.

**L. EVANS:** So the next question is I guess looking for an update on the work in the Town of Happy Valley-Goose Bay to build a new facility to bring together health, housing and supportive services under one roof. How is that work progressing?

**L. DEMPSTER:** So it is moving forward. There's been quite a lot done in terms of housing. Labrador Affairs officials recently sat down with the Town of Happy Valley and went through the design of the building. It's –

**L. EVANS:** Sorry –

**L. DEMPSTER:** No, that's okay.

**L. EVANS:** I just asked him, I wasn't sure about how much time I'm allowed so I didn't want to run out of time before.

**L. DEMPSTER:** So that work is progressing and the officials from Housing and from Labrador Affairs recently sat down with the town to go through the design of the building, to answer any questions they had. I'm only referencing that because it happened recently, but over the last number of months, they've been in the community and people in the community that had concerns or had questions had an opportunity a number of times to go to where those officials were set up and ask their questions and learn more about what's happening. So that work is progressing.

**L. EVANS:** Okay.

My colleague actually asked a couple of questions on the transient homeless population and the needs of the homeless transient populations and also the community. Also she mentioned some of the reports about crimes being common. That leads to my next question now. What's specifically is being done to address the transient population which is totally different than the homeless population and its impacts on the local residents?

**L. DEMPSTER:** So you're absolutely right and I did reference that earlier. There is a transient and there is a homeless. There are a number of people that may frequent the area that are not homeless but find themselves in that community year over year, in particular at certain times a year,

maybe when the weather is not as cold, et cetera. There are a number of initiatives ongoing.

From a public safety perspective, we're always concerned and I do say, and I say on the acute response team calls all the time, we're concerned about the public safety of everybody. So John and Jane Doe who has a house on 10 Street or the vulnerable population or the transient, we're concerned about safety for them, sometimes maybe even against themselves.

So we have the action team that's working on a number of initiatives toward this facility. We have the acute response team that's put funding into a number of different mechanisms around security, et cetera. We also have the Hub that the provincial government provides support for. They're in the Valley. Then we have an overflow at the Friendship Centre – sorry, at the Labrador Inn – because we've certainly not wanted to turn anyone away and end up with a tragedy or something, especially you know what our winters are like in Labrador.

**L. EVANS:** I was more thinking of – I think it's important to recognize the transient population as a vulnerable group that has needs and we need to make sure that they're safe, but, also, I think there has to be resources. I think that's what my colleague was also getting at.

The population, the resident population in Happy Valley-Goose Bay also is being impacted in a very, very negative way. We talk about crimes. We talk about residents not able to go out for their regular walks, leisure; they worry about their children.

I realize it's a balance, but I was just wondering is there any initiative there to try and reduce the transient population that's actually impacting the community of Happy Valley-Goose Bay in a sensitive manner – I will qualify it now.

**L. DEMPSTER:** You're absolutely right. It is a very, very, very complex file and I can't tell you how many times people say to me something has to be done. I say I'm open to hearing what solutions are. I was in Winnipeg for a conference in March, saw and talked to people, the biggest numbers – homelessness have grown across this country.

Regarding the transient, I want to say that we have an ongoing relationship with the Indigenous leaders and I know that leadership in some of those isolated communities, whether it's Innu, whether it's Inuit, they really struggle. I have had meetings where they say we can't prevent our members from leaving our communities, our residents, and I totally respect as leaders that they can't. When I was in leadership in a municipality in my community, I couldn't prohibit people from leaving the community.

But one of the things that the Indigenous leaders have been doing, recognizing some of the issues that you outlined, is they have been putting on flights. A number of times when I've been in contact with the Indigenous leaders they have said we have sent flights, and you'll see the numbers go down for a period and then the numbers will sometimes come up again.

Around the public safety issue, I referenced earlier there's been times that we have had increased officers go in to the community. As a government, we've put extra resources into security. We recognize that it's not just money and extra resources being the answer. It's really important that we have wraparound supports, social workers, et cetera, the mobile crisis response – it is not just an officer, but a social worker.

So as I mentioned to MHA Ottenheimer, we will get you a list of the measures and things that we are doing, because it is quite a substantive list.

**L. EVANS:** I'm going to start the clock again.

**CHAIR:** Okay, we'll start the clock again.

Carry on.

**L. EVANS:** You talked about committing resources to try and deal with this issue because it is an issue that doesn't only impact the Lake Melville region. A large percentage of the transient population is from Natuashish. We do also have some homeless people from my district that are actually in Happy Valley-Goose Bay.

One of the questions that I just wanted clarification on is: In the last several years, how much additional money have you committed to RCMP and the Town of Happy Valley-Goose Bay in terms of their policing?

**L. DEMPSTER:** I'm not able to answer that. That would be a question for the Justice Minister, because he is the minister responsible for signing off on the cost for the RCMP operations in the province. I don't want to misspeak; that would be terrible.

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

The reason why I ask that is because I know you've been heavily involved in the homeless issue. I know you've been heavily involved in the resources, advocating and also what was committed from Justice. So the reason why I asked the questions, I thought you might actually have it on hand.

I'm just trying to go through the questions here that have already been asked by my colleague. Just looking at Supplies, I know it sounds a bit nitpicky but Supplies there in the section 2.1.01, Labrador Affairs, there's a revised value of an additional \$4,000. If you look at the line item of Supplies.

**L. DEMPSTER:** The extra \$4,000 was an overrun due to higher than anticipated supply costs. Some of that would have been

safety equipment for our trail inspector, the increased cost of gas, et cetera, and there was a cellphone purchase as well. They get old and sometimes you have to replace them.

**L. EVANS:** Yes. Thank you for that answer.

Just moving on to the next section now, 2.1.02, Medical Transportation Program. I know a lot of questions have actually been asked under this, so I won't repeat them. My colleague had asked about whether the department was considering revising MTAP to provide upfront assistance. You said that's being done. Upfront costs now are available, correct?

**L. DEMPSTER:** If Labradorians have an opportunity to avail of airfare, air travel costs upfront, yes.

**L. EVANS:** So my next question, that hasn't been asked yet: Is the department looking at increasing the cap for reimbursement of expenses for medical travel?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Well, we're very early into the review. The budget came down and then the House closed for a couple of weeks. I think we were all scattered but certainly right now we are reviewing everything. We're reviewing the number of users under both programs. Where is the biggest uptake? Is it air? Is it road? All these things right now are being looked at.

**L. EVANS:** Okay, thank you.

Just looking at the health roles now, being the critic for Health, I guess I learned quite a lot of things and a lot of times we're not really aware of a lot of the health issues, the transportation issues that people in the entire province, but also in Labrador, face. I've heard the phrase about MTAP as being the payer of last resort. I was kind of confused by that.

So there seems to be a huge need out there for people who are having to make multiple

trips for health conditions. Like if they need extensive treatment or they have a chronic condition. I try not to preach or sound like I'm preaching, and I always do, but in the province, ensuring that we have adequate medical care is so important. I mean, Minister, you know that yourself. We have families who have needs. We have friends who have needs and being from Labrador but also rural Newfoundland and Labradorians to travel.

Have you taken into consideration what you've been hearing about families having to fundraise so that they can access treatment? I was just wondering again, is there any plan to have total coverage of your medical travel? Because we've had people who, say, for example, a resident of Happy Valley-Goose Bay was flying back and forth to St. John's for medical care. Then, all of a sudden, it wasn't available, so he was actually having to travel to Halifax.

When he was travelling to Halifax, his travel, his hotel, his accommodations, everything was arranged for him. He didn't have to do that himself and he didn't have to pay anything upfront because it was all covered. Then all of a sudden, bad news; it was available again in St. John's. The lists had gone down. So then he had to start going back and forth to the province. Then he was out of pocket; he had to do everything. I was just wondering, with this review, is there any consideration to have MTAP cover all the transportation costs related to medical?

**L. DEMPSTER:** So just to your first point, clarity around payer of last resort, really what that means is we have people who have insurance. Because it's the program, it's not income tested, so you might have somebody with a good job that their employer provides insurance. So, obviously, it's really important that they use up their insurance first because the program does have a finite budget and you don't want to be taking that money from someone where there might be a tremendous need.

In terms of where the program is going, all I can speak to, right now is that I have recently inherited, as the minister, and that I have a million dollars to start with this review. I also want to comment that if you read some of the recommendations that came out of the – because the things you speak of are things I deal with daily as a Member of a rural area, myself.

Under the recommendations of the Health Accord, they looked at a lot of things happening virtually with other jurisdictions and it was, actually, in your district in Nain, in January, that I thought I must pitch this idea and use someone as a benchmark. I asked an elder gentleman how he would feel. I understand that you have to leave a community and come to see a doctor, but once you have your need established and it's being treated, do you always need to travel all that way for appointments, et cetera. I know that you represent an area where many times English might be the second language.

So I did ask a gentleman, how do you feel about the direction that we can be doing more around virtual care? He actually shared, in the full board room, that he's using virtual care and very much in support of it. In addition to that, I think one of the things that will help alleviate some of the hardship is, as we move forward, doing a better job with like a patient navigator. If someone has to come in May 1 for an appointment and then they have to come back May 5, can there be some way that you can just coordinate that in so that's one trip instead of two?

So these are some of the directions that I want to move in and then, on a whole, the broader government in health care certainly looking at – you would have seen in the budget – providing more services around virtual care to make it better for individuals and hopefully help alleviate some of the travel.

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

Anything that will alleviate the stresses on a patient would be greatly appreciated. So I do appreciate your comments, Minister.

My next question now, where MTAP is coming under Labrador Affairs and it seems like the rationale to seat it under Labrador Affairs is because of the huge use of the program for Labradorians because of the travel for health care. That being said, it's the lead in to my question, are there plans to open an MTAP office in Labrador? Based on Labrador because we have so many Labradorians travelling, will there be an MTAP office in Labrador to sort of serve the residents better?

**L. DEMPSTER:** Well, as you would appreciate, we're spread out over a pretty large, vast land in Labrador and I think no matter where we would put an office the rest of the area – even myself, my constituency office is in Forteau, and that's about 3½ hours away from where I live. Then I have communities that are a couple of hundred kilometres beyond that.

What I have found the most value in when I want to keep close to a program is having it very close to me, instead of having it at a distance. Me, as a minister, at the top decision-making level, I have found that when I have staff around me that I can access every single day that that's what worked for my style of leadership. Whether at some point down the road there will be an MTAP office in Labrador, that's not something that I can speak to today.

I do want to say when you look at the big numbers of MTAP, Labradorians are not the biggest user. We might, in some way, have the biggest challenges and we certainly have some unique challenges unknown to the rest of the province, but just by giving the numbers, the fact that we are only 6 per cent of the provincial population, we're not the biggest users of the program.

**CHAIR:** MHA Evans, would you like the clock started again?

**L. EVANS:** Yes, well, we'll start again.

**CHAIR:** Okay.

**L. EVANS:** Thank you.

Okay.

**CHAIR:** Go ahead.

**L. EVANS:** My fellow –

**CHAIR:** No more questions there?

**L. EVANS:** No, but if something comes to you, just raise your hand. We're all friends here.

**CHAIR:** That's so nice of you.

**L. EVANS:** Well, it's all about improving the services for Labrador. That's why we do have a Labrador Affairs Department created is because of the vast geographical needs, the cultural differences. It's important to have a Labrador Affairs office and also for them to be advocating and raising the issues that we bring forward to you. I mean, there's a lot of value in your jobs and I do appreciate the role the minister plays and every single one of you in the department.

Sometimes I don't sound like I appreciate it, but it's so important. Anyway, I'm going to move on to the next question. This is near and dear to my heart, too.

Has the Department of Labrador Affairs been involved with discussions surrounding the launch of the Heart Force One? Will you be applying any lessons learned from this program to how MTAP can run and actually improve?

**L. DEMPSTER:** I really am not comfortable speaking to something specifically around health, other than to say, again from my own experience as an MHA, the Heart Force One I think it's an incredible venture that we're on there. Taking people from the hospitals and bringing them to where the



specialists are and then bringing them back to recover in the facility that they originated from. I have heard from my constituency very positive feedback, so kudos to the Premier and the Health Minister on starting that, especially for places like Labrador. I would be remiss if I didn't mention the hip and joint, which is happening the same thing.

I'm not sure if they've been to Goose Bay. They've been to St. Anthony. They may have serviced some of your constituency, certainly a good number of mine where you have a whole team of specialists that flies up, does a bunch of hip and joint surgeries and then the team flies back the next day or in two days and it's really cutting down the wait-list that built up in this province during COVID. I've heard some wonderful feedback about it and, of course, a little bit of extra pride, because the guy leading that is from my district, Dr. Moores in L'Anse au Clair.

**L. EVANS:** Thank you, Minister.

I share your sentiment there on the program. I'm not that struck on the name, Heart Force One, but I have to say coming from Northern Labrador, it really was one of the biggest positive initiatives that I've seen. It's really made a difference for the quality of health care for our people that need the service. So I think it is a good initiative and really support it. I just can't say enough good things about it.

But looking the rest of my comments now, my fellow colleague had raised a question there about what was being done to reduce the costs for the North Coast. I know the minister did mention the *Kamutik W* and said that it's 100 per cent subsidized. I'm not going to hold you to that, the 100 per cent or 70 per cent or whatever the subsidy is for the *Kamutik W*, but I do want to ask the *Kamutik W* really, really has not addressed the issue of road access because road access was the reason I was told – and I know there's a lot of regret in

saying those words to me in June 2019 – the *Kamutik W* replaced the ferry and the coastal freight boat from the Island. We still have the burden of the extra transportation, the extra trucking.

Now, one thing I did say to the deputy minister of Labrador and Indigenous Affairs – at the time it was one department – and the Minister of Transportation and all his people, because they said stuff being sold in Goose Bay should be the same price as on the North Coast because it's travelling the same distance. But the retailers in Goose Bay sell to a much larger market. The Town of Happy Valley-Goose Bay is many, many times larger than any community on the North Coast so the volume is much greater. So the markup can be much less and still make a good profit. So, for us, we are really burdened with the removal of the freight boat, which I think my colleague was getting at.

So I was just wondering is there any work being done on trying to reduce the cost of food? It's not just the Northern stores. If you go to any of the stores in the community on the North Coast, food insecurity is a huge, huge burden that people have to bear. So I was just wondering is there anything being done other than subsidizing the *Kamutik W*?

**L. DEMPSTER:** I certainly do appreciate, MHA Evans, where you are coming from and, as I mentioned, the 40-year cost of living high around the country, I've seen real true hardship, even in my own district. I know you have the extra layer of isolated communities. I know what you speak of is a fact because we actually walked as a group down through the aisles of the Northern store and saw things like orange juice, \$24 for a bottle. The prices were staggering.

I can't speak to the specifics around the transportation and the nuances of that other than to say we have continued to see an increase in passenger and freight and people going out with their own vehicle and maybe buying in bulk, some that could. I

know the most vulnerable can't do that because I represent some of those in isolated communities as well.

We often hear the chicken being the example, but if a chicken is \$10 when it gets to Goose Bay and sold in the store for \$11, it seems to be sold for a lot more on the North Coast. I don't have an answer for that question. It's something that I've always kind of baffled me, but I will say that my colleague, Minister Abbott, and I, upon return from our trip to Nain in January, we really straightway, got together and we want to work together to see what we can do to help address some of the high cost of living in Torngat.

**OFFICIAL:** (Inaudible.)

**L. DEMPSTER:** Yes, that's right and we did – I was just reminded that we did write the Nunatsiavut Government and ask them to participate in that with us as we try to look at why the cost of food is so high in some of those communities.

**L. EVANS:** Thank you, Minister, for acknowledging, too, that most people in my communities that access the *Kamutik W* don't have a vehicle that they can put on the ferry and go to Goose Bay and buy their food, buy it in bulk. Because the cost of maintenance, inspections and all those sort of things, so most people don't have a car. So that's not a solution and I really appreciate the minister acknowledging that.

Also, the question has to be asked about anything being done to increase the access to nutritional foods. The northern health food subsidy, or whatever it's called, does not seem to be working. I know under the Health Accord, the social detriments of health identify access to nutritional food and access to adequate food is a huge indicator impacting people's health.

So is there anything being done to actually increase the access to nutritional foods in Northern Labrador and also in Black Tickle?

**L. DEMPSTER:** As I mentioned, the program is there. It's a pretty generous program. I don't know, MHA Evans, if some retailers are not availing of the program, but I've actually had many conversations with the MP for Labrador and I know that she helped lobby with me to have additional food items added to that. Then there was the harvester's something cheque where a harvester can get money for going out on the land to harvest food, et cetera.

So I don't know if the businesses are availing of the program but it's certainly there. I'm sure it would really help, especially at this high cost of living time.

**L. EVANS:** Thank you, Minister.

Anything to help in terms of access to nutritional foods would be greatly appreciated.

My last comment is not a question. I was just contributing my comments to the question that my colleague asked about Starlink as opposed to Bell. It's my understanding that the monies for the upgrades to the system, most of it was from the federal government with a portion being contributed from the provincial government, it was with Nunatsiavut and also the Innu entered into the agreement as well.

It's my understanding that Bell was selected over Starlink because Bell was able to offer a package that would help with phone upgrades. We have serious, serious problems with the phone communication, where in the communities a lot of times people lose their phone service and Bell Aliant has to actually go in and do the repairs. It was about upgrading the phone systems. Also, the package was able to include cellphone service, which we don't have in our communities right now. Also, a big factor was the ability to repair and support, which Starlink wasn't providing. That was my understanding of the agreement.

**L. DEMPSTER:** Great job, you elaborated better than I did, very good.

**L. EVANS:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** Okay. Are there more questions?

Clerk, can you recall the section so a vote can take place?

**CLERK:** 2.1.01 to 2.1.02 inclusive, Labrador Affairs.

**CHAIR:** Shall 2.1.01 to 2.1.02 inclusive carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

**SOME HON. MEMBERS:** Aye.

**CHAIR:** All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subheads 2.1.01 through 2.1.02 carried.

**CLERK:** Total.

**CHAIR:** Shall the total carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

**SOME HON. MEMBERS:** Aye.

**CHAIR:** All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

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

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

All those in favour, 'aye.'

**SOME HON. MEMBERS:** Aye.

**CHAIR:** All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

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

**CHAIR:** Well that ends our meeting for this evening.

I'd like to say a special thank you to all of you who were here this evening. Thank you to the minister and her officials. Great job, nice to see you all, some for the first time, even though I'm on your floor. I only use your bathroom.

Anyway, the next meeting for Estimates is Friday at 9 a.m. to consider the Estimates of the Department of Finance, Consolidated Fund Services and the Public Service Commission.

Before I ask for an adjournment, Minister, is there anything you'd like to say before we end?

**L. DEMPSTER:** I'll just say thank you to my two colleagues across the way. I think it was a very good Estimates session. Thank you for the very respectful tone and thank you to the Members that sat through. A big thank you to the people around me because we could never do the jobs that we do unless we had competent, capable staff that put a lot into this.

Thanks so much and have a good rest of the evening.

**CHAIR:** Any Committee Members like to say something?

**H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER:** Yes, I would like to also thank everyone here today. This has been very informative. I thank the minister and thank the team that she has. I thank my team. It's great. Thank you very much for your invaluable assistance in preparing me for this experience. I thank you as well, Lela, my colleague from Torngat Mountains.

Thank you.

**CHAIR:** Lela you're going to have the last word, anyway, go ahead.

**L. EVANS:** I'll be very, very brief. As I said earlier, there's a reason why there is a Department of Labrador Affairs, before it was part of Labrador and Indigenous Affairs, but the vast geography, the cultural differences, the isolation in terms of travel, medical travel, all those factors really shows the need for Labrador Affairs. So I really thank each one of you. Sometimes we don't recognize the effort that you put into it. Also, I do thank the minister for her answers and the details that she went into. Also, in terms of the trails, the Labrador trails that extra money will be greatly appreciated. So I want to thank you all.

**CHAIR:** Okay, thank you very much.

Motion for adjournment.

**D. BRAGG:** So moved.

**CHAIR:** Moved by Minister Bragg.

Thank you everyone. Have a great evening.

On motion, the Committee adjourned.