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Executive Council

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Honourable Paul Lane, MHA

GOVERNMENT SERVICES COMMITTEE

Executive Council

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Jim McKenna, MHA
Mark Butt, MHA
Lucy Stoyles, MHA
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Appearing:

Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Office

Hon. Helen Conway Ottenheimer, Minister
Victoria Woolworth-Lynas, Executive Director
Andrea McKenna, Deputy Clerk of the Executive Council
Nicole Abbott, Departmental Controller
Erin Sulley, Director of Multimedia and Training
Clair Bartlett, Executive Assistant

Office of the Chief Information Officer

Hon. Mike Goosney, Minister
Blair White, Chief Information Officer
Shawn Edwards, Assistant Deputy Minister, Infrastructure and Cybersecurity
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Executive Council

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Andrea McKenna, Deputy Clerk of the Executive Council
Caroline Orsborn, Assistant Deputy Clerk of the Executive Council
Nicole Abbott, Departmental Controller
John Tompkins, Assistant Secretary to Cabinet (Communications)
Erin Sulley, Director of Multimedia and Training
Dan MacKenzie, Private Secretary to the Lieutenant-Governor
Curtis Knee, Executive Assistant

Also Present

Michael King, MHA
Sherry Gambin-Walsh, MHA
Angelica Hill, Official Opposition Caucus
Emma Kannenberg, Official Opposition Caucus
Scott Fleming, Third Party Caucus

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

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Sherry Gambin-Walsh, MHA for Placentia - St. Mary's, substitutes for Jamie Korab, MHA for Waterford Valley.

The Committee met at 5:30 p.m. in the House of Assembly Chamber.

CHAIR (Dwyer): Order, please!

Tonight's meeting of the Government Services Committee reviewing Executive Council will follow a slightly different process due to the structure of the head of expenditure and the various ministerial responsibilities and officials.

We will begin this evening with Access to Information and Protection of Privacy. As the various subheads are called, debated and voted, there will be a short recess in between to transition between ministers and department officials.

Typically, introductions of both the Committee and the department officials are done at the beginning of a meeting. Tonight, we will proceed with the introductions of the Committee and the officials for the first subhead in a few moments. Following each recess, we will proceed with introductions of department officials only.

I will now announce the substitutions for this evening. Replacing the Member for Mount Pearl North is the Member for Burgeo - La Poile, Michael King; and the Member substituting for the Member for Waterford Valley is Placentia - St. Mary's MHA, Sherry Gambin-Walsh.

Just as a reminder for our department officials, when you're asked to speak, just wave your hand in front of your microphone, wait for the tally light. There's a little red light that will come on in front of you on the

desk before you proceed, then just say your name and position each time you speak for transcription purposes. Please do not make adjustments to the chairs; some people have issues with that. There are water coolers here in each corner of the Chamber and the glasses are provided next to the coolers on each side of the Speaker's Chair. So there are two down here and there are two back here.

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

M. KING: Michael King, MHA for Burgeo - La Poile.

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

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Sherry Gambin-Walsh, MHA for Placentia - St. Mary's.

E. KANNENBERG: Emma Kannenberg, Research Assistant with the Official Opposition.

S. O'LEARY: Sheilagh O'Leary, MHA for St. John's East - Quidi Vidi.

S. FLEMING: Scott Fleming, Researcher, NDP Caucus Office.

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

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

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

CHAIR: I now ask the department officials to introduce themselves, starting with the minister.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Helen Conway Ottenheimer, Minister of Access to Information and Protection of Privacy.

V. WOODWORTH-LYNAS: Victoria Woodworth-Lynas, Executive Director with the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Office.

N. ABBOTT: Nicole Abbott, Departmental Controller.

A. MCKENNA: Andrea McKenna, Deputy Clerk.

C. BARTLETT: Clair Bartlett, Executive Assistant to Minister Conway Ottenheimer.

E. SULLEY: Erin Sulley, Communications Branch.

CHAIR: Great. Thank you, everybody.

Before we start the Estimates review process, the Committee will now consider the minutes of the previous meeting.

If there are no errors or omissions, I ask for a mover for those minutes.

J. MCKENNA: So moved.

CHAIR: The minutes are moved by the Member for Fogo Island - Cape Freels.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Motion carried.

On motion, minutes adopted as circulated.

CHAIR: We will now proceed with the Estimates review process.

Once I ask the Clerk to call the first subhead for this head of expenditure, I will proceed to recognize the minister who will get 15 minutes for opening remarks. Then I will proceed to introduce the first responder or questioner from the Committee who will get 15 minutes for questions in the first round.

After the first round, questions will proceed in rounds of 10 minutes each, alternating between Members of the Committee.

I now ask the Clerk to call the first subhead.

CLERK (Russell): 2.3.01, Access to Information and Protection of Privacy.

CHAIR: Shall 2.3.01, Access to Information and Protection of Privacy, carry?

I now recognize the minister for opening remarks.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Thank you, Chair, and good evening, everyone.

I am pleased to appear before the Committee this evening to discuss the 2026-27 Estimates for the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy – ATIPP – Office with the Office of the Executive Council.

Just a little background about the ATIPP Office and what it does. It supports openness, transparency and accountability across government while safeguarding the personal information of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. The office administers and supports compliance with the *Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, 2015*, and it works with public bodies to ensure information is managed responsibly, securely and in accordance with legislation.

The office supports more than 400 public bodies in meeting their access and privacy obligations under the act. How does it do that? A number of ways: By providing advice and guidance related to access requests or privacy matters, developing and delivering training, developing guidance of policies, tracking statistics on access requests, reviewing programs and services to ensure privacy compliance and, finally, assisting in responding to privacy breaches.

The office is also responsible for supporting departments and responding to access to

information requests. There are 55 funded positions in the ATIPP office. This is important work which helps build public trust by making government information more accessible and by protecting people's personal information. It also helps public bodies meet their legal responsibilities under the legislation, under ATIPPA 2015.

I just also want to talk about a little of the logistics here for this evening. First of all, given the structure of the head of expenditures, we have multiple ministerial responsibilities and staff providing responses to various headings. We're going to have four ministers in headings tonight, so just given that there's going to be a number of recesses, several recesses while departmental staff switch in and out throughout the evening. I just want you to bear in mind that this is not a typical process, but this is how it is different this evening.

I just thank everyone for their co-operation and patience. I want to, again, thank the Government Services Committee and the Chair, all MHAs and their staff that are here, as well as the staff of the House of Assembly for being present and supporting us this evening.

Those are the extent of my remarks. So we're ready to take questions now.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Member for Burgeo - La Poile.

M. KING: Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank the minister for her opening remarks and being here with us this evening and, of course, her staff as well. I know this is a different kind of format for this Estimates for Executive Council, so we appreciate everyone's patience, of course, with us as well as we navigate through different ministers here and different questions.

As a new MHA, I've said this a couple of times; it's not my first Estimates meeting of this budget cycle but it's been an interesting process and I've certainly been enjoying this process and getting to ask direct questions to the staff and the ministers and hearing more about what's happening in a department and the direction that the government is going to go in, of course.

I certainly just want to say again, thank you for being here with us this evening. We look forward to this process tonight.

Minister, I would just start off by asking about the Salaries noted in the Estimates. Just over \$3.5 million was spent in 2025-26, which was a little north of \$1.5 million under budget. Can you explain that difference, please?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Yes.

That difference reflects savings due to hiring process timelines for new staff.

M. KING: Thank you, Minister.

You had mentioned that there were 55 funded positions in the ATIPP office. Are any of those positions vacant right now?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Yes, one moment please.

Currently there are, as I've indicated, 55 funded positions; 43 of which are permanent, 12 temporary and there are five vacancies.

M. KING: Are those vacancies in the temporary or full-time positions?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: We'll have to provide – oh, no, we do have that information.

M. KING: Quick work.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Thank you.

Yes, those vacancies, four of which are temporary and one is permanent. I can break those down for you if you'd like.

M. KING: Sure, yeah. Go ahead.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: So the permanent position, the title is a privacy analyst; and the four temporary, one is municipal access and privacy analyst, a practice advisor, a privacy coordinator and senior access to information coordinator.

M. KING: Perfect. Thank you, Minister.

In the Supplies line, we're seeing an increase of about \$43,700 from the last year. What is the reason for that?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: I'm sorry, could you repeat that question? I had a little bit of difficulty hearing you there.

M. KING: Certainly.

We're seeing an increase in Supplies of \$43,700 from last year. Can you explain the reason for that, please?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: The \$43,000 reflects overrun due to higher than anticipated software costs. If I may, I can give a little bit more of an explanation on that if you'd like?

M. KING: Please.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: The Supplies budget provides for general office supplies and specialized software required to support departmental operations. The revised for '25-'26 was higher than anticipated, primarily as a result of increased costs associated with redaction software. It should be noted that it is necessary for staff to have access to the most modern software to do this important work.

M. KING: Thank you for that, Minister.

Redaction software, is it possible to elaborate on how that works? Like, what is a redaction software?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: I'll defer that to my official.

V. WOODWORTH-LYNAS: Redaction software is specialized tools that are used by access to information coordinators to allow them to be able to review records and apply those redactions as required and note the specific exceptions in the legislation that are being used to redact that information.

M. KING: Okay, so just for my understanding – excuse me for this – they would still manually redact the documents, obviously, reviewing within the legislation that they have to provide those redactions. This tool just helps them kind of do that more efficiently. Is that what I'm understanding here?

V. WOODWORTH-LYNAS: That's correct.

M. KING: Perfect, thank you.

Under Property, Furnishings and Equipment, the budget and the Estimates are the same but there was a revision of \$20,000. Could you just explain that expenditure, please?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: So there's \$14,600 that reflects the overrun due to the office equipment requirements.

M. KING: Perfect. Thank you, Minister.

Minister, could you talk about the number of requests in the past fiscal year that have been received by the ATIPP office?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: With respect to the access-request statistics, demand for access to information continues to grow year over year. When we look at '25-'26, the total was 3,800. So that was the total. I can break them down in terms of departments versus public bodies. With respect to

departments, there were 2,250 and public bodies was 1,550, for a total of 3,800.

M. KING: Thank you, Minister.

On that point, I guess, I just ask this question – we see a lot of times that, obviously, there's a review when a request is denied. A lot of times those reviews come from municipalities. I guess, having the things in place that they need to do to provide information on these requests, it seems that sometimes that's lacking.

Is this office having any reviews of what supports that municipalities get? I know it's a lot of challenges for rural communities, especially with small staff having to fill these requests. Could you elaborate on that a little bit, please, Minister?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: With respect to the support that's provided to public bodies and municipalities, I just want to, first of all, say that we provide direct guidance and advisory support for departments and all government agencies and municipalities. There are two municipal analysts and that provides support as well.

M. KING: Perfect, thank you.

Looking at the number of requests that have been received, obviously, that is a significant amount and, as you indicated, it's probably increasing over time.

What is the office looking at from a recruitment and retention kind of perspective from those positions that are vacant, especially, to make sure that there's a full complement of staff to be able to provide that support to the municipalities and anybody else who works – most every department, if I'm correct, has an ATIPP coordinator that would be responding to requests.

Can you elaborate on some recruitment and retention efforts that you're putting in place to make sure that support is there?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Well, I first want to say, and I'll address that issue with respect to the recruitment and retention, but I think it's important to talk about the new structure of the office, why the ATIPP Office structure works as well as it does, because there are many key benefits now, as we see from the structure, which allows for consistency, expertise development and reduced duplication across government.

When we look at five vacancies, when you look at the fact that there are 55 funded positions, I think it's safe to say that it's a pretty healthy staff complement, but the ATIPP Office structure has changed and now there's a centralized expertise which really leads to more consistent, high-quality decision making. There are so many other benefits like improving timeliness and coordination of responses across government. It reduces duplication of effort in individual departments. It strengthens privacy protection through specialized knowledge and supports better data tracking. There are many other benefits, but what the focus is now is on increased support through municipal and analyst and practice advisors.

I may just divert to Victoria to just elaborate further with respect to the vacancies but that would be my interpretation.

We're in a very strong position with respect to the staffing, would that be safe to say?

V. WOODWORTH-LYNAS: Yes, I would agree, Minister. We've just recently concluded the major hiring with this new ATIPP Office structure, so there are, as you noted, five vacancies currently. We'll continue to review what the resource demands are within the office and assess whether or not those positions will require to be filled going forward.

M. KING: Thank you so much for the information.

The new ATIPP structure you're talking about, when was that kind of created and how did that come about? Was that an internal decision or like how –?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: It's my understanding that was announced in *Budget 2022*, with respect to the new structure, and it was finalized in December of 2024.

M. KING: Okay, perfect. Thank you.

The ATIPP coordinators within the department, are they included in the 55 employees in this office?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Yes, they are.

M. KING: Okay, perfect. Thank you.

With the little bit of time I have left here at the beginning, Minister, I want to talk about the announcement for the statutory review of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

How is this review being funded? Is there a funding pot for this review?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Well, first of all, the ATIPP Office will fund that. I just, at this opportunity, would like to elaborate a little bit about that.

M. KING: Please.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: I think it's important to put this on record.

The review is anticipated to begin this spring, with the final report and recommendations provided to government by the end of January 2027. As you indicate, the statutory review was announced today with our Committee chair being Keri-Lynn Power.

That's just in terms of background, but that would be funded through the ATIPP Office.

M. KING: Thank you, Minister.

Is this review required by legislation?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Yes, it is.

M. KING: Okay, perfect. Thank you.

I'm assuming there will be a Terms of Reference for this review. Is that Terms of Reference going to be publicly available?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: That would be, yes.

M. KING: Okay.

Was that a part of the announcement today, or no?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Well, I think that's inherent in the announcement that that would happen, yes.

M. KING: Perfect. Thank you, Minister.

In the little bit of time I have left, from an ATIPP perspective, when we look across the country, especially, and the importance of access to information. Ontario is certainly in the spotlight these days from the Freedom of Information act; they've made some changes in their province.

Minister, I'll give you the opportunity, I guess, to – when you look at those changes, it's concerning a little bit. Obviously, it's not in this province right now, but it's concerning from a perspective of the public being able to see information and having that information readily available.

Is this something that would be a part of the review? Is this something you're looking at? Are you aware of those changes in Ontario? What is your opinion of those? I just kind of want to give you an opportunity to expand on that a little.

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: I'm just going to talk a little bit about the Office of

the Information and Privacy Commissioner in relation to the ATIPP Office just for clarification.

We know that the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner is an oversight body. People can make complaints to the OIPC to investigate ATIPP requests that they feel were not handled properly. The OIPC can also investigate allegations of the mishandling of personal information as well. As well, the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner can advocate for access to information and for increased privacy in government bodies.

What I can say is that we have one of the most robust privacy and access regimes in Canada. I can say that our Privacy Commissioner has expressed satisfaction with the structure of the role. Her role differs, from what I understand, from most jurisdictions. The Privacy Commissioner here in our province operates on more of an ombudsman model, the judgments of the Commissioner are adjudicative in nature and, therefore, enforceable.

But, again, I would say it's accurate to say that we have one of the most robust privacy and access regimes and it's leading in this country.

M. KING: Thank you, Minister.

One quick question before my time runs out that I should have asked in the beginning. Will we be provided a copy of the briefing binder for our access to information?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: Yes, we will.

M. KING: Thank you very much. I should have asked that one first.

Thank you, Chair. That's all for me.

CHAIR: Thank you.

The Chair recognizes the Member for St. John's East - Quidi Vidi.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the minister and staff and everybody who's attending here to answer these questions. I really appreciate your time and your expertise.

Some of the questions certainly have been already asked by my colleague, MHA King, so I'm going to move on to my next question here which is about the workload increasing, certainly for employees who handle the ATIPP files and, of course, that leading to longer processing times and increasing failures to answer requests in the legislated time frames.

Do you have any information as to what the gap is between the current number of employees and the number needed across all departments and agencies to handle the current workload?

V. WOODWORTH-LYNAS: As we just indicated, we've just finalized the last round of hiring. So we're in the process now of monitoring what the timeliness and the implications would be associated with that, but our hope is that we will now continue to see timely access to information. That is a really critically important thing for us.

S. O'LEARY: Wonderful. Okay, thank you.

Right now, I believe it's only core government departments that post previously answered ATIPP requests online. Many agencies and Crown corporations, such as the NLHS and NLHC, get lots of requests and many of those are multiples for the same information.

One way to cut down on ATIPP employees' workload could be to publish these requests online. Is that something you could do?

H. CONWAY OTTENHEIMER: I'm going to talk a little bit about the online posting as well, in answering your question.

Currently, we do this work for government, but that is something that we can certainly look at in terms of reviewing. I just do want to, for the benefit of people, provide a little bit of background as to what we do right now, currently, with respect to the completed requests on the webpage that was launched in 2013.

Since the launch, departments have received and responded to approximately 17,000 general ATI requests. Of the requests eligible for posting, more than 12,000 have been posted online. Requests volumes have increased significantly, about 300 a year in 2013 versus approximately 2,200 in '25-'26.

Before posting, every request is reviewed by experienced ATIPP office staff to confirm requests are eligible for posting and to add any needed redactions of personal information, third party information or copyright material.

Finally, I just want to say with respect to this, the ATIPP office has assigned resources to the posting of complete requests but, as indicated, we can look into that too in terms of other than government bodies.

S. O'LEARY: Okay, thank you.

I believe that's it in that department.

Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Member for Burgeo - La Poile.

M. KING: All good, Chair.

Thank you.

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

CLERK: 2.3.01, Access to Information and Protection of Privacy.

CHAIR: Shall 2.3.01, Access to Information and Protection of Privacy, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subhead 2.3.01 carried.

CHAIR: We will now take a brief recess to transition to the next subhead.

Recess

CHAIR: Order, please!

We'll now resume the meeting of the Government Services Committee reviewing Executive Council.

I now ask the department officials to introduce themselves, starting with the minister.

M. GOOSNEY: Thank you, Chair.

Minister Goosney, Minister of OCIO and Government Services.

B. WHITE: Hi, good evening. My name is Blair White, Chief Information Officer.

N. ABBOTT: Nicole Abbott, Departmental Controller.

S. PUTT: Susan Putt, ADM for Corporate and Strategic Services.

A. ROBERTS: Andrew Roberts, ADM for Design and Delivery.

S. EDWARDS: Shawn Edwards, ADM for Infrastructure and Cybersecurity.

T. NEWHOOK: Tina Newhook, Director of Communications.

N. IOVANOV: Nicolle Iovanov, Media Relations Manager.

C. DROVER: Craig Drover, Executive Assistant to Minister Goosney.

CHAIR: Thank you.

I ask the Clerk now to call the next subheads.

CLERK: 4.1.01 to 4.3.02, Office of the Chief Information Officer.

CHAIR: Shall 4.1.01 to 4.3.02 inclusive, Office of the Chief Information Officer, carry?

I now call on the minister for his opening remarks.

M. GOOSNEY: Thank you, Chair.

Just for clarification, does this run out the clock because it's lengthy?

Bobbi, go ahead.

CLERK: (Inaudible.)

M. GOOSNEY: Okay, I just didn't want to take away anyone's time.

CHAIR: You can also summarize.

M. GOOSNEY: Okay, that would be a good idea.

Thank you, everyone, for coming this evening.

Hello, everyone, it's a pleasure to be here this evening with my executive team to highlight the work of the OCIO and how we're supporting government operations while improving the services for residents and businesses across Newfoundland and Labrador. OCIO plays a central role in delivering secure, resilient IT and information management services that enable the day-to-day work of government.

At its core, our focus is simple: services that are easy to access, straightforward to use and clear for people to understand. Our team – key to our success – work behind the scenes 24-7 to ensure critical government infrastructure is available to enhance government processes using technology to drive innovation and improve how we deliver services in an increasingly technological online environment. Residents and businesses expect fast, reliable and accessible services, and we are responding to those expectations.

At any given time, the OCIO is advancing a significant portfolio of government-wide projects focusing on ensuring the technology needed is available 24 hours a day to help residents and businesses, improving speed of delivery, strengthening capacity and building a more responsive and sustainable technology environment. This work reflects the commitment in our platform to enhance government, reduce barriers and deliver simpler, faster and better services to the people of Newfoundland and Labrador.

At the same time, the OCIO also supports core operations across government, managing more than 10,000 devices in the fleet; 2,000 mobile phones; and approximately 120,000 service requests each year, ensuring government can operate effectively every day.

Cybersecurity remains a top priority for this department. We continue to strengthen our defences to protect government systems and the personal information of residents and businesses. Through partnerships with organizations such as the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security and Public Safety Canada, we are enhancing our ability to prevent, detect and respond to evolving threats. We are committed to continuous improvement in how we safeguard sensitive information to protect personal data and maintain public trust.

Through the cybersecurity team we are also strengthening awareness and resilience while guiding the responsible use of emerging technologies including artificial intelligence.

We recognize both the opportunities and risks of AI. While Newfoundland and Labrador continues to build strong expertise and talent in this area, recent incidents have underscored the need to proceed carefully and responsibly. OCIO has skills in this area and continues to expand this new core knowledge. That's why the OCIO is leading a government-wide review of AI, examining several areas such as governance, policy and whether legislative updates are needed to ensure a coordinated, responsible approach.

I have had discussions with the federal minister of AI, as the federal government works on an AI strategy for our country which is a part of our own review. The review builds on steps already taken to strengthen awareness and oversight of AI, including updates through procurement and contract processes. The role of employee training is part of this review and the expectation is that AI training will be ongoing on a regular basis.

For example, to date, OCIO has delivered over 50 in-person training sessions to gauge interest and hear questions employees may have on artificial intelligence use and to ensure their understanding of the benefits and risks associated with this technology. A team is actually on the road in Central and Western Newfoundland this week, as we speak, as part of this education. Our focus is clear, ensuring AI works for us while maintaining strong oversight, accountability and public trust.

As this rapidly evolving field continues to develop, we will take the time to get this right, aligning with national efforts by the federal government and the Senate to

ensure Newfoundland and Labrador is well positioned moving forward.

Thank you.

I'm happy to take questions at this time, Chair.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair recognizes the hon. Member for Burgeo - La Poile.

M. KING: Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank the minister and his staff for being here with us this evening for the Estimates process, of course, an important process of the budgetary process itself.

I know how important this office is to the security of our systems here in government. I'm pretty techy myself but I've had to call OCIO a number of times to use their services and they've been exceptional help and very efficient. I just want to say thank you to all the staff who work in that office for the work that they do to support so many departments and public offices across the province.

Minister, I'll get right into it at 4.1.01, Corporate and Strategic Services, underspent in Salaries last year by about \$125,300. Can you explain that discrepancy, please?

M. GOOSNEY: Chair, great question. Thank you to the Member Opposite.

There would have been some lateral shifts in positions. Oftentimes, I've noted in my short term in government when we're looking at numbers and budget reviews, we're all aware of sometimes there are vacancies or retirements. That number would be due to that and then mostly, I guess, throughout the year, and in any budget that would be fluid.

Thank you, Chair.

M. KING: So were there any vacancies last year?

M. GOOSNEY: Yes, there were vacancies, but I will say that staff do a tremendous job in this evolving industry. It's a very challenging market, obviously. Through the colleges, universities, I like to think a lot of times if you look around the province and you hear who's who and who's where and why, our province is known. It seems like sometimes we get someone here for a visit, a partner comes here, it's all part of it, but we're going to continue to educate and promote and advertise that we are here and we're looking to hire for any vacant locations.

Obviously, our demographics, as you would know in your district and my district, being farther from the city, that sometimes it can be a little more difficult but there has been some change in structures to salary and to fill vacancies. That's where we are right now.

M. KING: Minister, I'll probably phrase it this way: How many positions are in the Office of the Chief Information Officer and how many of those positions are temporary and permanent? How many of the total is vacant?

M. GOOSNEY: So I can give you a number, again, like I said, it's fluid, but to the budget previously when we came into government there were 350 roles within; 290-plus were hired due to some vacancies, some attrition, I guess, retirement, but I can follow up. We can get the specifics and the exact numbers per person as we sit here, afterwards, if that's good for you?

M. KING: That would be great to be provided.

I guess I should have, once again, asked this at the top. I forgot the last time. The briefing binder, can we get a copy of the briefing binder, as well, after the Estimates period?

M. GOOSNEY: Absolutely.

M. KING: Thank you.

In the Professional Services line, that looks new compared to the budget in 2025. There was about \$176,000 spent in the revised and it's estimated again. Can you explain what that spending was for?

M. GOOSNEY: Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to pass that to the deputy minister.

B. WHITE: That is a movement of a contract that was in a different branch. We moved it over to this branch just for realignment as an existing contract. OCIO has many contracts for the technology, and we've done an exercise to align them to the correct branch. That's what that is.

That's an existing expense this year that we've moved over. We moved it over during the year and we'll keep it over there next year, too.

M. KING: Thank you.

What is that contract? What are those services for?

B. WHITE: That one is an industry, knowledge sector, expertise contract. Like, the industry is changing radically all the time and some advisory services that come with an outside company and that's what that contract is.

M. KING: What subhead was that contract under previously?

B. WHITE: I'll just pass it to Susan. Do you know exactly which one it was?

S. PUTT: It would be under Design and Delivery, Professional Services in the previous year.

M. KING: Sorry, can you just say that again?

S. PUTT: It would be under Design and Delivery, Current, under Professional Services, so 4.2.01.

M. KING: Perfect, thank you.

Property, Furnishings and Equipment, we underspent and the budget is decreased even further for this year. So what type of things are purchased from this subhead and why are we reducing that expense?

M. GOOSNEY: Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to pass that over to the deputy minister.

B. WHITE: Sure, thank you.

Those are general expenses, the basics of running and office, and we've moved those around a bit. Obviously, we're not spending as much as we needed, so we reduced it again this year. It's general day-in, day-out supplies, things like that, in an office setting.

M. KING: Thank you very much.

Minister, I want to talk a little bit about the review on government's AI policies and pilots, given the Premier's recent comments regarding AI use by the provincial government. You had mentioned that a little bit in your opening remarks. I want to give you an opportunity to kind of expand on that review, what it's looking like.

You touched a bit on there were 50 in-person training sessions; there are education sessions happening right now. Is that a part of the review? Has the review started? Can you just elaborate on the review a little bit, please?

M. GOOSNEY: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for the question.

When I came into this role, as many would know, there was a policy for AI that was created prior to my time. As we sit here, everything is always about how rapid this

technology advances. I've tasked staff – and I will say they're doing great work – to do a much more stringent review on AI.

It's not long ago and we're all very aware of what happened in Tumbler Ridge and we spoke today in the House about the use of social media, but the reality is that AI has been around for a lot of years. I'm not so sure who knows and who doesn't it know it, but since 1940 – that's when it was given its birth – there were a lot of governments around the world that had put a lot of funds into such, more so for protection and military, but we are here and it's in our midst of society. I mean, you can use it right there on your own device.

We want to make sure that we get this right. I know it will come from pressure. I've been asked by media quite often; where is the review? It is ongoing, but I want to get it right. I'm not here to do knee-jerk reactions to find out that we made mistakes that could affect people negatively. Once that is out and we feel that it's secure, we'll present that publicly.

M. KING: Is OCIO undertaking that review itself or are you getting an external contract? How does that review work – terms of reference?

M. GOOSNEY: Thank you, Chair.

No, we have top-level employees that are well up to speed, very knowledgeable, and they're dedicated to seeing this review through. Obviously, with any review, you go through other jurisdictions, within other departments, whether it's private or public, and we want to make sure that we get it right.

The biggest thing for me, as minister, as I spoke earlier, I've had one meeting with the hon. Minister Solomon, and the feds are showing a great working relationship to say, hey, we're open. There are some things I think we can lead on; I think there are things that we can bring forward that will also add

to other policies throughout other provinces, and broader than that, and something to be proud of. Currently, it's in-house and it's also working with counterparts across the country and our federal counterparts.

M. KING: In my last seconds here, in response to some instances with AI, I know the Premier had said recently – it's not a direct quote, but something along the lines of – it shouldn't be used. You know, we saw a graphic recently that was used. So is there any policy shift when it comes to AI in government right now or is the review just happening and there's been nothing changed at this moment?

M. GOOSNEY: At this moment, it would be under the current policy that government has. There has been numerous discussions to talk about how we evolve in this modern technology and the rapid speed of it. But there are a lot of eyes on this, I will say, a lot of time spent.

Obviously, it's the protection of our most vulnerable because that's who could be affected by it negatively. As you said, it's been brought up in social media. The focus is more towards how we use it to design, not photoshop apps or whatnot that they're almost separate from. But they're also included in the review.

M. KING: Thank you, Chair.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for St. John's East - Quidi Vidi.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister Goosney, and, of course, the Executive staff who are here to answer these questions. I really appreciate your time and energy.

Unlike my colleague here who declares his techy aspect, I will say as an artist working primarily in analog, I'm very happy to have the expertise, certainly of this department and many others at my fingertips here. I begrudgingly go into the technological world

but, of course, like you mentioned, Minister, we absolutely have to use it. It is the here and now and we had a really healthy discussion in the House today about social media. I appreciate that dialogue, so that was great.

I do have a question here and I'll ask it, with the context that I'm coming from a slightly different vantage point, not about necessarily security in terms of what goes out, but I'll ask the question and go a little further with it.

Why is the government choosing to make the social media post content using AI, and sometimes with poorly generated images? I ask the question and, of course, you've already referenced it, about training and policy that we're going into. But my vantage point, certainly, in asking that question is about human resource. Because, as the critic for TCAR as well and as an artist in the community, that's people's livelihoods and that's jobs that we're talking about.

My interest here is ensuring, not only safety for the users and that aspect as well – we do know that we do need to use it – but the aspect of losing jobs in communities, especially in a time where Newfoundland and Labrador really needs to be looking at how we can support the workforce, I think is a really, really important question, so I wanted to ask it kind of again.

If you could just detail a little bit further about the training that is happening and the moves towards developing policy that impacts the local sphere here.

Thank you.

M. GOOSNEY: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the Member opposite, great question.

I won't burn up the clock on talking about how we've spoke numerous times over the years about watching it advance and where

we go and where we came from. The reality is, I've received numerous calls, emails, texts, various conversations, not only while I'm in St. John's but in the district, it's a balance to promote technology but also how do we do our best not to create a fear that we're going to look at job elimination.

I think that's what your question is specifically. I get that completely from a labour standard, but contradictory to what a lot of people would think, if you go back to DOS or the early – I call it control, alt, delete, shut it off – term of computers when I started to learn, there was a fear then and there's a fear now, but it's never evolved into less jobs.

I will say there has never been a conversation around any table in my term, while I've been here in this short seven months, of ever finding ways to cut jobs; more so the other type of conversation. As technology advances, I think it's fair to say, and you'll see it, I mean, prior to my time, I reviewed budgets, I was probably one of the people who should have been out fishing instead of fishing through government documents to see where they were, but it is a reality that there's a balance.

I'll be the first to say in this department and in this government, there's never been a conversation of eliminating jobs. I think you'll see sometimes more of transitional piece. I think where you're going, because I know your background as an artist and how important it is, that you physically have to take that brush and you physically have to apply that paint and you physically have to use your own creative mind and physically transfer something to a document, whether it's a spreadsheet or a painting, but I'm confident in saying there won't be a focus to reduce. I think it's more how we equally balance where we go and training people to learn. Back to your education, it's not about how do you just put up a post on a social media site; there's so much advancement.

I've learned quite a bit. I've read a lot. I'll never proclaim to be a professional, but AI technology is in multiple – I know there were discussions when speed cameras were brought into other jurisdictions, way before they came into Newfoundland and Labrador, from, I do believe, the RCMP union, wondering now all of a sudden, we have AI and digital cameras that allows it to take pictures, am I going to lose my job?

The reality is, as we know where the justice system is and how much resource – we all talk about how we need to keep fulfilling those positions, I think there's a bigger conversation, or I should say an education, on that they can work in continuity.

If anything, as technology ramps up, I think it may go the other way. I think working together in this Legislature like this and answering these questions could take some of those fears. If there's anyone like myself, where you were probably one of two or three other people that used to watch this place online before we were given the honour to get here, I think they need to be reassured that it's not the Walmart Effect, if that summarizes it for you.

Thank you.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you, Minister, for that.

I'm just going to enlarge on that a little bit. Of course, we're talking about creativity versus a generic kind of quick fix, and not necessarily a focus on losing jobs that you already have existing, but about the potential for contracting out, which, of course, government does on regular basis, for the kind of creativity that a district like mine in St. John's East - Quidi Vidi has, which constitutes the A1C district which has the highest per capita of artists in the country in terms of concentration.

This is something that I hear loud and clear from my constituents on a regular basis. It's not an aspect of we're not going to use AI;

it's about appropriate use of AI in a technological world.

Obviously, this is going to be an ongoing conversation and we'll continue on from there. I just wanted to clarify that it's not my concern about losing jobs, necessarily, within the department here, because I'm sure you've got more than enough work to do; however, it is really a grave concern in the community that I serve. I just wanted to reference that.

Thank you, Chair.

M. GOOSNEY: Can I?

S. O'LEARY: Oh, yes, certainly.

M. GOOSNEY: Thank you, Chair.

Again, that all comes around the labour side, of course, and that's another part of my other portfolio. Obviously, being involved in trade unions and unions throughout pretty much my entire working career, sitting on all three sides, I've always sat on the bargaining side, on the other side and the government side. The expertise we have here – as you know, when you're in the municipal level, you're always looking at your budget and saying, what can we do in-house? I would be willing to put this team up against any team across this country and there will be no chat as long as I'm in this to how do we sub-source it?

Just in retrospect from where it was before to where it is now, they've taken on a lot of work that was contracted out. So that has kind of dissipated and I'd like to stay on that path.

Thank you, Chair.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you, Chair.

Just one more question here. What specific initiatives are currently being undertaken to improve cybersecurity within government? If

you can cite some specifics around how you're trying to target that.

M. GOOSNEY: Thank you, Chair.

This is my first Estimates and I've seen this kind of alter, but I'd like to take the first part of the question, if that's okay, and then pass it to my deputy.

CHAIR: Yes.

M. GOOSNEY: Again, since coming into this role, I've met with the Privacy Commissioner within our province. I've met with the head of cybersecurity. I've met with the minister of – they call him AI technology – every portfolio seems to come with a different name. I take it extremely, extremely serious. This is extremely serious. It's a modern world that we live in.

I physically went through pretty much every part of this building on tour with these fine folks to, what they would say, bringing you to the bowels of what we have for technology, where we are, where the cybersecurity employees are located, how does it work 24-7, because we all know that bots, they work 24-7 for hacking.

When you talk to some of the federal counterparts and you get to tell them those intricate parts that this province and this administration did, as they did prior to me, I'm new, but there has been a lot of good work before and there will be a lot of good work into the future.

Blair, if you want to speak to that.

B. WHITE: Sometimes you'll see these things or your laptop rebooting and asking to do funny things and it can be inconvenient to do as an end-user; quite often that is something additionally going on to these devices to add security. That's a continuous thing that we do 24 hours around the clock.

You may have experienced some simulated phishing go in your inbox to ensure that the workforce is paying attention and aware of malicious things that could end up in an inbox. We do simulated attacks against ourselves, against our own infrastructure, and sometimes we'll hire a company to simulate an attack against us at a very technical level.

I would describe a significant amount of our time is going in right now to the evolution of AI, specifically onto the cybersecurity world. There are advancements going on in that world and we're spending a lot of time understanding that it's a very collaborative discussion across our country at the government level, as well as the vendor community is very collaborative right now, and there are people in the room specifically technical on this.

There's a key piece of work going on in the world right now called Glasswing and we're heavily engaged in that to understand how do we ensure that we keep the resilience that we have today at a cyber standpoint on this new evolution of AI.

Those would be the examples that I could point to that we're doing day in and day out. To echo the minister's comments, this is not a 9-to-5 job.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for Burgeo - La Poile.

M. KING: Thank you, Chair.

Kind of elaborating on that point that my colleague made on cybersecurity, what happened or is happening to the Cyber Security Office? I believe it was its own subhead before, but it seems that that's changed now. So could you elaborate on what's happening with the Cyber Security Office?

M. GOOSNEY: Coming in, again, when you get to see the structures and you want to know if – maybe sometimes you'll see a lateral shift, how do you utilize salaries to their best potential? In this case – correct me if I'm wrong, Blair – there are discussions. I'm not here to make knee-jerk reactions, but when you look at your staffing structure, and in this case, it was a lateral shift, that division, it feels safe to say, is still well staffed.

Sometimes when you move employees to one department or another, as you would know, you can get highlights that you've never seen and expertise and strengths, and I think that's where we went with this. As always, it's up for review to see where we are in staffing, and I think right now we're well staffed.

Thank you, Chair.

M. KING: So are you saying the staff that was in the Cyber Security Office is just integrated into the Infrastructure and Cybersecurity? Like, was there any elimination of positions or anything or just a complete integration?

B. WHITE: What you see now is 4.3.01, Infrastructure and Cybersecurity, the Cybersecurity Office is merged into that branch and services continue. That function is heavily engagement out into the Crown corporations, do a lot of engagement with the federal government and then that's a conduit. So when the federal government on a random Tuesday night calls us at 8 at night and say there's something very serious going on in the world, they'll call us and we will engage with all the Crown corporations.

We also do some engagement all the way out into the private industry. We will bring in some experts on cybersecurity and have an event and private and public comes, so everyone is there and all the same budget is moved over into there.

M. KING: Thank you, Chair.

With the integration, I guess there could be a little bit of an assumption made – and I'm not trying to assume anything but looking at the focus of cybersecurity, integrating that, it kind of takes away from having its own little office. I know there was a lead role, lead public servant, I think, was moved to a different department.

Is that role still within the division? I know you talked about it a little bit more, but could you elaborate more on your focus for cybersecurity and reassuring the public that it's still being taken very seriously?

M. GOOSNEY: Thank you, Chair.

Did you want to elaborate on that, Blair, if you could, please.

B. WHITE: Sure.

The one movement was one of the executive positions was moved out of the OCIO, so we've merged, but then once you go below that ADM, then the function of the engagement Cybersecurity Office sits right there at the director level for all of its outside engagement.

There are two main functions within that, so the engagement, education session, the phishing emails you see, but heavily focused on the public sector. Then there's another section under ADM, Shawn Edwards, behind that is day in, day out.

Those are the things that I talked about earlier, the upgrades to the laptops and phones that you see continuously going on, the monitoring of systems around the clock. If something burps in the middle of the night, we focus on that. The testing of ourselves and that part of what's called Infrastructure and Cybersecurity is the group that's heavily involved in the AI discussions right now into that world.

It's ever-evolving technology. What are we doing today? I would describe those as the main things we do today. We get alerted quite often, the numbers – somebody will tell us late at night there's something going on. A lot of times it's the CSIS of our country, the Cybersecurity Intelligence agency, or it could be a vendor. Last calendar year 2024, we had about 21,000 times somebody gave us something to investigate. Last year, that number was over 40,000 times that they gave us something to investigate.

Those decisions are made daily, as to if that is something that needs to be done 10 on a Saturday night or if that thing can wait until Monday morning. The volume certainly goes up, and I can use similar numbers when it comes to attacks on government daily in through an email system. Those numbers are in the millions.

M. KING: Perfect, thank you for that information.

I'm just going to bounce around a little bit, because we want to make sure we get some important questions answered. There was an IT outage in East Block for network upgrades; can you tell us more about those upgrades?

M. GOOSNEY: Thank you, Chair.

I think I can speak to that. I want to give factual answers here; I don't want to talk just in round.

Specifically to the East Block or any outages, as I said previously, when I came in, I liked to see – I call it the taste, touch and feel effect, rather than just sit in here in the House and not knowing exactly what I'm talking about when I'm speaking about it and how I'm talking to it and what it is.

I don't know if you'll notice them here but you'll see in the ceilings around Confederation there are a lot of these little boxes with green lights – well, we want

them to have green lights on them – they’re encompassing because of the effect – using the word “neglect” could sound strong, but it’s no different than a lot of buildings in any level of government. Sometimes the focus wasn’t there to keep things upgraded.

As we are in this era, you’ll see, obviously, there are some increases in budget, which is all public documentation. That’s high-valued money spent and it allows for what I call the click-and-scroll era. There have been a lot of late-night calls with myself and the deputy, Blair, just, again, knowing what things are going on, not only in the province or in this city, but throughout North America and worldwide that affects our province and the operations of government obviously.

That’s something that you’ll see ongoing, like any maintenance, but I do feel that the more time and the more investment into this now, as in your area and my area, it’s not the same conversation as continuity or connectivity of cellular service, but it’s a constant upgrade. I would expect more. Not all the time but, as a tradesperson myself and a pipefitter specifically, an aging building like this, you’re going to run into a lot of concerns with abatement and asbestos.

Never would I, as the minister, allow or be known to see that work get done without safety precautions put in first that protects the employee. Again, as a steamfitter, pipefitter, specifically, a lot of these buildings are full of asbestos, this one specifically is. That’s a lot of questions that I asked because when you look, how do I get that light to fix that light to this switch is a lot of complications that you’ll see. Sometimes it’s lot more costly when you’ve got to remove walls, abate things.

There’s modern technology now and it’s becoming more – I’d like to see it advance as quick as AI is, but there are tools now that contractors are starting to use that allow you to get from one end to another without having to tear something up.

In the case of this Confederation Building, it’s still a challenge ahead of us to keep continuing the upgrading. Once we get to a point where we feel that the system is secure and that technology that’s here is secure and it’s working to how it is, I think it’s an improvement that has got value for, not only the politicians or anyone, but all Members and societies.

That’s where that is, if that answers your question.

Thank you, Chair.

M. KING: Thank you.

Minister, can you confirm that the government is committed to maintaining the MyGovNL system and, if so, are there any new planned initiatives or services to be added on the platform?

M. GOOSNEY: Thank you, Chair.

Definitely, the uptake alone – and, again, I applaud anybody that brought in any service prior to me being in here. My job is to try and improve, but I was telling my crew just the other day, the night before being sworn into Cabinet, I drove out here in my vehicle on short notice and I realized that my registration was about to expire in the next 24 hours. I was thinking, oh my God, I can’t drive to Corner Brook. I thought, I don’t need to drive to Corner Brook. So I went onto MyGov and that’s where I did it and I used it. It has a multitude of uses.

As you heard me say before, with the illiterate of the 21st century quote, and where we are in technology, it comes down to learn to unlearn to relearn. It’s right here in the device, which you can do a multitude of things, which is the same as whether it’s from a licence for some type of outdoor activity, whether it’s hunting or fishing, everything is there.

I see the importance of it. So additions that come forward would match the system to

keep evolving in the way it's been going for the last while.

Thank you, Chair.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

Seeing no further questions for this subhead, I now ask the Clerk to recall the subhead.

CLERK: 4.1.01 to 4.3.02, Office of the Chief Information Officer.

CHAIR: Shall 4.1.01 to 4.3.02, Office of the Chief Information Officer, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Motion is carried.

On motion, subheads 4.1.01 through 4.3.02 carried.

CHAIR: We will now take a brief recess to transition to the next subhead.

Recess

CHAIR: Order, please!

We will resume the meeting of the Government Services Committee reviewing Executive Council.

I now ask that the department officials introduce themselves, starting with the minister.

L. EVANS: Minister Lela Evans, Minister of Health and Community Services, also MHA for Torngat Mountains.

J. HIGGINS: Deputy Minister Jason Higgins, Deputy Minister for Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

CHAIR: We'll go back to the minister.

L. EVANS: Sorry, I said Minister of Health.

CHAIR: You are that, too, we know that. You are not wrong.

You can correct it.

L. EVANS: I'm sorry, I'll start over.

Minister Lela Evans, Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, also the MHA for Torngat Mountains.

J. HIGGINS: Jason Higgins, Deputy Minister for Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

N. ABBOTT: Nicole Abbott, Departmental Controller.

J. COTTER: Joanne Cotter, Director, Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

V. BARBOUR: Victoria Barbour, Director of Communications.

K. DALTON: Krista Dalton, Media Relations Manager.

A. MACDONALD: Andrew MacDonald, Executive Assistant to the Minister.

CHAIR: Okay, I'll now ask the Clerk to call the next subhead.

CLERK: 2.7.01 to 2.7.02, Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

CHAIR: Shall 2.7.01 to 2.7.02, Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, carry?

I now call on the minister for a couple of opening comments.

L. EVANS: Just looking at the time and the amount of time allotted, I won't give a long opening statement.

I do think that the Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation is a very important department. It serves a great function. It works with other departments to make sure government policy, when being developed, addresses and identifies Indigenous importance for reconciliation and also the recognition of the Indigenous peoples here in Newfoundland and Labrador who were harmed by colonialism and the formation of – in actual fact, when we look at all of Canada.

One of the things that we have to make sure is that any government policy being developed, any programs that are being developed, also is seen through the Indigenous lens in the spirit of reconciliation.

That's basically what I'm going to say, because there'll be a good opportunity now to have more time for the Opposition to ask well-founded questions, so we can provide the answers and also identify some of the gaps that government needs to be addressing moving forward.

Thank you very much for being here tonight. I also wanted to recognize my staff. Staff has always made themselves available to departments and also Members of the Opposition when it comes to issues with Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation. All the knowledge that the office has, they're a great resource.

I just want to thank them for their services and just make sure that people realize that we are a resource – sometimes it's overlooked. I'm going to stop there because, of course, I could go on.

Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair recognizes the Member for Placentia - St. Mary's.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Thank you.

Minister, 2.7.01, every line item here except for Property, Furnishings and Equipment went under budget. Why is that and do you expect to spend the full amount this year?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

L. EVANS: Sorry, I didn't have my thing turned up. Are you talking about the Salaries or are you talking about

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Well, in 2.7.01, every single line except for Property, Furnishings and Equipment is under budget, I just want to know why is that? We've budgeted the same amount, so is there an expectation that it will be spent this year because it wasn't spent last year?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

L. EVANS: Thank you. That's a good question.

When you're looking at Salaries, you're right. There was \$123,600, and that reflects savings primarily due to vacancies.

When you look at the line item for Transportation and Communications, there was a savings there of \$103,800. That reflects savings due to less than anticipated travel requirements. Of course, we did have the election that did cut down on travel.

The line item for Supplies, there was a savings there of \$1,500. That reflects savings due to less than anticipated requirements when it came to supplies.

Looking at Purchased Services, a savings of \$1,300. That reflects savings due to less than anticipated expenditures.

Moving forward, we're expecting to have the expenditures back up to what was anticipated for the 2025-26 budget. So we will be spending the money.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: All right. Thank you, Minister.

In 2.7.02, the Transportation and Communications line was \$47,800 under budget this year. What travel was eliminated and what travel is expected to go ahead next year?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

L. EVANS: Yes, looking at the line item there for Transportation and Communications, you're talking about the \$47,800. That reflects savings due to less than anticipated travel requirements in the last budget, but we expect to be doing quite a bit of travelling because, as minister, I'm looking at going out and meeting and participating in a lot of Indigenous activities, but also talking to the leadership in different regions, looking at some of the issues.

Basically, the Premier has told us that it's very, very important to talk to front-line workers and those who are supporting front-line workers, but that also applies when you're looking at it through an Indigenous lens, is the Indigenous people and the people who provide the supports and services for Indigenous people. That could be the Indigenous leadership and the advocacy groups that are supporting Indigenous people.

So I'm hoping to actually be able to travel across the province and meet and get to know some of the issues first-hand. I do have a lot of lived experience. But, of course, being the minister is different than just being an MHA. I do hope to be able to do that.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

The Grants and Subsidies line is decreasing by \$250,000 in this year's budget, despite spending the full amount last year. Can you

advise what program is being cut and why there is a decrease of \$250,000?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

L. EVANS: Yes, the Grants and Subsidies line item there is a savings of \$250,000 and that reflects a decrease for a one-year enhancing of Indigenous education resources in 2025-26 only.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Thank you, Minister.

Can you provide an update on the work that your government has taken to advance the Calls to Action that came out of the Truth and Reconciliation inquiry?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

L. EVANS: The Calls to Action – in actual fact, what I'll do is I'll defer to my deputy minister because, of course, I became minister in October and there was a lot of work done throughout the year. So I'll just get him to summarize and then I'll probably add a little bit more in my role and capacity as minister.

J. HIGGINS: When it comes to the Calls to Action, as you know, there was a number of different departments that have different assignments and tasks that they take on. For example, in our department in particular, it's Call 57 which speaks to basically education for public servants and public bodies around Indigenous governments and organizations.

We have a mandatory module that all public servants need to take. It's called *Toward Reconciliation*. That's what has been developed and now we're working with other Indigenous governments and organizations to do more specific modules to their backgrounds, cultures and perspectives. You'll see those come online.

In general terms, looking through different Calls to Action, there are pieces in there around what are priority areas for Indigenous governments and organizations now. Basically, when you look at all the calls, in our meetings and conversations, with the IGOs – which is short for Indigenous Governments and Organizations – we look to find out what are their priorities – and they can change over time. We've had the Calls to Action for quite some time.

Depending on what the priorities are now for the IGOs, that tends to be where we focus our priorities. As Minister Evans mentioned, we spend a good bit of time working with other departments and supporting them in terms of advancing their calls that are specific to them and providing them support. Sometimes it's as straightforward as arranging meetings between the IGOs themselves and the relevant departments. Other times, it's my office and analysts and the director, Joanne, working with our colleagues in other departments to help them move things forward.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

L. EVANS: Just to add, when you talk about the Calls to Action, and you talk about Truth and Reconciliation, being the minister with lived experience of the harms of residential schools, Truth and Reconciliation, actually, the inquiry came out of the residential schools. Not every part of the province had residential schools. There were also day schools and that's something, too, that we need to acknowledge as well. Day schools also had a negative impact on our Indigenous people.

When you look at the Calls to Action, one of the most important things that came out of the Truth and Reconciliation was about overall wellness of Indigenous people, within Indigenous families, within Indigenous communities. What we saw when you looked at the Truth and Reconciliation, Indigenous communities

today continue to be harmed by intergenerational trauma.

For us, it's not just about the specific calls, but the overall holistic view that came out of Truth and Reconciliation. That's why it's so important for us to work together within the departments.

My department works closely with Minister Wall, Social Supports and Well-Being; Minister Pardy, basically Seniors; also Minister of Education, Minister Dinn. I could go through every department – Transportation and Infrastructure. At the end of the day, we have to make sure we have true reconciliation and that is making sure that the things that impact overall wellness of Indigenous people are addressed. You can't actually recover from intergenerational trauma if you can't have a safe space to live, if it's not warm, if you can't access nutrition, if you don't have access to education.

I'll stop there because I could probably go on, but I want you to have another question.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: I actually do have another question specific to that, because one of the things in the blue books, one of the policies, was in relationship to the outcomes of Innu in the child protection system.

As the minister, I'm just wondering specific to that department, Social Supports, have you engaged in any meetings with Indigenous groups or leaders yet specific to this topic?

L. EVANS: Regarding the inquiry, no, because the inquiry is still going on. But, in actual fact, indirectly. When I met with Indigenous leaders, myself and the Premier met with the Innu, they raised a lot of the issues that's coming out of this inquiry.

In actual fact, what the Innu is looking for is more autonomy. What that means is basically within their communities, within the

families, if there are issues where the safety of children or a child is paramount, they want to make sure that child is supported by Innu. That is the biggest want when it comes to basically what comes out of the inquiry. I think that everybody here who has any awareness will support that.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for St. John's East - Quidi Vidi.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, and, of course, to all the staff. I'm really looking forward to having a discussion on this.

As the minister knows, I'm very passionate about Indigenous affairs and issues. I, too, have a familial experience as well, and reconciliation comes in all kinds of different forms, of course. So I will ask some questions just pertinent to that.

The Office of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, of course, has three core functions: reconciliation; the policy, planning and consultation; negotiation of land claims, self-government and other agreements. So out of these functions, I'm just looking for an overview of three areas.

I'll just start with the first one. Of course, advancing reconciliation, which we've just discussed – I'll actually move on to the next one, the planning and policies offered by the office to other areas of government in this past year. So if you could detail some of that information, in just this past year?

L. EVANS: The policies and –?

J. HIGGINS: Could you repeat the question?

S. O'LEARY: Yes, sorry.

The planning and policies offered by the office to other areas of government over the past year, you were speaking to some of

those intersections already, but just if you could specify a few more?

L. EVANS: Yes, we are quite pleased at the number of departments that have reached out to our office.

I'll let my deputy minister go into some of the details.

S. O'LEARY: Okay.

J. HIGGINS: The minister did a really good job, actually, of going through a number of different items.

I know when you mentioned Minister Wall with Social Supports and Well-Being, we had a number of different discussions there in terms of how we move forward on priorities for, not just Innu in community, but also housing needs, because they're also responsible for housing. So we're trying to advance some of those priorities in various communities.

Working to advance the importance of – when you think about Northern, remote communities, working with Minister Petten in Transportation and Infrastructure to make sure that there is adequate, for example, ferry service that goods can be shipped north for infrastructure, food and other requirements. They're important conversations.

I know from an education point of view, working closely with Minister Dinn and his team to make sure education priorities for basically all five Indigenous governments and organizations, because it's important for all to get reflected, not just appropriately in curriculum, but, also as you mentioned before, in the resources that are available in the classroom and resources that are available for teachers to use.

So there are some examples there, if that's –

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

L. EVANS: I'm not going to take a lot of time because I know you have good questions, but just for an example. Being a new government, we're working closely with Justice, Minister Conway Ottenheimer and her team. We're looking at the RCMP and policing from an Indigenous lens, especially when you look at the transient population up in Happy Valley-Goose Bay and the residents and the neighbours, when we talk mental health and addictions, but also vulnerable seniors.

I will say, and I didn't get a chance to mention this when I was going through the Labrador Affairs Estimates, Minister Conway Ottenheimer actually went up to Labrador in the first couple of months that she was Minister of Justice. Minister Joedy Wall, I think, has gone up twice with Social Supports and Well-Being. When he was up there, Minister Conway Ottenheimer joined him to go to Libra House, which is a shelter for women. Also, she participated a lot when it came to the issues.

But when we're talking now, looking forward to this new year, we look at the RCMP and policing. We look at Corrections because one of the things that really impacted me, as MHA for Torngat Mountains, was the Auditor General's report on Corrections. I won't actually take up much time talking about it, but I was shocked and I was really deeply impacted because I thought when people in my district went into Corrections, they would be supported and they would be able to access services that they needed to help deal with addictions, trauma, a lot of things that contribute to their mental health and physical health, I guess what you call the impacts of trauma. Like I said, when we're looking at Justice, we're also looking at Indigenous women.

I can actually talk about Social Supports and Well-Being with Minister Wall. He came up, we did a tour. We looked at the transient

population. We met with the mayor in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. We actually went and looked at housing. We looked at the social supports. We looked at children in care and that's just a start. That's just at the beginning of our mandate.

Looking at Education, talking to Minister Dinn about the needs, not only in terms of education needs on the surface, but in terms of Indigenous people, what's really needed to make sure that they have, I guess, equity in education. A lot of times that's overlooked.

Anyway, I'll stop there, but I could go on.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you.

Just to follow up on that, education resources, obviously, that's something that's extremely important for us to progress as a society, you're speaking with Minister Dinn.

In terms of what is the present status on Indigenous education within the school system, the curriculum right now, can we get an update on that?

L. EVANS: I've had multiple conversations with the director of Education from the Nunatsiavut Government and also the deputy minister and the minister. They're actually doing a lot in terms of Inuktitut language, but, also, they're developing a lot of education materials from an Indigenous lens and some of those are being adopted by the provincial school education system.

I bet you didn't know I knew that, but just in the meetings, we also met with Kanani Penashue, she heads up the Innu school board. She talked a lot to us about some of the barriers they're facing. Also, in terms of recruitment and retention for their schools and the fact that their school board is separate and you run into seniority issues.

Dealing with Indigenous education is very layered – it's very layered.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you.

So that's within Indigenous communities. What about the education for the more general public about Indigenous communities so that we can destigmatize and end racism progress in that fashion?

L. EVANS: There's been a great amount of work done by Nunatsiavut in terms of developing curriculum, and some of the curriculum has actually been adopted and being piloted into the province.

Did you want us to speak on that, briefly?

J. HIGGINS: Just very briefly to it. I don't want to speak on behalf of the Department of EECD. They also have direct dialogue with the Indigenous government organizations and they have – I don't know if it's called a curriculum committee, again, I don't want to speak for them. But the concept of making sure that the curriculum can grow and evolve and be reflective of this type of thing, the very thing you say that would be important and that comes forward, it's that kind of standing dialogue that happens.

So to your point, not just to impact something in a specific community, but to really –

S. O'LEARY: Education at an entire level.

J. HIGGINS: – impact the curriculum as a whole and make sure it's continuing on.

CHAIR: The Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

L. EVANS: Yes, in actual fact, the true history of Indigenous people in Newfoundland and Labrador being developed and put into the curriculum, that's something that we will be supporting when asked.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you.

Last question here for this and I'll continue on afterwards, after my time.

Obviously, within my District of St. John's East - Quidi Vidi, we deal with an urban Indigenous community, which has a completely different lens, I understand, than it would in terms of Labrador Affairs, certainly in the Member's district and otherwise. The needs would be very different. However, there are still a lot of similarities in terms of the impact because we are seeing one of the highest growing populations of urban Indigenous people. And, of course, they land in some of the bigger cities and with all of the issues that they have been grappling with for many, many years, intergenerational trauma and otherwise.

I guess my focus is, what kind of policies or what kind of actions are we taking? I know one thing is in terms of support for the medical school, certainly with First Light, is a very positive thing to see that. But what other things can you envision for the urban Indigenous population?

L. EVANS: You are right. Our support for an Indigenous clinic, that will increase access to health care for Indigenous people. One of the things we also work with is – First Light does a lot of good work. So we do support the role that they play.

Also, for us, when you're dealing with Indigenous people in urban, they're within the urban setting. So there are a lot of supports available in terms of shelter, in terms of supports for food banks and different resources.

But one of the things with Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation is that we want to make sure that we're working with Social Supports and Well-Being so we can make sure that when they're putting policies and programs out that they're making it inclusive for Indigenous people. Same thing when we're looking at mental health.

You yourself, you know, as an advocate, that there's a big difference between equality and equity. Right now, the department is starting to look internally to see how we can improve making sure that we're advocating for equity and not just equality.

Maybe you could talk a bit about some of the programs that we've –

J. HIGGINS: Yeah, sure. Absolutely.

The minister mentioned First Light, which is one of the three Friendship Centres throughout the province. So we're got Labrador Friendship Centre in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. We've got People of the Dawn Friendship Centre in Stephenville, and of course, there's First Light, as we've talked about.

We provide \$30,000 in grant funding to each of them to help sometimes lever bigger and better things as well, but also to provide some operational funding for them to provide those services to urban Indigenous peoples. Because, like you say, there's that connection that's required.

The minister went through a good list of the supports they provide. Another one is around, like, employability skills and different things that come. So, yes, just to mention a couple of those.

Thank you, Chair.

L. EVANS: I just want to add one thing.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

L. EVANS: Also, Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation does work with other organizations. One of the ones that we look at is the Office of Women and Gender Equality.

We want to note that they provided \$360,000 in funding for the Indigenous

Violence Prevention Grants. A lot of those went to regions where it's not as rural, so there are supports for urban as well.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for Placentia - St. Mary's.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, I do remember when the final report for the Truth and Reconciliation came out in December of 2015, and I remember the booklet that the federal government gave to all of us at the FPT meetings. So my question is kind of in reflection to that and the inquiry that's ongoing here.

One of the things that's coming out of the inquiry is that court delays are causing legislatively mandated timelines for Family Court to be ignored and this is disproportionately affecting Indigenous children. I'm just wondering, have you met with JPS on this issue yet? Have you had any discussion? Is there anything ongoing about this particular finding that's starting to come out of the inquiry?

L. EVANS: In actual fact, in terms of the delays, as minister, I have not met with the Minister of Justice to discuss that specific issue; but that is something that we are planning for this summer when the House closes and we have time to actually schedule some meetings.

It's something that's on our radar, and also following up with some of the justice issues that relate to families where we have children in care or maybe the children have returned home but the file is still open. We're looking at sort of advancing a lot of the understanding around what needs to be put in place to make sure the children are safe but they're supported within communities, and also through extended families.

Of course, the Minister of Social Supports and Well-Being has a role to play there as well. When we're looking at that, some of our meetings would actually have three of the ministers present, not just two.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

Minister, you've advocated strongly for the Coastal Labrador Seniors' benefit to be increased, given the high cost of home heating on the North Coast and the fact that the homes on diesel in your region are excluded from incentive programs that have been announced. What progress have you made to change both the subsidy amount and the eligibility for communities in your district to avail of available incentive programs?

L. EVANS: I recall when I was talking on that incentive program, I said the reason why there was an incentive program is because of the high cost – the high cost of heating your home; the high cost of being able to actually purchase food; the high cost of actually being able to hunt and provide natural food to your population; the cost of actually being able to secure a home.

For me, my issue was that the subsidy was very small when it actually went to addressing the high costs and I wanted the cost to come down as opposed to the subsidy to go up. We can go back through *Hansard* if you want, and if you do find me saying that it should be higher, without me advocating for the true cost that's impacting people to come down, it would be different.

For me, it's one of the things that I, in my role as Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, Minister for Labrador Affairs and Minister for Women and Gender Equality, when I'm looking at my district, but not only my district, also the District of Cartwright - L'Anse au Clair, who is on diesel, power plants and the cost of electricity is so high, for me, I really want to

address why is the cost of home heating fuel so expensive.

Because, on one the Island side, you have a cost for oil and gasoline. You actually cross over into Labrador and the price goes up. Right now, the cost is not that much different, but it's because we're frozen.

As soon as Woodward actually does the refueling of those tanks, our price is probably going to go up by 50 cents. For me, addressing those high costs has to be a priority. It has to be a priority not just of me as minister, but basically the whole department and, in actual fact, the whole government.

Labrador actually has to be supported when it comes to these costs. What's at the root of them?

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Thank you, Minister.

Minister, we support the investment to cover the funds that the federal government have eliminated for the province in the terms of the Jordan's Principle funding. I'm just wondering whether your department is going to be active to ensure that the investment made will be reserved exclusively for Indigenous children.

I ask this because supports for the student assistants are very high for both non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous children, and is there a concern that the money will be used to fund supports for non-Indigenous children? I'm just asking for your opinion on that.

L. EVANS: In actual fact, that's a little bit tangly.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Yes, I know.

L. EVANS: Because when I was in Opposition, I was trying to support people that were looking for supports for student assistants. One thing I uncovered was that the education system would wait until

Jordan's Principle funding was allotted in the classroom, so if they had a student assistant in the classroom, a lot of times they wouldn't fund.

The criticism that came to me was that the student assistants were underfunded and what would happen is the burden a lot of times went beyond the assistants that were funded using Jordan's Principle.

Do you know something? That is not right, but at the end of the day, sometimes that was the only help that was available. So that needs to be addressed.

What really needs to be addressed is the allocation of funding for student assistants and how is it allocated for school, how is it allocated basically within the regions. That was one thing that they used to do, is they would wait until – and that was under the past government. I'm not sure exactly what's happening right now. The past government would wait until Jordan's Principle money was allotted and then they would basically distribute the rest of the money. That is what I was told and that's basically what I witnessed.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay, thank you.

Minister, has the Premier's roundtable met under your government since October 2025?

L. EVANS: I would say, no, it hasn't met, being a new government and basically getting familiar with the departments. But one thing I will say is that the Premier has met with all the Indigenous leaders of all the Indigenous organizations. He's gone through and met with them. He has followed up on many of the concerns and, basically, I, myself, as minister, have that repeated with the different leaders when asked.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

There's no argument from this side of the House that you're a very strong advocate for Indigenous people, but the facts are that the budget for this department has decreased over the years past and there's no meaningful investment for Indigenous people in the budget right now.

How can the Indigenous people in this province have confidence that government is listening, given there's been no increase in the budget?

L. EVANS: Could you point out the decrease? You just said the overall budget has decreased for Indigenous people.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Over the years it has.

L. EVANS: So you're talking about, like, the 10 years you were in government it has decreased?

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Well, on 2.7.02, right now, it was \$2.5 million in the original budget, \$2.2 million was spent and the budget now is \$2.275 million. So it's down.

L. EVANS: If you're looking at 2.7.02, the total rate is \$2,176,100 and what was the revised budget for 2025-26 is \$2,114,800. If you're looking at our budget for this year, it's \$1.926 million.

The difference is \$250,000, so you're looking at the decrease of \$250,000.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Yes.

L. EVANS: We did explain Grants and Subsidies was \$250,000 less and that was because of the decrease for one-year enhancing Indigenous Education Resources in 2025 only. So that was a one-year thing.

In actual fact, it didn't cut the budget. That was just a one-time funding. We didn't remove any program funding or any year-to-year funding or any kind of a decrease.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay. That was a one-off initiative.

L. EVANS: Yes, it was.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

I think that's all for me. My time is up anyway.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for St. John's East - Quidi Vidi.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you, Chair.

Just a couple of more questions for me.

Thank you, Minister.

The first one is the number of negotiations that the office was party to or had some involvement with regarding land claims – anything in that realm?

L. EVANS: We do have ongoing land claims with the Innu Nation, right now. They're current and relevant and I guess it's working with the federal negotiators as well because land claims are two layered. It's basically through the federal government, but also the provincial government is negotiating their component.

Nunatsiavut deal with the Inuit, their land claims are finalized.

Right now, the only active land claim ongoing through the federal government and the provincial is with the Innu Nation.

My deputy minister can just give an update on that.

J. HIGGINS: Just to add to that, as well, I know we say the land claim is concluded, we'll say the treaty is concluded for Nunatsiavut and the Inuit in Labrador, but that's when the work starts, because the implementation has to happen. There are so many different pieces to the land claim

agreement that can see kind of the devolution of different responsibilities and different things to the Nunatsiavut Government, and that takes decades, if not longer.

I look to my team behind me, I know the work they do with implementation of the land claim agreement itself. Even when the land claim agreement is finalized with the Innu, then comes the work with implementation over time because there could be certain components in the agreement where you devolve education or whatever it might be, but it's got to be when everyone is ready; when all the systems are in place because you don't want to move it to a place where folks aren't ready. So there's a lot of work that comes afterwards.

To answer your question, as the minister said, we have an ongoing and active land claim agreement with the Innu Nation and the federal government. We've completed one with Nunatsiavut Government and implementation is under way.

L. EVANS: Just to add, on the Island, there are no land-based claims.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you, Chair.

Just to follow up on that intersection with the federal government, which is interesting because, of course, we do have the Qalipu Band on the Island. Of course, it's an ongoing story, not unlike histories or education, the Qalipu, of course, has court challenges happening as well.

I understand that there's never a static point that things continue to move, but if you could just detail a little bit more about the intersections that you would have with the federal government, not necessarily specific to land claims, but in any other realm with your department.

J. HIGGINS: We outlined a lot of different ways we connect and work with departments within the provincial

government, the same holds true for the federal government as well. With our Labrador Affairs hat, we're planning a Northern Development Ministers Forum for June. That's an opportunity when we're in Ottawa to spend time with federal ministers to advocate and raise the profile of priorities in federal jurisdiction, the priorities that we have for Indigenous governments and organizations here. That happens quite a bit.

We did mention the land claims, which is ongoing with the federal government as well, but as issues arise – I know I'm pointing over my shoulder again to my team, Joanne Cotter who is director for Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, she spent time this week working with the Innu on the Innu roundtable. That's a very in-community roundtable where they discuss all kinds of different issues. It could be housing, it could be health, it could be whatever.

A lot of times, when those issues are raised, the whole point then is not just for our office, but other departments to sit around there to bring those things forward, and the federal government also sits at that table.

Sometimes it's working with them that moves things forward and sometimes it's advocating to keep feet to fire so things continue to move forward for IGOs in this province. There are a lot of connections that happen there.

S. O'LEARY: Okay. Thank you, Chair.

Final question – and I guess that's following up on the larger picture – is your office looking into bringing forward legislation to enact UNDRIP?

Of course we talked about reconciliation, but UNDRIP is the overall umbrella. Is this something your government plans to do?

L. EVANS: I was briefed briefly on UNDRIP in terms of where it is. It's my

understanding, right now, the team is looking at what UNDRIP entails; how it applies to our province, our region, our Indigenous people.

One of the things that we need to make sure of is that the groups that are recognized by the federal government or are in the process of being recognized, is that they are the leaders; they speak for the Indigenous people.

Sometimes there's confusion, where somebody who may be a part of an Indigenous organization then goes off and identifies themselves as a separate organization. They're not recognized by the federal government, they're recognized by the provincial government and, to be quite honest, that can get a little bit tangly.

We also, as a new minister, run into advocacy organizations and service providers for Indigenous people who take on the persona of being an Indigenous group, but, in actual fact, the services they provide could be to all four Indigenous groups of the province, and they're not the Indigenous group.

So there are many layers to these things but, at the end of the day, in my capacity as minister, I still want to support. Even if it's not recognized by the province or by the federal government, if you have Indigenous people out there that are doing good for the community or doing good for their people or, even in an urban environment, that are providing supports for Indigenous people, we want to support them through any way that we can without creating conflict with policy.

For me, I try not to get involved in any type of politics when it comes to Indigenous relations. We have to make sure, at the end of the day, we're doing what we can in the capacity that we have to support Indigenous people.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you.

My final comment on that was that this was a United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. So it shouldn't be political. Because it is such an overarching kind of concept to respect the rights of Indigenous peoples worldwide, I think that it's something that certainly should be looked at less with a political lens or less with various nations or bands or that kind of focus, but an overarching umbrella.

Anyway, that's my comment there because I do believe it's an important thing to support.

L. EVANS: Just to clarify, so I am paraphrasing what I said tonight. I want to clarify that I do support Indigenous people. I do support Indigenous groups and governments. I do support Indigenous leaders. My only comment about political is that, really, there's no room for politics when it comes to dealing with long-standing issues of inequity, intergenerational trauma, the ongoing harms of colonialization.

For me, if anything, I think it would be really hard to be accused of being political. So you and I both have that shared advocacy.

S. O'LEARY: That wasn't in any way, shape or form an accusation. It was an understanding that UNDRIP should be an umbrella that takes in all of the issues for Indigenous peoples and the respect for all. So I'll leave it at that.

Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister.

L. EVANS: Yeah, thank you.

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

CLERK: 2.7.01 to 2.7.02, Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

CHAIR: Shall 2.7.01 to 2.7.02, Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Motion carried.

On motion, subheads 2.7.01 through 2.7.02 carried.

CHAIR: We're a little bit over half through this Estimate, so we are going to take our 10-minute break now and we'll come back to the next subhead, which will be Women and Gender Equality.

Recess

CHAIR: Order, please!

We will now resume the meeting of the Government Services Committee reviewing Executive Council. I now ask the department officials to introduce themselves, starting with the minister.

L. EVANS: Minister Lela Evans, Minister of Women and Gender Equality.

S. JONES: Sharlene Jones, Deputy Minister of the Office of Women and Gender Equality.

S. FURLONG: Susan Furlong, Director of Violence Prevention.

N. ABBOTT: Nicole Abbott, Departmental Controller.

E. CHRISTY: Emily Christy, Director of Policy and Planning.

K. DICKS-PEYTON: Kathy Dicks-Peyton, Director of Communications.

CHAIR: Okay.

I now ask the Clerk to call the next subhead.

CLERK: 2.8.01 to 2.8.03, Women and Gender Equality.

CHAIR: I now call on the Minister of Women and Gender Equality to open the discussion.

L. EVANS: In the interest of time, I won't do any opening comments. Right now, just looking at the teams across from me who just going to be asking their questions, I think that things will be clarified. I don't think we need an opening statement; we'll just get into the questions, because I know you have a lot. In terms of preserving the time for questions and answers, we'll go right ahead.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister, that's very responsible of you.

I now call on the hon. Member for Placentia - St. Mary's.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, 2.8.02, the Salaries line has increased by \$160,000. Is there a new position here?

L. EVANS: Under 2.8.02, yes, Salaries have gone down \$208,900.

OFFICIAL: (Inaudible.)

L. EVANS: Sorry about that, I was on the wrong tab.

Looking at Salaries, there's a decrease for the 2026-27 budget of \$160,000, that reflects a one-time carry forward due to The National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence funding savings from 2025-2026. That was federal funding.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Minister, I'm just looking, it was \$1.4 million in 2.8.02.01, Salaries, and now allocated is \$1.5 million. I'm just wondering, the variance, is there a new position? Why is it higher?

L. EVANS: This increase of \$160,000?

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Yes.

L. EVANS: Like I said, it was a carry-over.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay, so the funding was carried over?

L. EVANS: Yes, the funding was carried over. It was federal funding that wasn't spent.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay. Thank you.

L. EVANS: I did say a one-time carry forward due to the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence funding and it was savings from the last year.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay. Thank you very much.

Is the department fully staffed now?

L. EVANS: Looking at the staffing, we've got 15 funded positions. We have seven that are permanent, five temporary and three contractual.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay.

L. EVANS: Looking at the vacancies, I'd have to refer to my deputy minister.

S. JONES: As of April 1, we had 18 funded positions of which 15, as the minister just referenced, were filled, and we have three vacant positions.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay. Thank you very much.

Purchased Services was underspent by \$200,000, but we're seeing a \$300,000 increase this year. I'm just wondering what that is for.

L. EVANS: So looking at the line item there for Purchased Services, there was a \$200,000 savings between the original budget and the revised budget for 2025-2026. That reflects a one-time savings in the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence. That was funding for the

new educational violence prevention awareness campaign, which will not be required until 2026-2027, therefore, the funding was carried over. That was the \$200,000 savings.

Looking at this 2026-2027 budget, we look at an increase of \$300,000, and that reflects a one-time carry-over, \$200,000 from the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence funding from the previous year and its reprofile at \$100,000 to better align with the operational requirements.

To make sure it's clear, because the way I said it, it doesn't sound clear, I'm going to ask my deputy minister to clarify.

S. JONES: In fact, we had, in total, \$460,000 from the National Action Plan that was carry-over; \$160,000, as the minister mentioned previously; as well as \$200,000 in Purchased Service and \$100,000 in Professional Services.

When we carried it over, we reprofiled the \$160,000 to Salaries, because it was in Salaries, and the other total was \$100,000 from Professional Services and \$200,000 from Purchased Services. We put it all in Purchased Services this year because of the various items such as the education awareness campaign that we're planning on doing.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Thank you very much.

I'm just looking also at the Grants and Subsidies, there's a decrease of \$75,000. Is that because of the 100th anniversary of women's right to vote scholarship? Is that what that decrease is?

L. EVANS: Looking at Grants and Subsidies, yes, there was a decrease. The 2026-27 budget is down by \$75,000 from the original budget. That reflects, as you said, a decrease due to the 100th anniversary celebrations of women's right to

vote scholarship which was only budgeted for the 2025-26 fiscal year.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay. Thank you.

Minister, can we get a copy of the binder and then a breakdown of the remainder of who received these Grants and Subsidies? You don't have to list it, because I know the list is long. If we could just get a –

L. EVANS: We actually have that information. I think we have it handy to read out.

No, it's way too much. It'll kill too much time. We'll send that over to you.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: That's fine.

L. EVANS: We'll also send a copy over to MHA Sheilagh O'Leary's office as well.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Perfect. Thank you.

So all the federal revenue wasn't received this year, but I guess it's going to be expected, it's going to be still coming – okay, yes.

Minister, can you provide us with any statistics on the instances of intimate partner violence in the province over the last year?

L. EVANS: Yes, we can.

Just looking at the revenue, you said there was a holdback. Yes, that's \$17,500. That reflects the revenue from the federal government, as \$17,500 was held back until the federal government receives a national crisis hotline final report and the \$17,500 in revenue received in this fiscal year.

In just looking at the stats there, I'll let my deputy minister go through some of the stats that you asked about.

S. JONES: Sure. I'll just go over what I know and if there's anything further, I'll have

the director of Violence Prevention step in and provide some.

The stats that we got from the RNC: between April 1, 2025 and March 31, 2026, the RNC Intimate Partner Violence Unit received 2,840 calls for service, and then the information from the RCMP, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police – each year, of course, we request the information from them, but the most recent numbers that are available are still the 2023 numbers.

They have noted that they're in the process and they should have the 2024 stats updated soon, but we have not received them to date. They did want to let us know that they are projecting an increase, a 16 per cent increase, over the 2023 calendar year, but they're verifying the numbers and we'll get them shortly.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay, thank you.

Can we also get a job description of the new position for the Intimate Partner Violence director?

L. EVANS: Yes, you can.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Thank you.

L. EVANS: We'll send that over.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay.

Minister, advocacy groups have been asking is there going to be a formal declaration that intimate partner violence is an epidemic?

L. EVANS: That's actually quite easy to talk about because myself, now, as the current Minister of Women and Gender Equality, while I was in Opposition, I was quite vocal in advocating for major changes to address gender-based violence. The current Minister of Justice, Minister Conway Ottenheimer, she was quite vocal as well.

We both, in our ministerial roles of Justice and Women and Gender Equality, recognize that gender-based violence is at an unacceptable level and we actually need to work together. We need to work with stakeholders, advocacy groups and government departments to work together. So we do identify right now that there is an epidemic in terms of gender-based violence.

When you look at what gender-based violence entails, there are many, many facets to gender-based violence. There's sexual violence. There's intimate partner violence. There are so many different components to this. In actual fact, it's going to take a lot of work and organization to get everybody working to address these issues and that's the only way we can resolve it.

So, for me, right now, I identify that in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador and across Canada, gender-based violence is at an epidemic level.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Thank you, Minister.

Earlier this year, Corner Brook residents were unable to anonymously present to the hospital to have evidence of their sexual assault captured and stored at the RNC, pending a province-wide MOU with the RNC.

Has the MOU been completed and is this type of collection now available anywhere other than St. John's and Corner Brook?

L. EVANS: Well, as you recognize yourself, over the last few years, there has been many issues with, basically, somebody who presents at St. Clare's or at an emergency who has been sexually assaulted and being able to access a SANE nurse to help with the trauma, but also to prepare if the person wanted to go further in terms of pressing charges against their assailant.

Of course, we all know, myself, as Minister of Women and Gender Equality; yourself, as former minister; and the Member over in the

Third Party, as a strong advocate for women and sexual assault survivors, we recognize that a lot of times sexual assault survivors are failed again and retraumatized again, sometimes because they don't have access to justice. So being able to actually have evidence collected in a trauma-informed manner is very important, but the collection of the samples has to be stored appropriately to be able to stand up in court.

The MOU was just between here on the Avalon, St. Clare's, and with the RNC, and then we saw just recently there was a problem with the collections not being considered anonymous because the sample was collected with a number that could be traced back to the individual. It was either their hospital number or their MCP number. Even though it had the appearance of being anonymous, it really wasn't.

The MOU does take care of that. What we've done now to address that is we've expanded it to the West Coast. Right now, we're working to expand it across the entire province, but that work is still ongoing.

If you want, my deputy minister can actually add a bit of clarity to that.

S. JONES: Yes, I guess just further to what the minister has said, there is a lot of work ongoing, mainly, of course, in the Department of Health and Health Services with various hospitals throughout the province. The intention is that the service will be provided to many more.

I do want to make sure that the point is that any person that shows up still can have their kit collected by a SANE nurse. They're in over 32 communities now. We have 110 SANE nurses trained. We have 12 new ones since last year and we're in four new communities. We're very happy to see that.

It is unfortunate that, right now, for some, the only option is to use – if they don't want to use their name – an identifier, which to the minister's point is MCP or hospital

number, but just to know that anyone who goes to any of the facilities can at least get their kit collected and that the department is working very tirelessly to see what can be done to further expand and do more MOUs.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Member for St. John's East - Quidi Vidi.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you, Chair.

Does this budget contain any increased funding for women centres?

L. EVANS: We can provide you with a breakdown with the funding and the increases.

S. JONES: There was an increase for the women centres, I believe, in the '24-'25 budget. While there's no increase this year to the core funding they receive, I do want to highlight the fact that they're getting access through other funding sources that we have, such as the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence funding, the federal funding. A lot of the women's centres are availing of that funding for now.

While they may not see an increase in their core grant, there is availability. We're reaching out to them and we work very closely with them to get project funding throughout the year.

L. EVANS: I just want to add to that, when you look at the appearance of budget decrease, there was a \$75,000 savings due to the 100th Anniversary of Women Achieving the Right to Vote. That was one-time funding.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you.

What has this office's role been in advancing the ankle-monitoring program for use in cases involving IPV? Of course, understanding that there's a lot of crossover, of course, with Justice when we're dealing with a lot of these issues.

What is this office's role been in advancing that program?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Women and Gender Equality.

L. EVANS: I think you referred to ankle monitoring?

S. O'LEARY: Yes, the GPS ankle monitoring.

L. EVANS: Yes, the electronic monitoring. The Department of Justice and Public Safety has noted that the electronic ankle monitoring is currently available in the province and more that 200 offenders have been subject to it. So it is currently in use.

When we're looking at these electronic monitors, a condition that's imposed by the courts, so it's basically up to the court to rule who can and who can't avail of this condition. It's available to those who are sentenced to probation or conditional sentences, post-conviction.

One thing that I do have to say for myself as Minister of Women and Gender Equality, we have to express concern. Because there is a concern that needs to be addressed when relying too heavily or too fully on this tool. While electronic monitoring can enhance victim safety, it does not guarantee that the victim is safe. An offender can still commit the crime, including violence while being monitored.

So one of the things that we need to do is make sure that all the risks are identified. If we're going to actually assign this to somebody, we have to make sure that the victim is safe. Somebody who has brought charges against an abuser, if we have an abuser out on probation being monitored through the ankle monitoring, we have to put things in place to make sure that that person is not at risk of being harmed because there's no physical barrier that will protect the victim from a perpetrator who is wearing an ankle monitor.

We do support expanding the system but, at the end of the day, from a women's safety perspective, we have to make sure that the risk is identified and conditions are put in to mitigate it so that we don't have people who are prone to violence against women or against other people wearing a monitor or bracelet and then be at high risk of offending again. I think that's something that most people support.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you.

What is the total amount of core funding going to the Multicultural Women's Organization of Newfoundland and Labrador? Is there any change in this amount from last year?

L. EVANS: Could you answer that one because I just got the \$6 million?

S. JONES: The core funding that they'll be receiving is \$152,775 and that is the same amount as last year.

S. O'LEARY: Okay, thank you.

We've often heard that access to family planning, including abortion access, is often next to impossible for those living in rural areas, especially Labrador. Is this office working in conjunction with HCS to improve access?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Women and Gender Equality.

L. EVANS: As Minister of Women and Gender Equality, I'm a huge advocate and supporter for safe access to abortion. That has to be provided to people who want to avail of the service. We've seen, through many generations back in history, where women did not have this access and were seriously harmed. Being 2026, we have to ensure that.

I met with Athena in my role as the Minister of Health. One of the things that I wanted to be reassured of is that the clinic is viable

and healthy in terms of its function, its role and its ability to provide the service to people. One of the things I did look at is that they do have the capacity and they have actually been travelling out to rural regions to provide the service. I did notice, in my role as Minister of Health, that they haven't provided the service lately. So I did have that conversation with them, and it basically was because of a health issue with one of the individuals that provides the service, and they are looking to get back on track.

For me, in my dual role as the Minister of Health and the Minister of Women and Gender Equality, I just want to make sure that the service is out there and available. One of the things that I've looked at in my role as the Minister of Health is how do we provide the access to those services out in rural and, also, what's needed.

That's something we're going to be looking at this summer going into the fall, and that's basically in my role as the Minister of Health and the Minister of Women and Gender Equality. There's a lot of overlap in the –

S. O'LEARY: Of course.

Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister. That's it for me.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for Placentia - St. Mary's.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, earlier this month, the department advised that there was violence prevention posters available. I'm just wondering, were any of these posters distributed anywhere, to any schools, bars or anything like that?

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Minister of Women and Gender Equality.

L. EVANS: We did have a delay in getting them out, but really the delay was at the printers. Basically getting the last step there

to get them printed. To be quite honest, we were a bit concerned because of the budget coming up and all the printing that would have to take place. So we did push it, and we do have them printed.

I'll just let the deputy minister or the director explain the distribution.

S. JONES: In fact, as of last Friday, we actually started finally putting them in the envelopes and they're going out the door. They should be in the mail this week for anyone who did respond. Then we're also doing up our own list for even people who did not request them that we're sending them out. We have someone assigned to that and now that we have them all printed, they are finally going out the door.

To the minister's point, there was a delay in getting them printed, but we now have them and we have someone working on them and they've already started to flow.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay.

The reason why I asked that is because some advocacy groups did see the media release and they were just wondering, are they distributed to bars? Will they show up in bars? Will they show up in schools? Like, does government have a plan to actually distribute the posters?

S. JONES: Our plan is twofold. One, we have a list of our community groups, bars, airports, all those areas that we're aware of that we know we want to get to. There's a reason why we did two different types of posters, one geared towards adults and one more geared towards children, because we want to make sure they're in all the schools as well.

So it's a two-pronged approach in that we have who we want to send them out to, but we also then opened it up and said anybody else who would like them, to contact us. Because we may not even be thinking about some people, as well as if there's any

business or any office buildings or anybody out there who would like to get them to put them in their office or public washrooms. We want to make sure they get access to them, so we'll be doing both.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay, thank you.

Minister, have you met with Senator Manning and/or Georgina McGrath regarding Bill S-242 yet?

L. EVANS: I actually had an informal meeting with Senator Manning. When I did meet him, we did have the conversation and one of the things that we're looking at is engaging him and just actually following up to make sure that what we're doing is supporting the work that they've already started. For us, it's working together and sort of amplifying the work that they're doing.

I actually did meet with them but it was in an informal manner.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

Minister, have you met with the Provincial Advisory Council on the Status Of Women?

L. EVANS: I'm actually invited – do you have my calendar?

S. JONES: As you're aware, the ministers have changed portfolios throughout the year and then the House opened up. For this minister in particular, we've been only really scheduling a lot of our meetings with a lot of stakeholders in the upcoming weeks.

I can note that I recently had a meeting in the last couple of weeks with the group and that sort of thing, but those meetings will be happening and they'll be happening more on a regular basis now that we have more access once the House closes.

S. GAMBIN-WALSH: Okay, thank you.

That's it for me, Chair.

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

CLERK: 2.8.01 to 2.8.03, Women and Gender Equality.

CHAIR: Shall 2.8.01 to 2.8.03, Women and Gender Equality, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

The motion is carried.

On motion, subheads 2.8.01 through 2.8.03 carried.

CHAIR: We will now take a brief recess to transition to the next subhead.

Recess

CHAIR: Order, please!

We will now resume the meeting of the Government Services Committee reviewing Executive Council.

I now ask that the departmental officials introduce themselves, starting with the minister.

C. PARDY: Craig Pardy.

J. MCGRATH: John McGrath, Deputy Minister.

N. ABBOTT: Nicole Abbott, Departmental Controller.

B. HANLON: Brendan Hanlon, Comptroller General.

L. CURRAN: Lisa Curran, ADM.

R. WILLIAMS: Renee Williams, Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Board.

E. SULLEY: Erin Sulley, Communications Branch.

C. KNEE: Curtis Knee, Minister's EA.

CHAIR: Thank you for that.

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

CLERK: 3.1.01 to 3.1.06, Treasury Board Secretariat.

CHAIR: Shall 3.1.01 to 3.1.06, Treasury Board Secretariat, carry?

I will call upon the minister for brief opening remarks.

C. PARDY: If this were a ball game now, we'd be into what we call the extra innings of the session.

I'm pleased to be here with the Committee and thanks for everyone's participation. I know my predecessor often said about what an A-team and a fine group that she had worked with. At least, now I know that I've experienced it. We've got a lot of skill here around me. I think that's evident in a lot of things the department is doing. We'll get through that, I'm sure, in the questioning.

Treasury Board – we refer to as TBS for short – in our platform, we talked about planning efficiently and spending smarter. I would think that this is a division of which would drive those two mandates for us.

The role: It provides strategic leadership and oversight for the public service, the public sector resources and, more broadly, how they are managed.

I know that the Chair gave me one minute and maybe that minute is pretty well used up. So I'm thinking that maybe we can go right into the subheadings.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

I appreciate your brief opening remarks. In the interest of time, we'll go right into questions.

I now call on the Member for Burgeo - La Poile.

M. KING: Thank you, Chair.

I would quickly say to the minister, if this is a reference to a Jays' game, the extra innings may not be very exciting these days as they're playing.

Anyway, we'll get right into the questions. Thank you, Minister, and to your staff as well, for being here with us this evening.

Subhead 3.1.01 underspent Salaries by about \$140,800 but are still expecting the same budget as originally set last year. Were there any vacancies that have been hired there?

C. PARDY: No, the Salaries are reflected with two funded positions: one would be the secretary to the minister and the other one was a special advisor for Treasury Board Secretariat, that position is yet to be filled. So why it remains from this year to next year is we would hope that, in this fiscal, we will fill that position.

M. KING: Thank you, Minister.

Transportation and Communications was underspent last year but the budget has significantly increased there, as you note. Can you explain that, please?

C. PARDY: I would say that if the hon. Member were in my position, that budget would be a little higher, travelling 10 hours across the province, but my predecessor in this department was in metro. The travel would be proportionally represented that I do live outside the metro area.

M. KING: Duly noted, as I know the travel that you have to do as well, Minister.

Thank you.

Under 3.1.02, Executive Support, the revised Salaries line overspent \$326,800. What was the reason for that and why do we not anticipate spending that money again next year?

C. PARDY: Any time you find in the department an executive position, you get a transference out and in or any kind of changeover then, sometimes, I said there are commitments on the salary basis that would lead that, whether it be severance or sick leave pay that would occur. So this was basically due to partially offset the leave payout.

M. KING: Thank you, Minister.

Back to the senior advisor position you had mentioned in the Salaries previously. That's a political appointment, correct?

C. PARDY: Yes.

M. KING: And you said you're looking to fill that position?

C. PARDY: In this fiscal.

M. KING: Okay. Thank you.

I'll move on to 3.1.03. We underspent in Salaries by \$1.5 million – a little shy north of \$1.5 million last year. Can you explain the reason for that?

C. PARDY: This is in the Salaries, primarily due to vacancies.

M. KING: Okay.

Have those vacancies been filled, Minister? How many vacancies are in that position now?

C. PARDY: I can defer that to the deputy minister.

J. MCGRATH: I can certainly give you the latest vacancies we have across the department, which might be helpful. As of April, the latest data we pulled was 46 vacancies.

M. KING: Thank you, Chair.

Where are those vacancies and do you have a plan to fill those?

J. MCGRATH: Forty-three are in Treasury Board Secretariat operations.

M. KING: Do you have a plan to fill those?

J. MCGRATH: Yes, so we would work with the Public Service Commission to fill those. We would have conversations with them throughout the year to post those internally or if they're hard-to-fill positions we would work on different options with them as well.

M. KING: Thank you.

In Professional Services, overspent by \$117,100. What was purchased there?

C. PARDY: The overrun there is primarily due to increased costs associated with the pension administration system.

M. KING: Okay. Perfect. Thank you, Minister.

3.1.04, there was overspending in Employee Benefits last year. What accounts for that overspending of about \$11 million?

C. PARDY: That reflects an overrun primarily due to the 17.48 per cent group medical increase, plus the Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission cost in '25-'26. That was only related, those extra costs, to NL Schools.

M. KING: What is the reason this year's budget is just north of \$6.3 million over last year's budget?

C. PARDY: That's related to the Employee Benefits?

M. KING: Yes.

C. PARDY: Yes, a 7 per cent increase due to a Canada Life increase to the employer share of the benefits for this fiscal. It provides the employer cost with respect to NLSchools, Employment Insurance, Canada Pension Plan, group medical and life, and health and post-secondary education tax.

M. KING: Thank you, Minister.

There's a decrease in federal revenue of \$60,500 this year compared with last year, what is the reason for that?

C. PARDY: Decrease in revenue due to the employee benefits for Climate Change protected natural areas initiative.

M. KING: Thank you, Minister.

Under 3.1.05, can we get a breakdown of how much of this budget was transferred out to departments? Is that possible, please, Minister?

C. PARDY: In the Financial Assistance?

M. KING: Yes.

C. PARDY: A record of what was transferred out in the past fiscal?

M. KING: Yes.

If I can just elaborate for a second, Chair, I believe the tobacco settlement legal fees were included here, which I think were then transferred to Justice and Public Safety, but if you could provide the complete breakdown that would be great, please.

C. PARDY: I can provide the list, but I'll give you a few.

M. KING: Sure.

C. PARDY: You said the tobacco legal settlement?

M. KING: Yes.

C. PARDY: The tobacco legal settlement was \$132 million-plus; the Churchill Falls inquiry, \$568,000, and that was transferred to JPS. In the Executive Council, the Churchill Falls inquiry was another \$431,000, and then we had the T'Railway repair to TCAR; Air Access Program Pilot, \$300,000, to Labrador Affairs.

I'm sure you'd be interested in probably getting the total binder after and you'll see a complete list. There's about 12 there.

M. KING: Minister, you took my next question. My next question was going to be: Can we have a copy of the briefing binder?

C. PARDY: Oh, yes, without a doubt.

M. KING: You're reading my mind, Minister.

Last question for me in this section, Minister: What is the \$42,342,000 in this year's budget for?

C. PARDY: We had an interesting discussion in the Future Fund where we talked about eliminating the strategic priorities. This would be the strategic priorities section here.

It also includes the money that we've allocated for a referendum, if needed. I know that I was asked on budget day how much money we allocate for a referendum model for the Upper Churchill; \$8 million of it is here. So what the strategic priorities would be, that is to be seen, much the same as what it would have been as it was written in the Future Fund.

M. KING: Thank you, Minister.

So, basically, this is almost like contingency for what could happen? Is that what you're saying?

C. PARDY: Strategic priorities.

Now, keep in mind, I think the past government had a contingency fund of \$200 million last year. Well, we have similar this year of \$175 million, which we'll talk about on Friday morning. I wouldn't conflate the two, but even the two, you could have some strategic priorities. The contingency is just to respond to some occurrence that we respond to. This one is strategic priorities that we may have as a government.

M. KING: Okay. Thank you.

I'll save that one for Friday, because I'll see you there then. I'll save that question for then.

C. PARDY: Good, I look forward to that.

M. KING: One final question. You mentioned Canada Life earlier and I know the breach has affected many employees, could you just elaborate if there's any support from the Treasury Board for that or how does that work in your division?

C. PARDY: That's a national program, it's a federal, even though our employees are a part of it. Yours truly is one of them. You're another one. I know my executive assistant is another that would be.

The only thing with the communication, I feel okay with the communication that was received on behalf of Treasury Board that came out. I know that they provided the credit monitoring and the information, the number to call if ever you desire to have a concern, then I feel okay that we're in a good place with that.

Remember, the information they took, there was, I think, no SIN number. It was a

mailing address and employee numbers, what they had. I don't even think they had a date of birth. So never good to have a breach of anything, but I think there was some more sensitive information that they could have got that we would be concerned about.

M. KING: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Chair.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for St. John's East - Quidi Vidi.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, and, to your staff, thank you so much for taking the questions. I'm going to go very easy on you with one question.

Over the past few years, we've heard multiple complaints from individuals and unions about discrepancies and alleged unfairness in the Job Evaluation System. Does your government have any plans to re-evaluate the system now that the current framework has been in place for over 10 years?

C. PARDY: If, as minister, I were to say that we had any program that we didn't constantly evaluate or assess, that would be poor governance.

I would think this program, like no different than any other, then we are constantly assessing the effectiveness of. If we do get a lot of feedback on any program that we would have in government, then that would give you a little more of greater reason, I think, to look down at the program that we've got offered. It has done tremendous work, but we know that we've had a lot of people that may have been disenchanted with the outcome and also with the time frame that may be taken, and I understand that, but I know it's not a big division and I know that they work diligently and they're heavily taxed with mandate that they've got to do.

Yes, we would certainly be assessing that program as with others.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you.

That's it for me. Thank you very much.

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

CLERK: 3.1.01 to 3.1.06, Treasury Board Secretariat.

CHAIR: Shall 3.1.01 to 3.1.06, Treasury Board Secretariat, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subheads 3.1.01 through 3.1.06 carried.

CHAIR: We will now take a brief recess to transition to the next subhead.

Recess

CHAIR: Order, please!

We will now resume the meeting for the Government Services Committee reviewing Executive Council. I now ask the departmental officials to introduce themselves, starting with the minister.

C. PARDY: Craig Pardy.

G. SKINNER: Gillian Skinner, Deputy Minister.

M. JANES: Mark Janes, Assistant Deputy Minister, Trade Policy.

N. ABBOTT: Nicole Abbott, Departmental Controller.

C. KNEE: Curtis Knee, Executive Assistant to the minister.

E. SULLEY: Erin Sulley, Communications Branch.

CHAIR: Thank you very much.

I now ask the Clerk to call the next subhead.

CLERK: 2.6.01, Intergovernmental Affairs.

CHAIR: Shall 2.6.01, Intergovernmental Affairs, carry?

I now call on the minister for a very brief introduction. The last introduction was brief; this one is very brief.

C. PARDY: Thank you, Chair.

This is appropriations for 19 funded positions; they provide review and analysis of intergovernmental issues and negotiations relating to social, fiscal, resource, economic, constitutional and trade policy. Intergovernmental Affairs helps to position Newfoundland and Labrador as a strong and effective partner within Canada and internationally while supporting economic growth, collaboration and better outcome for residents.

We've been involved with meetings. I know I've attended one with the team that, federally, the federal desire is to build a stronger Canada – a stronger, more resilient Canada. We know that the rationale, why we've been focusing so hard on making sure that we look at trade, diversification of trade and other issues because of our neighbour south of the border. Call it as it is.

Premier Carney stated today that the world is facing an energy crisis and Canada must help solve it. I thought of that being said today because one of the things that I had mentioned in the House of Assembly before, from my meeting in Ottawa, was the fact that he said we have a productivity crisis. We know, unfortunately, with the war

on Iran, that we've got a lot of pressures on our economy manifesting itself in higher inflation and cost of living.

Internationally we're challenged. I do think that Canada can assist in that, and I'm certainly aware that Newfoundland and Labrador can assist to the best of our ability in the so-called crisis.

Anyway, I thank the team for being here tonight and I pass it back to you, Chair.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

I now turn it over to the Member for Burgeo - La Poile for questioning.

M. KING: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Chair. Thank you to your staff for being here with us this evening as well. I'm just going to go straight into some general policy questions, I guess.

Minister, can you give an overview on what progress has been made since you formed government on reducing interprovincial trade barriers?

C. PARDY: We've had initiatives, along with our counterparts throughout Canada, to look at labour mobility. I think we've talked for some time saying that we've had a – for example, a physician in Ontario that, all of a sudden, through the licensing board, wasn't able to come expeditiously to Newfoundland if they desired. It was a slow process. We've had transport truck trailers that were moving goods with different regulations in different provinces that we've had.

So we've achieved the labour mobility and had some advances in that. We've also, on the movement of goods in our country, made some great inroads on striving. We would think that that helps build a stronger, more resilient Canada, and it makes us more efficient in our delivery of products.

I would say, in the procurement, Microsoft licensing, we're looking under the federal

government, which gets a much cheaper rate than we do for Microsoft licensing. If we went with the federal government, which is, I think, still our intention, to go with the federal government on that, then that would equate to savings for us in Newfoundland and Labrador of approximately \$800,000 for core government to have Microsoft licensing under the federal government.

These are the types of actions that we've been part of, and the team has been quite active in that. I know that I've attended one of those meetings. I know the Premier is the minister in charge of the Intergovernmental Affairs, but I filled in for him on one trip to Yellowknife and had the pleasure of working with the team and engaging in that round table. There is a concerted effort to make sure that we do reduce the trade barriers when and where it makes sense.

M. KING: Thank you for that, Minister.

Just to kind of expand on that a little bit as well, I know that, obviously, your government decided to close the Boston office, but from my previous life travelling to different conferences and meeting with different provinces, a lot of other provinces have trade offices and trade folks in different areas of different countries to bolster trade and to bolster investment for their provinces.

As I mentioned, you closed the Boston office, but is there any plan to look at different trade opportunities, different offices to open up to expand those opportunities for trade for Newfoundland and Labrador?

C. PARDY: We've always been active in attaining international markets. I think we have some big companies that do have phenomenal outreach in international markets. OCI, for example, has numerous offices in a variety of countries around the world: United States, Japan and many others. We do have a big outreach in our international markets and offices.

We believe that we can do it here, centrally in Newfoundland and Labrador, as effectively as what we could by having an office open in Boston. That was the premise of doing it.

Another thing was the cost. If we looked at annual cost of \$1.2 million or \$1.3 million per year, was that a factor? Well, I would think that was a factor as well, especially if we felt that we can look after and be as effective in making sure that we grow those markets and diversify our markets from here in Newfoundland and Labrador. We do believe we will be able to do that as well from here.

M. KING: Thank you for that, Minister.

I appreciate your comments and I would say the in-person perspective is that as well, though, and being there in person and speaking to those folks on the ground, I think adds value as well and somethings I think you should consider going forward.

Just to talk about another topic, I guess, that's important to me. As you would know, Marine Atlantic is an essential operation in my district; a major, major employer in the Port aux Basques area and, of course, the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, the gateway to this province.

There has been lots of conversations around new vessels expanding access to this province. Can you confirm if you or your officials know that the fifth vessel is still on track to start running this year?

C. PARDY: I can defer that, but before I defer that, when we talk about direct contact, when you mentioned about the Boston office. Now, keep in mind, I think previous governments before us – the Boston Seafood show, that was huge, as well as others internationally. The government has always attended those, the seafood show in Boston. It's a huge networking event that's down there. One would say that, yes, the value in the person-

to-person contact has value, then I would think that's probably the greatest value of attending that seafood show that you get down there.

I think that it's a busy time. I've never been there but I know the previous minister and the ministers before, of whom I sat where you are, asking the minister over here on those seafood shows and the networking, has been huge.

It still occurs and it doesn't mean that it's only going to be once a year, but it does occur and it comes both ways. A lot of these people who are interested in our valuable product would certainly come here to see first-hand what we've got as well. The only thing is that we think that we can certainly avail of those types of exchanges in person, but also to do a network from here, much more cost efficiently.

I'll pass it over to the DM.

G. SKINNER: Yes, it's our understanding for the fall that the extra vessel will be running. I think Minister Barbour may have spoke to that last night in terms of that kind of advocacy with Marine Atlantic as well. That's our understanding.

M. KING: Thank you for that.

I was actually going to mention that the minister mentioned that last night, but I just want to clarify, as well, that this new vessel is five in total. It's just the way the minister phrased it last night, kind of sounded like there was another vessel coming. Are you aware that there are just five in total?

G. SKINNER: Five in total is my understanding.

M. KING: I know the *Leif* is supposed to also drop off at some point.

G. SKINNER: Yes, five in total is my understanding.

M. KING: Okay. Perfect.

Thank you.

That's all the questions I have, Chair.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the Member for St. John's East - Quidi Vidi.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all.

Just following up on intergovernmental relationships. Obviously, we've heard loud and clear about boycotting the US so it's interesting the discussion is now about the Boston office closing, but still the benefits.

We've been encouraged to boycott the US because we have a President of the United States waging illegal wars with unconscionable behaviours. This has been in the public consciousness about people when they go to the grocery stores, when they're buying their products, they really desperately don't want to buy American goods. Oftentimes, the supermarkets have kind of been a little cagey around how they advertise in those scenarios.

The bottom line is that we are continuing to wean off our dependence on American markets. I think it's very smart for us to be looking at the continued relationship building across the country and, of course, across the world and Europe where we've had historically and traditionally a very strong working relationship.

I guess my question here is where is our provincial government? Where is the government now on this boycott of American products, because it's starting to get a little quiet out there about this? We still have these wars raging and a very adversarial neighbour. I'm just wondering what is the standpoint right now in regard to that particular issue, which is a very big issue in the world?

Thank you.

C. PARDY: A very well-asked question.

As we know, we are still maintaining that there will be no American liquor on our shelves in Newfoundland and Labrador from the NLC perspective. We still have an act of CUSMA agreement. We do have industries, such as the fishery, where 95 per cent of our snow crab are being shipped to the United States. We can't diversify that quickly. I think if none of that product went to the States, we would never be able to move it within one fiscal. It wouldn't happen.

I think with everything, diversification is key. I think we realize now that we need to diversify, and I think diversifying we are. We know it still remains to be a huge market, the largest market, but we have made inroads with a lot of sectors where products are being shipped to others, as you said, Asia, Europe and so on.

So cognizant of the size of the market, but I know that we are diversifying when and where it is economically feasible to do so.

S. O'LEARY: Thank you.

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

CLERK: 2.6.01, Intergovernmental Affairs.

CHAIR: Shall 2.6.01, Intergovernmental Affairs, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Motion carried.

On motion, subhead 2.6.01 carried.

CHAIR: We will now take a brief recess to transition to the next subhead.

Recess

CHAIR: Order, please!

We will now resume the meeting for the Government Services Committee reviewing Executive Council.

I now ask the departmental officials to introduce themselves, starting with the minister.

C. PARDY: Craig Pardy.

N. ABBOTT: Nicole Abbott, Departmental Controller.

A. MCKENNA: Andrea McKenna, Deputy Clerk.

C. ORSBORN: Caroline Orsborn, Assistant Deputy Clerk.

J. TOMPKINS: John Tompkins, Assistant Secretary to Cabinet, Communications.

D. MACKENZIE: Dan MacKenzie, Private Secretary to the Lieutenant Governor.

C. KNEE: Curtis Knee, Minister's EA.

E. SULLEY: Erin Sulley, Communications Branch.

CHAIR: Thank you.

I ask the Clerk to call the next subhead.

CLERK: 1.1.01, Government House.

CHAIR: Shall 1.1.01, Government House, carry?

I now call on the minister for a quick opening remark.

C. PARDY: Thank you, Chair.

We are looking at the Executive Council now for the third go around here. This one covers the Government House, Premier's

Office, Cabinet Secretariat, Communications and Financial Administration. Those are the headings.

So maybe what we'll do, just to be informed that there are 76 funded positions across those areas. I'm sure that's probably one question that you would have. Collectively, these functions would help ensure government decision-making is coordinated, communications with the public are timely and effective, and public resources are administered responsibly.

While much of the work takes place behind the scenes, it is essential to support a cohesive, transparent and effective government for the residents of Newfoundland and Labrador.

With that, I yield to my colleagues.

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

CLERK: 1.1.01, Government House.

CHAIR: Shall 1.1.01, Government House, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Motion is carried.

On motion, subhead 1.1.01 carried.

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

CLERK: 2.1.01, Premier's Office.

CHAIR: Shall 2.1.01, Premier's Office, carry?

I now call on the Member for Burgeo - La Poile as the first questioner in this section.

M. KING: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, and your staff for being here this evening, again, for you anyway.

For the special advisor in the Premier's Office that has been noted to be paid by MCP, is money being transferred from MCP to the Premier's Office to pay for this staff person?

C. PARDY: I'm going to defer this to the Deputy Clerk.

A. MCKENNA: Dr. Whalen is a practising rural emergency physician who is compensated through an established provincial mechanism for physicians – physicians that provide administrative and advisory services. So that's consistent with arrangements that exist for a small number of physicians across government.

Currently, there are a limited number of physicians engaged in that way, providing expertise that supports the system beyond direct clinical care. These individuals are placed in roles where their medical knowledge can inform decision-making, including within departments and in senior advisory capacities.

Thank you.

M. KING: Does Dr. Des Whalen only provide medical advice to the Premier's office?

A. MCKENNA: As I had said, his role involves coordination between the department and the Premier's office.

M. KING: I think you did state though that it was a health care kind of advisory position. Is Dr. Des Whalen only providing health care advice to the Premier's office?

A. MCKENNA: To the best of my knowledge, he is.

M. KING: Are there any other political employees, obviously in the Premier's

office, that are not paid through this subhead?

C. PARDY: No.

M. KING: How many staff in the Premier's office are paid on a different scale? It's a political staff scale and the executive staff scale. Do you have a breakdown of that?

C. PARDY: I may defer that now, but I just want to give you a little overview. I know where you're going with your line of questioning.

In the Premier's office in our previous administration, we had 18 employees which used up the full allocation of monies that would be in the Premier's office. We currently have 14 in the Premier's office, with \$335,000 less than what the allocation would be of \$1.8 million.

We're \$335,000 less on the total than what would be allocated, knowing that previous government had used up the full amount in the previous government. I just want to get that out there to know that there is nothing nefarious, that's the amount that we have and in the amount we still have quite a bit left over. We have 14 employees versus previously it would have been 18.

On the scales, I can probably pass it to the deputy clerk.

A. MCKENNA: The remaining staff in the Premier's office are all paid through the political scale.

M. KING: Thank you.

For the staff person, the former deputy chief of staff, Steve Outhouse, how was he paid in the Premier's office?

A. MCKENNA: That expenditure was not paid from the Premier's office. We can answer that in the next subhead, if that would be helpful.

M. KING: Isn't this all under – sorry, no.

C. PARDY: Executive Support would be the next subheading.

CHAIR: In the interest of time, we can move to the next subhead. We only have one minute so we have to vote on the subhead.

CLERK: (Inaudible) if she wants to answer that question.

CHAIR: Yes, if you want to answer that question, we'll move along then.

A. MCKENNA: Yes, sure.

That expenditure was from 2.2.01, Executive Support. That was under our Professional Services budget as a transition consultant.

M. KING: So the former deputy chief of staff was paid as a consultant? Is that what I understand?

A. MCKENNA: The transition consultant fees were professional services fees that came out of the Professional Services budget from Executive Council to provide the transition from one government to another.

M. KING: I understand that his title was deputy chief of staff in the Premier's office, so was that individual paid as an individual, Steve Outhouse, or was he contracted under a company name?

A. MCKENNA: It was a contractual service. The company name was Intercede Communication Incorporated.

CHAIR: Now that we have run out of time, I need to ask the Clerk to recall the subhead.

CLERK: 2.1.01, Premier's Office.

CHAIR: Shall 2.1.01, Premier's Office, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Motion carried.

On motion, subhead 2.1.01 carried.

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

CLERK: 2.2.01, Cabinet Secretariat.

CHAIR: Shall 2.2.01, Cabinet Secretariat, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subhead 2.2.01 carried.

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

CLERK: 2.4.01, Communications.

CHAIR: Shall 2.4.01, Communications, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subhead 2.4.01 carried.

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

CLERK: 2.5.01, Financial Administration.

CHAIR: Shall 2.5.01, Financial Administration, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subhead 2.5.01 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, Executive Council, total heads, carried.

CHAIR: Shall I report the Estimates of Executive Council carried?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, Estimates of the Executive Council carried without amendment.

CHAIR: I just want to thank the ministers this evening. We've had several in the room this evening doing expenditures. I just want to thank all the department officials and especially the Committee for your questions and for your attendance as well.

The next meeting is Thursday, May 21, at 9 a.m., to consider the Estimates of the Department of Government Services.

I ask for a mover for adjournment.

M. BUTT: So moved.

CHAIR: Moved by the Member for Lewisporte - Twillingate.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Motion carried.

Thank you, everybody.

On motion, the Committee adjourned.