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

April 13, 2022 - Issue 8

Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development
Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation

SOCIAL SERVICES COMMITTEE

Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development
Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation

Chair: Sherry Gambin-Walsh, MHA

Vice-Chair: Joedy Wall, MHA

Members: James Dinn, MHA
Jeff Dwyer, MHA
Paul Pike, MHA
Scott Reid, MHA
Lucy Stoyles, MHA

Clerk of the Committee: Kim Hawley George

Appearing:

Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development

Hon. John Abbott, MHA, Minister

Susan Walsh, Deputy Minister

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

Dave Martin, Departmental Controller, Finance and General Operations

Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation

Hon. John Abbott, MHA, Minister

Julia Mullaley, CEO

Mike Tizzard, Executive Director, Finance and Corporate Services

Joe Mercer, Executive Director, Regional Operations and Program Delivery

Melanie Thomas, Director of Policy, Housing and Homelessness

Doug Jackman, Director of Finance

Also Present

Hon. Siobhan Coady, MHA, Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board

Lela Evans, MHA

Carlson Young, Official Opposition Office

Scott Fleming, Research, Third Party

Perry Trimper, MHA

David Hamlyn, Government Members' Office

Bobbi Russell, Policy and Communication's Officer, Clerk's Office

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Siobhan Coady, MHA for St. John's West, substitutes for Paul Pike, MHA for Burin - Grand Bank.

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

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

CHAIR (Gambin-Walsh): Minister Coady, I just want to make sure you can hear us.

S. COADY: I can very well.

Thank you.

CHAIR: Perfect.

Siobhan, if you can wave if you need to say anything –

S. COADY: Okay.

Thank you, I will.

CHAIR: Okay.

I want to call the meeting to order. This is the Estimates of Children, Seniors and Social Development and Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation. The substitutes for this evening are: Burin - Grand Bank, we have substituting St. John's West, Siobhan Coady; and St. John's Centre –

J. DINN: (Inaudible) and then my substitute is taking over.

CHAIR: Okay, perfect. Substituting for Children, Seniors and Social Development department, we have MHA Evans.

C. COADY: Madam Chair, I am not substituting; I am here –

CLERK (Hawley George): If you would like to put your earpiece in, the minister is speaking.

CHAIR: Yes.

CLERK: Go ahead, Minister.

S. COADY: Sorry, I thought you indicated that I was substituting but I believe I am here –

CHAIR: You are substituting for MHA Pike who is on the Committee.

S. COADY: Oh, okay.

Thank you. Got it.

CHAIR: Have we come to an agreement of how we are going to work with the independent Member?

CLERK: Maybe just confirm it with the Committee, Chair.

CHAIR: We will do the Official Opposition, Third Party and we will allow the unaffiliated Member –

J. DWYER: I think it went through us twice and then it goes to them for 10 (inaudible) –

CLERK: Ten on each head; that's the way the Committees have been doing it previously at the end of the questions here.

CHAIR: All right, so we will do two rounds and then we'll allow the independent Member to speak.

CLERK: At the end, the independent Members will have 10 minutes, when the others are finished. That's the way we have been doing it.

P. TRIMPER: (Inaudible.)

CHAIR: So at the very end when the parties are finished speaking here, we'll give you 10 minutes on the clock for each heading.

P. TRIMPER: (Inaudible.)

CHAIR: So for each heading.

P. TRIMPER: So will I have enough time to ask questions in each department or do I have to wait until the end of the session –

CHAIR: Each group, before it's called and voted on, you will be permitted 10 minutes. Thank you.

Okay so we'll probably take a break at 6:45 if everyone is good with that.

I just want to remind everyone to wait for your light to come on and to identify yourself and if your light doesn't come on, just do a gentle wave and they will see you and turn your light on. Please don't adjust the chairs. We've had some incidents of chairs being adjusted. Water coolers are on each side.

First, I am going to get the Committee Members and staff to introduce themselves and then I'll get the minister to introduce his staff. We'll adopt the minutes and when we call the groups, the minister can then speak for introductory remarks before we start.

So we'll just start over here.

J. DWYER: Jeff Dwyer, MHA for the District of Placentia West - Bellevue, shadow Cabinet minister for CSSD, Newfoundland and Labrador Housing and Income Support.

C. YOUNG: Carlson Young, Political Staff.

J. DINN: Jim Dinn, MHA for St. John's Centre. To my right is Scott Fleming one of our researchers and holding up the rear and anchoring us, Lela Evans, MHA for Torngat Mountains.

CHAIR: Okay.

MHA Reid.

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

D. HAMLYN: David Hamlyn, Sessional Support, GMO.

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

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

CHAIR: Thank you very much.

S. COADY: And I'm Siobhan Coady.

CHAIR: Siobhan, I'm not certain how I'm going to remember you there,

S. COADY: That's okay. Just by way of introduction, I am present. I'm here. I'll wave.

Thank you.

CHAIR: We have Minister Coady.

J. ABBOTT: John Abbott, Minister for Children, Seniors and Social Development, the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation, and MHA for St. John's East - Quidi Vidi.

I'll ask the staff to introduce themselves.

J. MULLALEY: Julia Mullaley, CEO for Newfoundland and Labrador Housing.

M. TIZZARD: Mike Tizzard, Executive Director of Finance and Corporate Services.

M. THOMAS: Melanie Thomas, Director of Policy, Housing and Homelessness with NL Housing.

J. MERCER: Joe Mercer, Executive Director for Regional Operations.

D. JACKMAN: Doug Jackman, Director of Finance, NL Housing.

CHAIR: Okay, I have the minutes; I ask the Committee to adopt the minutes of April 12, 2022.

J. DWYER: So moved.

CHAIR: So moved.

On motion, minutes adopted as circulated.

CHAIR: I'll ask the Clerk to call the first subheading or group.

CLERK: For the Estimates of the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation, Housing Operations and Assistance: 1.1.01.

CHAIR: The Estimates of the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation, Housing Operations and Assistance, 1.1.01 inclusive.

Minister.

J. ABBOTT: Thank you, Chair.

Thanks, colleagues and staff, for being here this evening. I've got a few opening comments around the work that the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation is doing and has done over the past year to set the stage for some of the questions.

As minister responsible for the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation. I'm certainly pleased to be here this evening to discuss our Estimates for the corporation.

Everyone deserves a safe and affordable place to call home. Through *Budget 2022*, our government is pleased to provide an investment of \$47 million to the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation, leveraging a further \$52 million in federal funding and enabling the delivery of vital programs and services that address a diverse range of housing needs throughout the province.

Cost-shared investments of \$58 million within those sums will support operations of our public rental housing portfolio, as well as partner-managed and co-operative housing throughout the province, providing homes for over 13,000 low-income individuals and families.

Over \$15 million will be invested in repairs and renovations to our public housing rental units. This includes \$1 million to complete major repairs on vacancies so these can once again become homes for families in need.

Through the budget, government will continue to invest \$8 million to further support housing affordability through the provision of heat subsidies to our tenants. An additional \$2.4 million under the Low Carbon Economy Leadership Fund will provide for the electric conversion of oil furnace systems upgrading and other energy efficiency improvements on 178 of our units over the next two years.

Budget 2022 also invests \$14.4 million to provide rental assistance in the private market, expanding available housing options and assisting over 2,000 low-income households to find safe, affordable homes. Over 50 per cent of these clients are seniors.

Launched this past year and starting in November, we have the new \$74 million Canada – Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Benefit, which will further expand portable rental assistance in the private market for an additional 800 households over the next six years.

We have an investment of over \$11 million for home repair programs that will support low-income homeowners throughout the province, again, most of whom are seniors. This financial assistance program will support much-needed home repairs and improve housing accessibility and energy efficiency, allowing individuals to remain in their homes.

Budget 2022 also includes investments to work with our many and valued partners in addressing homelessness throughout the province. Over \$7 million will provide emergency accommodation, food, transportation and supports to individuals who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. An investment of over \$7 million through the Supportive Living Program will support community-based partners to prevent homelessness and provide individualized supports to foster long-term housing stability.

Additionally, an investment of \$9 million will continue to support the work of the 10 transition houses throughout the province to provide safe accommodations and services to support women and their children fleeing intimate partner violence.

Collectively, these investments designed to address housing and homelessness issues in our province are critical to the social, financial and physical well-being of individuals, families and our communities. We look forward to continuing to work in partnership with our federal, municipal and Indigenous governments as well as our many community partners to ensure all Newfoundlanders and Labradorians have a place to call home.

Thank you for the opportunity to highlight these important *Budget 2022* investments. I certainly look forward to the opportunity to respond to the questions from my colleagues.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

All right. We shall start with MHA Dwyer. Put the time on the clock.

J. DWYER: Thank you very much, Minister, for your opening remarks. I appreciate it and I appreciate the fact that your staff are here to help answer questions and the support that is on this side to ask those questions.

The first question, I guess, is can we obtain a copy of your briefing binder?

J. ABBOTT: Absolutely.

J. DWYER: Okay. Thank you very much.

And are you applying zero-based budgeting for this Newfoundland and Labrador Housing industry?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, we are.

J. DWYER: The budgeted amount for Grants and Subsidies is \$137,100 more for 2022-2023. Can you please explain that?

J. ABBOTT: Well, there are throughout the entire budget, which is \$122 million, give or take, a number of variances, but the main factor is around the negotiated and approved salary increases for the staff at the corporation.

J. DWYER: Why is there no federal revenue in this year's budget?

J. ABBOTT: Again, this shows the net, which is the contribution that the province will be providing to the corporation. The balance of our budget would show, I think it's \$52 million in federal funding going towards our overall budget.

J. DWYER: Okay. Thank you.

You are spending \$563,400 more than last year. Is that due to budgeted salaries as well?

J. ABBOTT: I'm going to ask Mike Tizzard to respond to that particular question, if that's okay.

M. TIZZARD: The increase you're seeing there is related to the salary increases that the minister noted. That's the total that you're seeing on the bottom line for Newfoundland and Labrador Housing. Outside of employees at the corporation, there's also an increase this year for the transition house employees; they fall under the group homes agreement that the provincial government has with all those transition houses. So we basically are the pass-through for the salary increases for those as well.

The other difference there is the revenue that netted out to zero this year that you alluded to. That's related to the low-carbon economy fund for one of our home repair programs for oil. We seen lower uptake on that last year so we have some surplus funding we're carrying forward. That funding comes from the Department of Environment and Climate Change. So they've instructed us basically this year to use up that excess funding first and when we do that, go to them and we'll be reimbursed for our expenses that way.

So that's why the revenue is gone to zero this year. The money is still going to be received, but it's going to be received by the Department of Environment.

J. DWYER: Okay. Thank you.

What is the current waitlist for rent supplement?

J. ABBOTT: I'll ask Julia to respond to that.

J. MULLALEY: So the waitlist in total is 1,930. We don't differentiate between our units and/or the rent supplement so there's one application and whatever becomes available that meets the needs of the individual, they'll be offered either a unit and/or a rent supplement, whatever one becomes available first.

J. DWYER: Okay. What is the wait-list to receive a unit?

J. MULLALEY: The timeline?

J. DWYER: No, the –

J. MULLALEY: So 1,930 is the wait-list currently.

J. DWYER: Okay. So last year you noted you were negotiating with the federal government to increase the number of units. You noted in two years you would be down by one-third and last year was somewhere around 1,500. I'm just wondering, with that increasing, do we still think that timeline is feasible?

J. ABBOTT: So a couple of things. One is we negotiated with the federal government with the Canada Housing Benefit and as a result we will see from last year and this year, we'll see a reduction depending – or an increase, whichever way you want to look at it – in terms of rent supplements that we will be able to fund.

So if you did the math that would then bring it down from now 1,900 to 1,300. The challenge we have of course is that the number of families coming forward looking for a unit or rent supplement combined continues to increase.

J. DWYER: Okay.

What is the wait-list under the Home Repair Program and what is the current cap limit?

J. MULLALEY: Again, there is actually no wait-list for the Home Repair Program right now. As an individual comes in and applies, it will get processed. So there is no specific wait-list right now.

For the Home Repair Program, when you say the cap, are you referencing the income limits or rent?

J. DWYER: No, how much they can obtain.

J. MULLALEY: Under the Home Repair Program it is \$5,000; Labrador is \$6,500. There is a loan availability as well of \$12,500; \$15,500 for Labrador. Under the Home Modification Program, it is a \$7,500 grant and a loan of \$10,000.

J. DWYER: Do you feel that, with the escalating costs of materials, would they need to increase that cap?

J. MULLALEY: We are actually currently reviewing that program now from the perspective of the costs and the increase in costs.

J. DWYER: Is there an inventory of units to be sold based on the cost of repairs and a plan to construct new units?

J. ABBOTT: We have a couple of areas in the province where we are looking at how we develop or divest of units. Marystown is an example where we are now talking to the town and the community as to how best to use those units because there isn't a demand and – quote, unquote – they're sort of locked up, boarded up and not being used. We're going to divest of those, we think. We have a situation in Corner Brook very similar.

Those are the two that are outstanding areas. Outside of that, all our other units that we will be keeping, if they are not repaired by now they will be, literally, over the next year or two years at the outside. We have funding in this budget to do the major repairs that have been outstanding for some time.

J. DWYER: Okay, thank you.

What is the current plan for homeless families and individuals?

J. ABBOTT: Well, a couple of things. First, we are required under our agreement with CMHC to have a three-year action plan. We are in the process of revising that and we will have that done in short order. In addition, we are using that as the basis of a larger provincial housing and homelessness plan. We'll be doing consultations on that and then it will be my job to bring that to government and then to the House to review our future investments.

We are also working closely with the federal government and there have been announcements in the recent federal budget for additional funding for social housing across the country. We, obviously, will be talking to them and negotiating with them our share of those dollars so that we can invest in the province.

But one thing we have been doing and really focused on – before my time and certainly now that I am here – is looking at the shelter system

and making sure we improve both on the services we are currently delivering and in expanding the non-profit shelter system here in the province dealing with the homelessness that will need that type of housing. We also want to expand supportive housing and we're doing that. There's money in the budget to do that as well,

J. DWYER: Thank you.

In 2019, 900 people registered as guests at the Gathering Place. Currently, there are approximately 2,000 availing of the centre's services. How many of these people are housed in less than ideal housing?

J. ABBOTT: I don't know if I can answer that question. We work quite closely with the Gathering Place, and the Salvation Army here in St. John's will be taking in guests very soon in their new facility. So we're working with them. The Gathering Place really are a – quote – community/health centre, so they are providing overnight shelter for those that are homeless; that do not have a place to call home at the present time; and they're providing health services and other services. We're working with them quite closely around the housing needs.

So one of the things that this Canada Housing Benefit allows us to do is for people who are ready to move into supportive housing as well as long-term rental, we can support that and that's really our aim, and we have plans to expand those services across the province.

J. DWYER: I think you just answered one of my other questions because I think, you know, we need to find a way to get away from the emergency shelters and give more permanent housing would be the goal I would hope for the corporation.

Last year over a million dollars was paid to shelter operations and there was some complaints to Newfoundland and Labrador Housing about spoiled food, urine on the floor, locked laundry rooms and the list goes on. They are not staffed or supervised by Newfoundland and Labrador Housing?

J. ABBOTT: No, I think the issue you may be referring to is we have both – in terms of our shelters, we have non-profit shelters such as the

Gathering Place and others, and then we have for-profit shelters. However, if we get complaints and when we get complaints, we respond to those immediately.

For the private shelters, as some backdrop, we looked at our data over the past four years. In terms of complaints on file, and that's all we can go with for the moment, we had 44 complaints over four years. There were 20,000 shelter nights over those four years.

Now, we recognize – and I know there were questions in the House this week around that – that if issues are going to arise we will deal with those. We have standards, but we intend and are working on improving those, and there will be consistency between the profit and non-profit shelter system on a go-forward basis.

J. DWYER: That's usually a good way to move forward, for sure.

How many units are currently vacant, and is there ongoing work to modernize the units for families?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, so we have several hundred of what we call vacant. Within that are units that we will not be using and we will be divesting. We have units that we set aside for special housing needs in the community. For those that remain that are currently vacant, we will be funding any of the repairs and maintenance required to make sure they are brought back in to the housing stock for families, and that money is in the budget.

So the plan, and ideally by the end of this year, we will have any vacant units that will be used and can be used available. That being said, from time to time, people will move out and we will be constantly upgrading those units. We announced money for Lab West just recently, for the vacant units up there, and we'll have those ready within the year.

J. DWYER: I think that's one of the things that we've noticed the most, and I get questions about it all the time from Newfoundland and Labrador Housing clients, is the turnover from the time a client leaves until we get a new one in, there seems to be a longer period that we'd like to see shortened. Obviously, the need is

much greater now, and expediting that would be to our benefit.

The current supports are not sufficient to secure housing for the low-income earners and people on fixed incomes. Would you agree?

J. ABBOTT: No.

As I mentioned, we have our existing stock of rental units, over 5,500, and they're fully subscribed. We now have the Canada – Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Benefit, so that's going to bring on more people to be able to rent in private. That is 800 over the next couple of years. We are also looking at – and we are ready to fund – some new shelter and housing units here in the province and that is built into our budget.

Now, what we are seeing – given recent economic conditions in the province – is that there is certainly more pressure put on our system, but we are working within the means that we have to address that. What I will say is that any individual who needs a home or shelter, our objective is to work to get that in place.

CHAIR: Thank you.

The Members time has expired.

MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, and thank you to the staff who showed up tonight.

Is it possible to have an update on staffing numbers, both by region and type of employment? I know there is some mention of this but do you have a breakdown of that? If you have it here, fine. If not, that can be sent –

J. ABBOTT: We can provide that.

J. DINN: Has there been any elimination due to attrition of staff?

J. ABBOTT: We are just at the tail end of our attrition. We have the equivalent of probably a position that we may have to address but we're being able to, through our budgeting, protect the

salary budget, where we can. In fact, because of the additional federal-provincial agreements in place we have actually had to hire staff so we've brought on, I think, 17 or 19.

OFFICIAL: Nineteen.

J. ABBOTT: Nineteen staff over the past year to help us deliver on our mandate, and examples to support us in our shelter work in particular.

J. DINN: How many of those will be, let's say, inspectors who would be responsible for making sure that standards are followed or make sure the shelter where people are going is up to standards. I guess the other part I am looking at is maintenance in particular.

J. ABBOTT: Okay.

Maybe what I'll do is ask Julia Mullaley just to give you a quick snapshot of how we do the inspections and who's responsible for that.

J. MULLALEY: So we actually did hire two new emergency housing officers more recently. We added them into the staffing. So they will help support the calls as well – the call volume as well as the inspections. So they are doing a schedule up now. They have been out more recently in the last couple of weeks inspecting the shelters again.

There was some COVID restrictions over the past year but they do go and do those inspections and there will be a full schedule to do that.

J. DINN: And they would also go out and do the physical inspections as well, right?

J. MULLALEY: Yeah.

J. DINN: Thank you.

In terms of wraparound services provided to clients of NLHC, have there been any innovations or improvements in the past year that have reduced siloing between departments and led to improve the service delivery?

J. ABBOTT: I think, Mr. Dinn, the answer is yes.

I know Melanie Thomas is here and that's really a large part of the work she does is working with all the other community agencies and departments that are involved around housing matters particularly when it comes to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

And the fact that we have brought, over the past couple of years, all government funding into the Housing Corporation to focus our efforts on making sure we get it right and that we have the resources to do that and that's paying dividends. But we work, obviously, in the St. John's area with End Homelessness St. John's on a regular and almost daily basis.

But we've worked with The Gathering Place to support the work that they're doing; working with the Salvation Army in the work they're doing. In Labrador, working with the action team there and there are several housing and homeless coalitions that have developed across the province. We work and consult with them on a regular basis and get the input and then we obviously provide support to those as well.

J. DINN: Thank you.

In the bilateral agreement with the federal government as part of the National Housing Strategy, we have to commit to expanding the social housing stock by, I think it was, 894 units. Is it possible to have an update on reaching that milestone?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, we can do that. One of the things to that agreement is that we have to protect the existing public housing stock. So, as a result, we are, with the federal government, finding the dollars to, obviously, improve on the housing stock. So that's a very specific condition of the funding on which we're obviously supportive of and at the same time it is allowing us to expand.

J. DINN: So if I'm understanding you correctly, part of that 894 is about protecting the existing stock.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah. So this would be in addition, so we're currently planning and budgeting for the investments we need to make now to reach those numbers.

J. DINN: Okay. So have we started on reaching those numbers?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: Okay. Any update? Are we 200 in or – I'm just trying to get an idea of where we are with that.

J. ABBOTT: Well, I'd say more in the planning and getting ready to move forward, we're probably in the 100 to 200 range. This is a multi-year agreement so it's going to take some time to get it. At the same time, we're trying to – wherever we can – move dollars into adding to the housing stock, either that we manage but largely focused in the community.

J. DINN: Right. And multi-year, so I'm assuming that you're looking at reaching this over the next two or three years or something like that or –

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, it's a seven- or eight-year agreement.

J. DINN: Oh, seven or eight, perfect.

J. ABBOTT: But we're trying to move that as fast as we can.

J. DINN: Thank you.

Is it possible to have, then, a breakdown of how the \$74.4 million from the Canada – Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Benefit will be invested and how much has been spent since the announcement last August?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, we can provide that.

J. DINN: Okay.

In last year's Estimates, the minister mentioned a housing homelessness plan for the province was under development. Any update on that?

J. ABBOTT: As I mentioned earlier in one of the questions, we're just finalizing the action plan, the three-year action plan for CMHC. Once that's done, we'll roll that into our provincial plan and we're looking to have that done summer, fall at the latest.

J. DINN: Okay, thank you.

With regard to the grants under the Home Energy Savings Program, how many of these non-repayable grants have been awarded in the past year?

J. ABBOTT: It's 399.

J. DINN: Is that up or down, or what you expected?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, it's up this past year.

J. DINN: Thank you.

Just a question with regard to housing and the shipping season in Torngat region and district. So there's a five-month shipping season to get raw materials in there. I'm just wondering, what are the plans, then, to ensure that there are materials in the community year-round so that housing needs and repairs and that can be addressed? Are there any plans to address this?

J. ABBOTT: I'm going to ask Julia Mullaley to respond in some details but one of the challenges that we have had, despite all the best intentions over this past year to get more work done, is that when the tenders came in they were exorbitant, well passed our budget and we recognize the cost of doing business in Labrador and they were reflected in our own numbers. So we have had to go back and come back with another plan to do that. That is one of the delays, but I'll ask Julia to respond to that specific question in terms of ...

J. MULLALEY: Conscious, obviously, of the shipping seasons and everything else in Labrador, I think generally what we try to do is plan very early in the year so you will see we just did our awarding now for units. There is another nine going out to public procurement and we're trying to get those out as soon as possible, appreciating that it is important to get the materials there.

The other ones, really, is around a majority of all of that. We do some in-house, but the majority are contractors who would certainly be aware of that as well. So it is really getting the tenders out as early in the year as we can.

J. DINN: If you can't find people in the community to do the work or the contractors are limited, to the minister's point, about the costs, is it possible then to bring in contractors from other areas besides Happy Valley-Goose Bay – like outside the province to do the work, especially if it is hard to get them at a reasonable price? Or is it just within the area?

J. ABBOTT: Well, the answer would be yes. As a matter of fact, the reverse has happened. In doing some work in Labrador West, we have had to bring from outside Labrador West and from other parts of Labrador. We are open to any option that gets us to move those repairs and upgrade as quickly as possible.

J. DINN: I have time for one quick question. I just want to go to – I think you mentioned at the beginning there was \$1 million to implement major repairs. Just curiosity then – I think at the end of March 2021, there are 141 housing units that were unavailable for rent due to needing major repairs. I am just trying to get an idea. Even with the \$1 million, how many housing units are we looking at and when can we expect them up and running?

J. ABBOTT: With the money, as I mentioned earlier, we've allocated in the last year's budget and money we have in this year's budget will allow us to address all those major repairs.

CHAIR: The Member's time has expired.

MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: Thank you, Chair.

The cost of food and fuel is making long-term housing increasingly inaccessible. Is there a plan for long-term solutions instead of having to utilize emergency shelters so often?

J. ABBOTT: Certainly one of the things we've been trying to do – wearing my other hat as Minister of Children, Seniors and Social Development – is to identify how we can support, at the community level, issues around food security, as an example.

So wherever we can we work, certainly, with Food First NL to make that a reality. One of the very successful programs, really, and initiatives

is connecting seniors here in St. John's and trying to move that approach across the province where you are working with, in this case, seniors who are at risk and having the same challenges – issues around cost of living, obviously, food security, mental health issues at times and what have you.

They are able to bring a team together to support them and help them find a suitable accommodation with support. And the critical thing is with support. We've seen in the past where we have an individual who has exhibited certain challenges. We've put them in a house or an apartment and, within a month, the whole arrangement breaks down. Why? Because there are no supports.

So that's one of the things that we are constantly working on, expanding our services there and the conversations I have had and am having with the federal minister is around that. And I think there was an appreciation within the federal system. It is one thing to spend billions on housing and if there are no supports for those who need supports, then it's not going to achieve the results.

That's one of the areas that our team is certainly focused on. We've just funded 10 housing support workers throughout the community sector to help individual groups work with their clients and guests to help them with long-term housing solutions.

J. DWYER: Make it more like a wraparound support –

J. ABBOTT: Yes, absolutely.

J. DWYER: – as opposed to just a house or a roof over your head.

Do you have a report of the number of people in emergency shelters and the desired outcomes?

J. ABBOTT: We certainly are tracking those that are coming in for every night – we will know. I don't think we are doing a really good job in tacking outcomes per se but, that being said, we have organizations like End Homelessness St. John's who are working and we work with them to do just that, to see how we can improve where people are in their life

and where they want to be, what housing is needed for them and doing assessment and, again, providing supports.

We'll know we're successful when the demand for shelters goes down, for instance. And we were seeing that trend down, up until almost this time last year, and then it has accelerated through this summer, into the fall and into the winter. So obviously there are challenges out there around accommodation and we're working for those solutions.

J. DWYER: Sure.

J. ABBOTT: Julia's going to add.

J. MULLALEY: I just wanted to highlight as well, because we work very closely with our Reaching Home entities. There is \$7 million that will come to our Reaching Home entities, like End Homelessness St. John's here in the city, so that helps to support a lot of this work as well, and we work very closely with them.

For example, we partnered last year on positions to help really support individuals to move out of the shelter and into more permanent, stable housing. This year as well End Homelessness St. John's had just released an RFP for 18 positions, so they're providing 18 positions focused solely on helping individuals move out of the shelter, and we're coming also to the table with that Canada Housing Benefit. So there's a Canada Housing Benefit waiting for every single one of those individuals, and matching with the positions to move them out. So that's a lot of work happening on that end as well.

J. DWYER: Would they have, like, social worker experience?

J. MULLALEY: That's correct, yeah.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Can you explain the breakdown of the \$140 million to improve housing stability and prevent homelessness, and where is the amount identified in the Estimates?

J. MULLALEY: The \$140 million referenced in the Budget Speech would be our total, provincial and federal. So as the minister

mentioned in the opening remarks, there is \$47 million provincial that you see, but there is a significant amount of federal funding, and our rental revenue of \$22 million as well. So combined, that provides the programs that you'd be familiar with, the rental housing program, our home repair programs, our homelessness programs, so that's that budget.

J. DWYER: Okay, thank you.

A current unsafe situation is emerging at an emergency shelter in Labrador, and has been brought to our attention recently, including the removal of weapons. What is being done to improve these conditions, and is there a plan to invest in a shelter for the people of Labrador?

J. ABBOTT: Working backwards, the answer is yes, absolutely. Right now there is the action team in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, which has 14 agencies involved, including ourselves, and they were looking at identifying the right solution here. There's a consultant working with them right now. We'll go to design and funding later this year. That is the plan.

In the meantime, we're working with the resources that we have in the community. The Housing Hub, operated and funded by the Nunatsiavut Government – we obviously support that financially as well. We're using the private accommodation there with the Labrador Inn, working with them. We know that is not ideal; they know that is not ideal, but right now that is a stopgap measure. We also fund, I think it is, \$3.6 million in supportive housing within that community as well.

J. DWYER: Okay.

My last question is that contractors were brought up earlier from a question from my colleague, and my understanding is that contracts for repairs were pulled back and no repairs were actually conducted. Can you explain the repeal of the contracts?

J. ABBOTT: I don't know about the repeal of the contracts, unless there is something that Julia or have to respond. We did have tenders out. They came in, but as I said earlier, they were exorbitant in terms of their price. So we had to go back and rework all of that and break those

down. As a result, we now are able to award some work and get that going.

J. DWYER: Those tenders will go out now?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, and there are some going out as well, as Julia mentioned a few minutes ago.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: Thank you.

MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

I just want to follow up and maybe jump ahead with something that my colleague said with regard to supports for people. One of the questions we had that I was looking at – I'm sure there must be clients who pose particular challenges to being housed. I am understanding that some of the new housing that's up on Froude Avenue has already suffered severe damage. That is the information that I am getting from there, that people were put in, and I won't use the description; it contains an expletive: they kicked the crap out of the place. So obviously, we have people who have these difficulties and they need supports.

If we are moving people around, how do we make sure that the supports are in place so that – and Julia, sorry, I was speaking with you. We spoke on one issue up there. What do we put in place to make sure that the people who live adjacent can have a quiet enjoyment of their premises, but also that the people who also deserve a right to a safe place to live have the supports they need? And that's the big thing in a lot of this as well.

J. ABBOTT: Mr. Dinn, I'll start, and certainly, Julia and Melanie, if they want to add. Part of our approach here is recognizing some individuals have unique needs, mental health and other issues, in terms of placing them in a particular unit or whatever. So we screen as best we can in those issues, but we do have social workers/housing officers, and that's their job, to work with those individuals, work with their

neighbours and work through these issues and provide the supports where we can.

At the same time, in the community – whether it's in the St. John's environment – we involve Eastern Health, for instance. So they have nursing and other staff that go around and work in the community to help if those, you know, if it requires that type of support. And I am familiar with other parts of the city. In my own district I've had to deal with those types of issues, and it does require getting people around the table to figure out, all right, how do we support these individuals? Because everybody has a right to their home – a home and their home if they are there – and we've to figure this out. Sometimes it becomes a challenge for neighbours when people, quote unquote, act out and we've got to work with that. We work with the police, obviously, if needed and they are sensitive to those situations. We have the mobile response team, as well, to provide support.

So there are a lot of supports around but sometimes it's just getting the right people to make sure they have the situation addressed properly to bring in the supports. We're loath to have to evict somebody, obviously. And if we go down that road, which is not very often – like I said, we have over 55,000 units that we are the landlord for. But then we will work with that individual to make sure that they are housed.

J. DINN: And I guess where I am going with this – we have dealt with people who when they find out that they are being sent to – I'll use this street in my district – and now the name escapes me. It will come to me in a minute. But they will not – they panic: no, they do not want to go there. And this is down in my district as well, so they – because it's becoming more and more unsafe.

In the other situation, there is one lady who was told – her neighbour, the troublesome neighbour, was up all night and she said, well, you're going to have to learn to sleep during the day. That was the advice that was given.

So I guess in some ways we're dealing with a – I recognize that people need shelter, but there's got to be something in place there so – there's not just enforcement, not just police; that's all

part of it – but the measures in place that both people can cohabitate, more or less.

With regard to – I'm just going to jump ahead because I've got a few minutes here, and I suspect my colleague's not asking any more questions, so – I'm just wondering has NLHC considered issuing promissory notes to landlords, accepting tenants under the Rent Supplement Program?

Here's what I mean: right now, for a tenant to move, they've got to come up with usually a damage deposit of some sort, okay? Which, if they do, it's coming out of the one pot. If it's issued through Newfoundland and Labrador Housing or through some other agency, it's going to be clawed back from their income support. And usually what it does, if they end up in a situation where it's an untenable situation they're sort of stuck there, because they're not going to come up with another deposit any time soon.

I'd be interested in finding out as well – and I think I know what the answer would be – is how many tenants actually get their damage deposit back? And they're not going to challenge it. So if in this situation, I might recommend that would save some money to the department, to your agency, that if I'm issuing a promissory note, like, to a tenant that, here, you got a letter that says this person is eligible for a damage deposit, and at the end if they decide to move out and if there's actual damage, then it's up to the landlord to go say to the department: You know what? They damaged my property, here is the proof, and now I want my damage deposit back.

So in terms of – it puts control back in – it means that the person who is coming up with the money is not in that position to try to come up with it, gives them a bit more freedom, also keeps the money in the department's pocket until needed and puts it towards other – has that ever been considered? I don't know if I've explained myself well.

J. ABBOTT: I think I understand the concept. Unless, again, Julia wants to add – nothing that I've had a conversation on since I've been in this role, but one of the things we do foster and try to foster obviously is independence for those

coming forward so that we'll provide – certainly when it comes to our rent supplements, which are what we've introduced there, is affordability. So before the subsidy went to the landlord, now the subsidy goes to the individuals. That's a move in that direction. So we are trying to foster that.

I know the concept, but for me right now, I don't see us going down that road. That being said, we obviously work with individuals – if the damage deposit becomes an issue, then we'll work with that individual to make sure that's not a barrier.

J. DINN: I've just been in a few homes that your department pays the rent for and they are – well, I don't think I'd put my dog in them, but, nevertheless, the fact is that – and they're stuck there, the people are stuck there then as well.

Just out of curiosity on that, how many inspections were done last year of private rental houses by the NLHC? I'm just wondering, and how many fines were issued or warnings or concerns? Because I'm assuming also that there are landlords that you deal with who are problematic.

M. THOMAS: If the question is related to the rent supplement program, there were 171 individuals who were selected for rent supplements in the prior years. So in advance of each selection and awarding of the rent supplement, there would have been an inspection by our engineering, technical staff.

J. DINN: Okay. Is it possible to have access to reports like that – to those reports?

J. ABBOTT: Sure, whatever we have.

J. DINN: Were there any landlords that received warnings or fines or cautions as a result of inspections? Let's say if you went back and they weren't up to standard.

J. ABBOTT: Again, I don't know the answer to that one.

M. TIZZARD: So when we do the inspection, if we find code deficiencies, for example, like smoke detectors not working, we don't let the individual move in until it's fixed. That would

be, I guess, the follow-up or warning that would be there.

J. DINN: What happens if the standards are such that after, let's say there are complaints issued after, that they don't maintain that code, is there a process to deal with that?

J. ABBOTT: Termination of a lease, we would support that kind of approach if need be.

But one of the things we've done is, again, with the rent supplements, as Melanie was saying, now that we will insist on any new lease that there is an inspection and meets our standards before that agreement would be supported by us by the tenant. We're starting down that road to be, shall we say, more present in the face of the landlord.

J. DINN: Okay.

CHAIR: The Member's time has expired.

MHA Dwyer, do you have any additional questions?

J. DWYER: No, I don't.

I'd just like to say thank you to the minister for his answers and the staff for being here and all the work that you do. I know it's a very vulnerable and hard, tough, job to house that many people and have that many units in your control.

Thank you very much for everything you do and thanks for being here tonight, I appreciate it.

CHAIR: Thank you.

MHA Dinn, do you have additional questions?

J. DINN: Yes, I do. I'm trying to get through these quickly.

What is the process for determining which units are in need of repairs and what kind of criteria are used to rank them in terms of high to low priority?

J. MULLALEY: Generally, that would be through condition assessments and the regions all would manage that from that perspective.

That also flows into a five-year maintenance plan so that condition assessments will flow in and prioritize on our five-year plan.

J. DINN: I have to ask a question, the apartments on Anthony Avenue, the one with the birds nest in it, I'm just wondering where that stands. I know I asked that last year and I think the year before.

J. MULLALEY: I know that was all awarded and tendered. I don't know – do you know?

M. TIZZARD: The tender has been awarded. Joe, I don't know if construction started or is it soon for spring.

J. DINN: I know there is going to be at least one eviction, a feathered one.

D. JACKMAN: The tender was awarded and the construction is due to start now once the – in the contractor's words – weather breaks.

J. DINN: Excellent, excellent.

The other area I was think of was Livingstone Street that is rapidly getting a terrible reputation and a lot of good people living there.

We asked last year, and we'd like again this year, a list of any companies that do the subcontractor maintenance on NLHC, please.

J. ABBOTT: Yes, that can be provided.

J. DINN: Could you tell us the last time that the maximum threshold for the rent supplement was increased? It's currently \$800 per month, not including utilities.

J. MULLALEY: Under the rent supplement program it is still that particular max, but again there are always variances on an individual case basis. But what I would say is Canada – Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Benefit is now paid to the CMHC rental market average rates in the areas so that will float with the market rates. That's not a hard cap anymore under the new program.

J. DINN: Excellent. I guess by region, too? Yeah.

How long on average does it take for someone to be put on the wait-list for NLHC housing or a rent supplement and actually getting them into a unit? And has it increased or decreased over the years?

J. MULLALEY: So it does vary very much by individual. So, again, we do have a priority wait-list code. The top category is victims of violence and the next one is homeless and then there's a list. So it really does depend. If you're on the top of the priority code, you're housed generally very quickly. The more challenging is the affordability unit, so that can take up to a year or longer in general circumstance from an affordability perspective.

J. DINN: Thank you.

Is it possible then to have a breakdown of the wait-list requests by age, region, bedrooms? We can send you exactly what we're looking for, if that's all right.

J. MULLALEY: Absolutely.

J. DINN: And the funding for the shelter in Labrador West is only for a year, but the minister noted that this policy would be reviewed. What consideration has been given so far into extending this line of funding?

J. ABBOTT: Mr. Dinn, I guess for me, it'll be based on the experience, obviously, for that shelter over the – I'll say its first year. We recognize the need for that particular service and facility. We will be very supportive of it continuing if the need is there.

J. DINN: Thank you.

When were the grant limits for the home repair programs last adjusted?

J. MULLALEY: I don't know the exact date but it's been many years. I'm saying 2005 or something. I don't have the exact date but it's been quite a while.

J. DINN: That's fair enough.

I guess where I'm going with this is building materials have skyrocketed. It's not the first time I've heard tenders had to be re-awarded because

the price is way out there. I'm wondering if that's just the fact of labour and the building materials have shot up and we've got to adjust for that.

J. ABBOTT: We're also looking at the program for those and other factors, the financial thresholds and the like, and we've started an internal review of that program.

J. DINN: Excellent.

Is it possible also to have a breakdown regarding the age of tenants living in Newfoundland and Labrador Housing stock?

J. ABBOTT: We have that, yes.

J. DINN: How many private shelter operators excluding non-profits are currently in business and how much do they receive in subsidies from the provincial government? And where in the province are these establishments located?

J. ABBOTT: We can provide that information to you as well.

J. DINN: Excellent, perfect.

This is sort of a pet peeve of mine, only because when I delivered food to St Vincent de Paul and you're going to bedsitting rooms – when I say bedsitting rooms, I mean a house that has bedrooms and each person gets a bedroom but they share common bathroom facilities and a common kitchen. It creates all sorts of problems. It allows them to overload houses.

I'm just wondering, is there any consideration to making it a requirement that from here on in – something like at the Salvation Army, where you have sort of a little kitchenette and bathroom, but there is privacy and security more than anything, and sort of making that a requirement from here on in, especially with landlords looking to – they're taking taxpayers' money there's no doubt about it. To me, I would want to make sure that people are safe.

Has there been any consideration in the long term to sort of phase out bedsitting rooms and maybe focus more that it has to be like a bachelor apartment where you have these facilities that are secure? Because we've

received an awful lot of these emergency shelters basically are what I would call bedsitting rooms.

J. ABBOTT: A couple of things.

Certainly, looking at the shelter system, we're using the private shelters really as a last resort. We are wanting to figure out with both programming and funding how we expand on the non-profit shelter system and we're doing that. We have some plans for that. As we're improving on our standards, I think they are some of the things I think we need to build in there as well.

Now, obviously, it comes at a cost and we have to figure out those factors as well, but your point is well taken in terms of the amenities and – if we want these shelters to be successful, whatever they are, then they have to be designed and managed properly. So I take your point.

J. DINN: And I have to get this in, we have to make sure the Grace General Hospital, whatever happens to that land, there has to be some allowance there for affordable housing, supportive housing. It's an ideal place.

J. ABBOTT: We are in conversation with the owner, the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, and we're having those conversations. We're hoping to get a decision on that soon.

J. DINN: Excellent.

NLHC units play a role in providing safe housing for women and their children fleeing violence. There are 10 houses that are vacant in Nain and four (inaudible) houses are vacant in Hopedale. Some houses remain vacant for years. I'm just wondering – and my colleague asked: What are the department's plans to ensure houses are repaired in a timely fashion?

J. ABBOTT: I think, as I mentioned in the House, and now I am mentioning here tonight, we had started down that road. We've got some tenders already approved and ready to roll. We've got other tenders put out there to get that work done. So we are committed to getting that done as soon as humanly possible because we

don't want them vacant and we have committed the money for that.

J. DINN: Okay.

Northern Labrador residents pay 19 cents a kilowatt hour for electricity to heat their homes. They can't afford to switch from oil to electric heat. A drum, I think, of stove oil costs \$100 more than Goose Bay residents pay. This may or may not fit under here but I'll ask it anyway. What is your department doing to help these residents?

J. ABBOTT: Well, again, we would have some heat subsidies and the like, but outside of that, we don't have any control over the cost element. But where we can, we will make sure we can make – you know, obviously, when we renovate these units now they will be as energy efficient as possible so that, obviously, should help. And then we do have heat supplements in our units as well.

J. DINN: Thank you.

I would assume, too, that Housing would, in some way, fund Choices for Youth and the housing for the youth here in care? No.

J. ABBOTT: Well, we provide, through my other hat, we are providing the support there.

J. DINN: Okay. I'll leave that to my colleague. She will be taking over after I leave here. I have nothing else to say.

Thank you.

CHAIR: The Member's time is expired.

You don't have anymore question?

J. DWYER: No, I'm good.

Thank you.

CHAIR: MHA Dinn do you have any additional questions?

J. DINN: Dangerous question to ask me. I think I'm good right now. What I'll do, I will send them – we more or less got the major ones covered.

Scott, anything? We're good.

CHAIR: MHA Trimper.

P. TRIMPER: Thank you very much.

First of all, I would like to say hello to some good friends over there and to that department. I think besides Health and Community Services, CSSD is the other go-to place and we rely heavily on very professional, dedicated people being available at strange hours and it's usually not nine to five. I thank you, Ms. Mullaley, the minister and others very much for the support.

I have a few questions. I'll get to some, maybe, sort of the more – the tougher stuff. Let's start at some of the easier items first of all.

Does the department have any plans to establish additional off-reserve, affordable, Indigenous housing in Labrador?

J. ABBOTT: I think the right answer right now is no, in that sense, because we are going to be reliant and working with the feds because they have, both in last year's budget and this year's budget, a significant amount of money set aside for Indigenous housing. We will work then with the Nunatsiavut Government and the Innu Nation and NunatuKavut and First Nations here on the Island to make sure that they can get access to as much of that funding as possible and we work with them.

Now, we have to do some bridging and all those kinds of things, yes. I guess, Mr. Trimper, by the way you phrased the question, but we will be expanding our housing supports in Labrador at the community level but I wouldn't have broken it down the way you did.

P. TRIMPER: Just put a little suggestion in your mind, Minister, and it has been brought up to me a couple of times. Certainly one of the issues in Labrador is the cost of materials, housing construction; we have more than an abundant forest. I am just wondering if we could pull a couple out of the departments like Forestry and maybe in skills development and we could create a little bit of a – there are saw mills operating, we could get some wood sawing, we could get some people building

some homes. I'm just throwing that out there as some of the discussion that is on the go.

J. ABBOTT: If that came from the community and it was something that they wanted us to support, we would be all for it.

P. TRIMPER: Okay, it is coming from the community so maybe I just need to organize it in and have it sent to you.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

P. TRIMPER: Okay. Thank you.

You know the discussion earlier about the frustration of seeing so many units empty while we're awaiting maintenance is something we're also encountering. Some of your staff have been very candid with us in terms of what some of the issues are. I wonder if it might be reasonable – and again from a cost-effective perspective – to consider engaging a professional company, a contractor, to actually do that. You're going to pay a little bit more but you're going to get the work done on a more timely basis and thereby get folks into these units and save in other aspects of the provincial budget.

J. ABBOTT: It would depend on the type of maintenance. If it is what I would call routine maintenance, we have staff in place to do that. If it is any major repairs or upgrades, obviously, we usually contract all of that out in any event. It is a balance here for us. At the end of the day, it's what's in our overall budget to allow us to do that.

I'm certainly focused on – in talking to the staff here, that priority for me is to make sure that any of our vacant units are put back in the market as quickly as possible.

P. TRIMPER: So much of the challenge seems to be advertising for a full-time position and not finding sufficient qualified individuals to apply in the first place, so, yeah.

Another observation, just in our office in preparing for this evening, was that we seem to have a shortage of single- or two-person units available; they seem to be mostly three- or four-bedroom. That's excellent for families, which has to be an important priority for us, but we do

have many individuals who are waiting for that particular opportunity and we're not able to provide that. I'm just wondering if you had any comment.

J. ABBOTT: That's really the legacy of the families we served in the recent past. So any of the new units that we're looking at on a go-forward basis, for sure, would be something smaller and fit the current sort of family size. Where we can renovate a unit or a set of units to accommodate splitting them up, we will do that. But we're finding that's really almost cost-prohibitive and it's better to really start from scratch. So that's how we're approaching it.

P. TRIMPER: Minister, you and I and Ms. Mullaley, Melanie in behind and others working – and I appreciate the dialogue on so many of the challenges we're facing right now, particularly in Happy Valley-Goose Bay around sheltering, providing at least a safe place at night for so many people. We are at capacity tonight. The shelter, the Hub is full and the Labrador Inn is at 38 people, I think, again this evening.

We're full now. Here comes spring and warmer weather and expecting more folks to travel. I just wondered if we have any kind of immediate plan for the next month, two months, three months and then – well, maybe I'll ask that question first.

J. ABBOTT: Well, as you know, Mr. Trimper, the action committee on the ground in Labrador is assessing all of that as we speak, and what supports and services that we need to put in place now and over the next number of weeks and months. So, obviously, outreach is going to be an important factor, and we've put in a lot of additional supports now and put in place for the spring.

In terms of physical accommodation, we'll be assessing that and what the need might be. But at the end of the day there's going to be a limited supply, no matter what we do. We're going to have to work with all the players – the Innu Nation, the Nunatsiavut Government and others – to say how we can support their citizens, their residents in the communities there. So it's going to be a challenge and we know that. We're just going to certainly be pulling out all the best

efforts to accommodate as many people as we can where we can.

P. TRIMPER: I appreciate the overture now; I guess we're looking at putting in some security cameras at the Labrador Inn. Security has been enhanced somewhat. We still have gaps. I just wondered what the department's thoughts – what your thoughts – are on having some of those counselling services at that location. As I say, we have as many as 38 people there on any one evening. The counselling tends to be down at the Hub, some six kilometres and as I've said, minus 40-something degrees away.

I'm just watching the situation and just feeling that we can perhaps get some of those professionals in your department and in the network also perhaps more in attendance. I know they're responding. They're there after the event has happened and then are leaving soon after. It's support that we're missing there.

J. ABBOTT: So in terms of any individuals that are, say, at the Labrador Inn that are sent there through the Housing Hub – so they've been, for the sake of a better term, triaged – they are supported by the Housing Hub and the resources there. We're obviously having a number of conversations with Labrador-Grenfell Health to make sure that their resources are available and will present themselves to the Labrador Inn or wherever else they are needed in the community. They're, I think, committed now to doing that.

Again, lots of resources, we just have to figure out how we can make sure they are in the right place at the right time.

P. TRIMPER: Yes, we have a geographic challenge there as well.

I'm just about out of time, Minister, so I want to go just to the longer term. As you know, I've been pushing a particular proposal that finally was presented somewhat before the action team just recently. There are plenty of other efforts, discussions ongoing even this week.

I just wondered is that what you see as a department as a longer term solution. I don't need to talk about it publicly here, but in terms of what the action teams had presented to them,

is that what everyone is working with now in terms of a longer term plan?

J. ABBOTT: The longer term plan, which hopefully will be put in place in a relatively short period of time is – and I will use the term because it's been used to me – sort of a Gathering Place model, where it will be integrated services for individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness that live or come into the Happy Valley-Goose Bay area.

Right now, the consultant is working, doing some further consultations to make sure we got the model right and the need right. We'll be doing a design on that in very short order and then secure the land. Then, we'll be able to work with the federal government to put the funding in place, and we're assuming the Salvation Army and others will be involved.

Now, some of that could change a bit, but the model is what I think what most people will agree on is needed. How that gets funded and who supports whom, we've got to work that out literally over the next couple of months.

CHAIR: Okay, Minister.

The Member's time has expired.

I just want to confirm that Minister Coady is with us?

S. COADY: I am.

CHAIR: Thank you.

So I ask the Clerk to recall the subhead.

CLERK: Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation, Housing Operations and Assistance, 1.1.01.

CHAIR: Shall Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation, Housing, 1.1.01 carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subhead 1.1.01 carried.

CHAIR: I ask the Clerk for the total.

CLERK: The total.

CHAIR: Shall the total carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation, total heads, carried.

CHAIR: Shall I report the Estimates of the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation carried?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, Estimates of the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation carried without amendment.

CHAIR: Thank you.

We'll take a 10-minute break and then we'll move on to Children, Seniors and Social Development.

Recess

CHAIR: Okay, Minister Coady.

S. COADY: Hello, I'm joined.

CHAIR: Just checking in; you're good, okay.

We're going to call the meeting to order and we'll start all over.

So I'll just mention a few things. I ask everyone to identify yourself and wait for your red light to

come on. If it doesn't come on, just do a little wave and wait until the light comes on. There are water coolers on each end. I ask that you not to adjust the chairs. Staff are to wear masks unless you're talking.

We're going to ask the Committee first to introduce yourselves and then we'll ask the staff to introduce themselves. And we'll give the minister a few minutes and we'll start in.

We'll start with MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: Jeff Dwyer, MHA for the District of Placentia West - Bellevue, shadow Cabinet minister for CSSD.

C. YOUNG: Carlson Young, Political Staffer in the Opposition Office.

L. EVANS: MHA Lela Evans, Torngat Mountains.

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

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

D. HAMLYN: Dave Hamlyn, Sessional Staff, GMO.

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

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

CHAIR: And we have Minister Coady joining us here.

S. COADY: Hi, Siobhan Coady, St. John's West.

J. ABBOTT: John Abbott, Minister of Children, Seniors and Social Development, and MHA for St. John's East - Quidi Vidi.

Staff, I am going to pass it on.

S. WALSH: Susan Walsh, Deputy Minister, the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development.

B. EVANS: Brian Evans, Assistant Deputy Minister, Corporate Services and Performance Improvement.

D. MARTIN: Dave Martin, Departmental Controller.

CHAIR: Okay, I ask the Clerk to call the first subgrouping.

CLERK: For the Estimates of Children, Seniors and Social Development: Executive and Support Services, 1.1.01 to 1.2.02 inclusive.

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

Minister.

J. ABBOTT: Thank you, Chair.

Good evening again, folks, and thank you for allowing me to join you for presenting our Estimates for the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development. My department consists of 11 lines of business, which include child protection, in-care services for children, adoptions, youth services, youth corrections, adult protection, persons with disabilities, seniors and aging, poverty reduction, income support and the community sector.

Since last year I would now like to highlight some of the department's key areas of progress. In terms of adult protection, last November I had the opportunity to lead the debate on proposed changes to the *Adult Protection Act*. The purpose of this legislation is to protect adult residents of the province who are at risk of abuse, neglect and/or self-neglect, and who do not understand or appreciate that risk. The proposed changes, that received Royal Assent, will further strengthen the adult protection process in this province, as well as incorporate Indigenous culture and identity in that process. The department is actually in the process of developing the accompanying policies and rolling out training to be positioned to proclaim the updated legislation this fall.

When it comes to seniors and aging, we have a division which focuses on helping seniors to remain healthy, active, engaged citizens living in age-friendly communities and addressing the

province's aging population. In *Budget 2022*, my department has a number on investments to help support seniors and older adults, including \$95,000 for the Newfoundland and Labrador Age-Friendly Communities Program, which provides communities, incorporated municipalities and Indigenous governments with the opportunity to obtain support in planning for population aging throughout the province.

We also have \$300,000 for the Newfoundland and Labrador Community Transportation Program, which supports alternate transportation services for individuals who experience barriers to accessible, affordable and inclusive transportation. Indigenous government and incorporated municipalities, not-for-profits and entities within a local service district can apply for funding through this program.

We have \$200,000 budgeted for the Seniors' Social Inclusion Initiative, which supports initiatives that promote social inclusion and intergenerational projects to increase interaction between youth and seniors.

With the release of the Health Accord NL report, aging in place is a key theme. The department's Age-Friendly Newfoundland and Labrador Communities Program is recognized as a viable policy response and a useful tool for community planning in this sphere.

Last fall my department, in partnership with the Department of Municipal and Provincial Affairs, hosted a webinar called Making Your Community More Age-Friendly, and this webinar provided an overview of the age-friendly program, and how we can benefit communities and communities can become more involved.

As well, I was pleased to recently join my federal-provincial-territorial colleagues across the country, in February, with a meeting of the ministers responsible for seniors, and we discussed our collective goal of helping communities become more accessible to all of us, regardless of age or ability. My colleagues and I acknowledge that making communities more age-friendly requires the collective efforts of all federal, provincial and municipal governments across the country, as well as community partners.

The themes and issues from the seniors' forum align with what I heard and continue to hear from our Provincial Advisory Council on Aging and Seniors, and I met with them recently to discuss the issues that they are finding that are of concern to seniors.

When it comes to disability policy, our office works closely with persons with disabilities, organizations of and for persons with disabilities, as well as advocacy groups, and across federal, provincial and territorial governments and departments.

To further advance accessibility and inclusion of all persons throughout Newfoundland and Labrador, I was pleased to introduce the province's first *Accessibility Act* last October and it became law on December 3, which is International Day of Persons with Disabilities. This enabling legislation outlines the principles and goals for an accessible province. Following the principle of Nothing About Us Without Us, we began by establishing an Accessibility Standards Advisory Board, which will have 50 per cent of members being people with or representing communities of persons with disabilities. This board will be instrumental in establishing and implementing accessibility standards for the province and I look forward to announcing the board membership in the very near future.

In *Budget 2022* my department has a number of investments for program grants under the Disability Policy Office, including \$400,000 for the Accessible Vehicle grant program and the Accessible Taxi Grant Program to provide funding that can help to adapt vehicles to be accessible for personal use and to modify taxis to make them more accessible.

We have \$250,000 for the Capacity Building Grant Program, which provides support to non-profit, community-based organizations, incorporated municipalities, including Indigenous governments and organizations, to enable persons with disabilities to become fully engaged in their communities. And finally, we have \$75,000 for Inclusion Grants for community-based and non-profit organizations

to help them create more accessible and inclusive events and facilities.

When it comes to poverty reduction and income support, we recognize these are challenging times that have and continue to deeply impact individuals and families, especially those living in poverty. I am aware of the economic pressures that many people are facing, as well as the increasing demand on emergency food programs throughout the province.

In order to address this immediate pressure related to the increased cost of living, this government recently announced the five-point plan. One element of this plan impacting my department was providing over \$5 million to approximately 20,000 individuals and families currently in receipt of income support with a one-time benefit of \$200 for single people and \$400 for families. I certainly have to thank our staff in the department for mobilizing to ensure that the eligible recipients received these one-time payments by April 8. Most received it before the end of March.

We also provided a one-time emergency grant of over \$400,000 to assist Food First NL's Community Food Helpline to provide food and other necessities to individuals and families and to administer a grant program to provide support to community food-based programs, including foodbanks throughout the province.

We put these short-term measures in place to respond to the urgent situation many individuals and families have been facing while we develop a longer term approach. To that end, we are developing a social and economic well-being plan that will include leading practices in poverty reduction and focus on factors that impact social and economic well-being. This plan will take the social determinants of health, prevention and early-intervention approach and will fully align with the Health Accord NL recommendations.

As well, to help inform our plan, we are reviewing the province's Income Support Program and exploring the potential of a basic income approach. As well as looking at the

ongoing work of the Health Accord, the Premier's Economic Recovery Team report, the minimum wage review and the post-secondary education review. We will also continue to work with other government departments and agencies as we develop the plan. The next phase of our work on the social and economic well-being plan will include engagement with people with lived experience and community partners, and we'll be starting that shortly.

Our commitment to support people in low income is reflected in *Budget 2022* with such investments as \$74 million for the Newfoundland and Labrador Income Supplement, which supports approximately 162,000 individuals and their families. We have \$63 million for the Seniors' Benefit, which supports approximately 50,000 seniors and their families. We have funding allocated to extend the bus pass program that provides Metrobus or GoBus passes for the areas of St. John's, Mount Pearl and Paradise to income support recipients. This year, we'll be adding seniors who receive the Guaranteed Income Supplement and at-risk youth receiving services from our Youth Services Program.

We have allocated \$270,000 for the Prenatal-Infant Nutrition Supplement, formerly known as the Mother Baby Nutrition Supplement, which is being increased from \$100 to \$150 per month for people with low incomes who are pregnant to assist with the extra cost of healthy eating during pregnancy and up to the baby's first birthday. An additional \$100, one-time payment, is also provided during the month of the baby's birth.

I now want to talk a little bit about child welfare and particularly Indigenous children and youth in care. We are absolutely committed to reducing the number of Indigenous children and youth in care. In fact, there has been a 14 per cent decrease from September 2020 to September 2021 in terms of the number of Indigenous children and youth in care, from 350 down to 300, and that number continues to be reduced.

We continue to work with Indigenous governments and organizations as well as the federal government on improving outcomes for Indigenous children and youth, as well as better

understand how we can share information and support the work happening in our Indigenous communities. While working with our Indigenous governments in Labrador, we have been able to reduce the number of Indigenous children and youth coming into care by 42 per cent from 2018 to 2020. Again, this number continues to come down from 94 children in 2018 to 54 in 2020. This is a significant improvement and demonstrates how we are doing business differently in our Indigenous communities.

It is also important to note that we are focused on supporting Indigenous partners in their efforts to secure upstream, preventive and supportive services as a means of preventing vulnerable families from becoming involved with the child protection system in the first instance.

Our *Children, Youth and Families Act* and the new federal act, *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit And Métis Children, Youth And Families*, each have provisions to ensure Indigenous children and youth in care remain connected with their culture, including the requirement for cultural connection plans and the provision of notice on significant measures to their Indigenous representatives.

Last June, I was pleased to join the Innu leadership to sign a new CSSD Inuit protocol that is building on our relationship and service coordination of working in the best interest of Innu children, youth and families. This new relationship is paying dividends to both Innu families and our social workers on the ground in Labrador.

My department is also working in partnership with the Nunatsiavut Government as well as the Department of Indigenous Affairs and Reconciliation and other government departments to holistically address the issues outlined in the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate's *A Long Wait for Change: Independent Review of Child Protection Services to Inuit Children in Newfoundland and Labrador*.

In particular, we have worked with the Nunatsiavut Government to identify priorities related to the review and co-design, co-plan, and

co-implement work to address these priorities. Central to this work has been the enhancement of relationship building, information sharing and collaboration in the spirit of our shared commitment to the well-being of Inuit children, youth and families in this province.

I just now want to turn to adoptions. Last October, I was pleased to introduce amendments to the *Adoption Act, 2013*, which received Royal Assent in the beginning of November. The amendments are reflective of best practices and input gathered from stakeholders such as birth families, adoptive families, foster parents, the Newfoundland and Labrador Foster Families Association, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate and Indigenous governments and organizations, as well as the public.

Through these amendments, we are strengthening the adoption process in Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as addressing the unique needs of Indigenous children and their families in the adoption process. Work is ongoing to develop the policies and training to reflect the amendments and to proclaim the legislation in the coming months.

To conclude, as you can see, my department has a variety of policies, programs and services that have a continued focus on supporting children, youth, families, seniors, persons with disabilities and persons experiencing poverty and I'm working closely with the community sector. We will continue to work horizontally across government departments and community groups to help address the complex issues that people are facing throughout the province.

On that, Madam Chair, I will conclude.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister Abbott.

MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for that opening commentary, much appreciated. I'd also like to say thank you to your department staff for being here to answer questions and to help us through helping the people that need our help the most, I guess, kind of thing. I appreciate your time and thank you for being here.

So to dive right in, Minister, can I obtain a copy of your briefing binder?

J. ABBOTT: Absolutely.

J. DWYER: Thank you.

And are you applying zero budgeting?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, we are.

J. DWYER: Can you provide the number of employees in the department last year?

J. ABBOTT: I have those numbers right here. Give me one second.

So in terms of positions in the department, there are 985, of which 772 are currently filled.

J. DWYER: How many retirements were in '21-'22?

J. ABBOTT: I did see that number, but I ...

Twenty-two retirements, yeah, thank you.

J. DWYER: Can you provide the number of vacancies and a breakdown of those?

J. ABBOTT: We have those, so that would be in your binder.

J. DWYER: The binder. Okay, thank you.

Were there any positions eliminated?

J. ABBOTT: We didn't eliminate any positions; I can just give you a quick rundown. We had 84 people who resigned and we hired back 39, new hires from outside government.

J. DWYER: Were there any layoffs?

J. ABBOTT: No.

J. DWYER: Okay.

There were no positions eliminated. How many short-term employees are there? Are there positions to fill?

J. ABBOTT: We have a number of those – Susan, do you have that number in front of you there?

S. WALSH: So we have 71 temporary positions and nine contractual.

J. DWYER: Thank you.

How many employees are still working from their residence?

S. WALSH: We have all of our staff at Confederation Building back in the office. As it relates to our regional operations, both on the Income Support side and on the child welfare side, we are using a rotational model, 50 in and 50 out, to ensure we don't bring any particular team down. We've had some experience when it hits a team and then service delivery is significantly impacted.

We anticipate by next week to have our Income Support staff back in the office, all of them. And then we'll wait another week or two and bring in the child welfare staff.

J. DWYER: Great, thank you.

On the Executive and Support Services with the Minister's Office, why were Salaries \$3,000 more than budgeted?

J. ABBOTT: We had a new ADM position assigned to the department. That's the primary increase there.

J. DWYER: For the last few years Employee Benefits were zero and you continue to budget that amount. Why is that?

J. ABBOTT: Bear with me for a second.

Maybe, Brian, if you want to answer that.

B. EVANS: We continue to budget for that. We anticipate that travel may be reinstated and, certainly, that's generally reserved for conferences for the minister and executive staff. Those have been generally held virtually for the last couple of years, so we continue to budget for that amount under the assumption that in-person face-to-face conferences may resume.

That would account for membership fees and conference fees.

J. DWYER: Thank you.

For '21-'22, you budgeted \$77,300 for Transportation and Communications and only used \$12,000.

Why the big difference? Why are you reducing that budget now to \$40,000 for this year?

J. ABBOTT: I think, Mr. Dwyer, really based on Brian's earlier question, we just didn't – because of COVID we weren't doing any travel. We realized on a go-forward basis we probably won't need as much as we had budgeted in the past. So we reduced that budget and allocated some of those savings to more pressure points in the department.

J. DWYER: Okay, thank you.

S. WALSH: We've also rightsized the travel budget. We previously had a minister who was from outside St. John's and now we have a St. John's minister.

J. DWYER: Okay.

So on Executive and Support Services, why were Salaries \$113,900 more than budgeted and increased another \$31,000 for this year?

J. ABBOTT: That, again, was flex in – I may have misspoke on the first question you asked. That would reflect the additional assistant deputy minister position in the department.

J. DWYER: So then that \$3,000 that was budgeted from the first question, that was due to the ADM as well?

J. ABBOTT: No, I'm just (inaudible).

J. DWYER: That was under Executive and Support Services.

J. ABBOTT: I'll just go ahead now. That was on salaries or ...?

J. DWYER: I think your colleague behind you might have an answer there.

J. ABBOTT: Okay, go ahead.

B. EVANS: Certainly, the \$3,000 under ministerial support was former Minister Warr exiting from Cabinet into an MHA role. They're entitled to two months of salary while they're transitioning from a Cabinet role to MHA, so that accounted for the extra \$3,000.

J. DWYER: Thank you very much.

For the last two years, Employee Benefits were zero and you continue to budget that amount. Is that the same reason as you gave earlier on Executive Support?

J. ABBOTT: I'm going to say, yes, but I'm just trying to figure out if we're on the same line there.

J. DWYER: 1.2.01.

J. ABBOTT: Yes, I'm just trying to find it here now in my book.

Is that under Minister or Executive?

Again, the events did not transpire so we didn't need those funds.

J. DWYER: It will be reinstated?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: Okay, thank you.

For 2021-22, you budgeted \$30,300 for Transportation and Communications and only used \$11,500. What is the difference? Why are you reducing it to \$25,300 this year?

J. ABBOTT: Again, we didn't need the money or use the money for – it was from lack of travel primarily. We are anticipating – recognizing the reality that we're not going to be doing as much in any event, so we reduced the budget and reallocated those savings to other parts of the department.

J. DWYER: Have you considered the advantages and disadvantages of what COVID has presented us in doing virtual meetings instead of having to meet in person?

J. ABBOTT: There's no doubt – and I've seen it now for the past year – it's certainly changed how we do business. Zoom and Skype calls are actually more prevalent and people are more comfortable with them. I see just generally, in my department and right across, that the need for a lot of, I'll call executive travel is going to be reduced as a result. So we'll monitor that again this year and see, but when we get back to whatever the new normal is, then we'll budget accordingly.

J. DWYER: Okay.

For 2020 and 2021, you budgeted \$256,500 for Transportation and Communications and again the cost is declining, but you budgeted the \$227,000 again. What's the reason?

J. ABBOTT: In that area, that's under Corporate Services, our travel requirements were down, but that's where the rest – I'll call it, the large part of the administrative side of the department or our middle managers and whatever that may be doing is picking up more travel. We've reduced it; we didn't spend as much this year and we reduced it from what was budgeted last year, but, obviously, an increase for this year as well, for the coming year. As I said, where we can avoid the travel, we will using the virtual meetings.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: I just want to remind the Members to identify ourselves. The Broadcast is having a little bit of difficulty knowing who is speaking.

J. ABBOTT: Okay.

CHAIR: All right, we'll move on to MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Sorry, I'm having trouble with my earpiece there.

CHAIR: Yes, and we're having trouble with the clock.

L. EVANS: I'm going to ask some general questions, first. I'm just going to try to avoid duplication –

CHAIR: One second, until we get the clock going.

Okay, we're good.

L. EVANS: I'm going to ask some general questions first.

You mentioned the Mother Baby Nutrition Supplement program. Where is it located, under which heading, this year in the binder?

J. ABBOTT: It would be under Income Support.

L. EVANS: Under Income Support?

J. ABBOTT: Or is it separate?

D. MARTIN: It's in the Income Support Program and Policy, under Allowances and Assistance.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

In Budget 2021, almost half the money for the Mother Baby Nutrition Supplement program wasn't spent due to a low uptake in the community. So has there been any progress on finding out why that was the case and are there any solutions implemented? Because there is a strong need for the program.

J. ABBOTT: Chair, I'm prepared to answer the question, I know it's a different subhead.

CHAIR: Yeah.

MHA Evans, that group hasn't been called yet, do you want to –

L. EVANS: Okay. We didn't know where it was, which is why we put it in general. So if you want, just give me the number and I'll put it under to –

J. ABBOTT: Dave, can you just repeat the subhead number for the supplement?

D. MARTIN: It's 4.1.02, Income Support Program and Policy.

L. EVANS: Perfect. So I'll just move it over to there, which is why we had it under general, we couldn't find it.

Could you provide a list of the initiatives funded under the Community Transportation Program and how many municipalities and community organizations have applied for and received funding?

J. ABBOTT: Again, different subhead.

CHAIR: Yeah, again, that's a different subhead, perhaps they can –

L. EVANS: Yes, just give me the number.

CHAIR: Give her the number so we can –

J. ABBOTT: Can you give her the number again, David?

L. EVANS: We're both new to the –

D. MARTIN: What was the program? The Community –

L. EVANS: Community Transportation Program.

D. MARTIN: Community Transportation Program, that's the age-friendly community grants? Is that the one you're looking at?

L. EVANS: Yes.

D. MARTIN: That would be 3.1.01, Seniors and Aging.

L. EVANS: Okay, perfect. Thank you.

I'm almost afraid to ask my next general one.

Many of the recommendations that are coming out now in the Health Accord are related to the social determinants of health. So in the short to medium term are there any particular planks of the report that the department will be looking at implementing? Similar to the Minister of Health, he's going to start implementing some aspects of the Health Accord before the program is rolled out.

J. ABBOTT: As a department, some of our staff were involved in some of the committee work of Health Accord NL so one of the things that we are taking back is really the largest theme of the social determinants and building that in to our Social and Economic Well-Being plan. So we're going to build on the work that they have done and how we can now operationalize that in our planning within the department.

But if you look at what we are doing for some of the things you just mentioned: age-friendly communities, the nutritional supplement and all of that ties in. So what I want to do as minister, once the Accord is – quote unquote – adopted as government policy, let's put it that way, then we will make sure that the work we do is fully aligned with the overall theme of the Health Accord NL. And then we will be looking at specific initiatives and funding opportunities that go along with that.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

What is the current ratio of social workers to cases? And are there differences amongst the regions?

J. ABBOTT: So our standard is one social worker for 20 cases. In the St. John's metro area, we are at one social worker for 19 cases. In Labrador, we are at one for a little over 30 cases. That continues to be a challenge for us in terms of recruiting and retaining social workers in Labrador from time to time and we are doing that right now. We are having social workers from the St. John's metro area come help and support the staff in Labrador.

L. EVANS: Okay. That leads into my next question: How many positions are vacant in Nunatsiavut, that's the five Inuit communities and Natuashish? We are just looking at the vacancy.

S. WALSH: So we just implemented a new model of service delivery in conjunction with the Nunatsiavut Government for a fly-in, fly-out model in the Nunatsiavut zone, so all communities. I'm pretty confident in saying all positions have been filled at this stage.

L. EVANS: I just came from Hopedale. For example, in Hopedale, how many social workers do you normally have compared to what's there now?

S. WALSH: We fill based on the level of need, when you think about the model of 20 cases to one social worker, so it would really depend on the number of cases in a community – the number of families and children that need support. I can't really give you an exact number on how many would need to be in that community without knowing the caseload and I'm sorry I don't –

L. EVANS: No, because if we're looking at the caseload, it's way over one per 30 cases, if you look at the communities. I've been in all the communities and that's one of the things I've been talking to the social workers who are actually there, and we're way above one in 30 right now. So what you're saying is wait to see how the fly-in, fly-out model will work.

S. WALSH: Yeah, absolutely. We knew we were having significant challenges recruiting people to live in some of these communities, unfortunately. Some people love it and want to stay, and those people have been encouraged to stay and we continue to have them there permanently, but in other circumstances we had used the fly-in, fly-out model in the Innu communities and had been very successful. So we met with the Nunatsiavut Government. It's not intended to be the long-term answer, but in the interim of people who will come and live in community, we have implemented this model jointly.

L. EVANS: Many of the people who've left CSSD, social workers, have actually gained jobs with Nunatsiavut or the Innu, so it's not about not wanting to live in the communities, because they stay in the communities. Just an addition to your comments there, and thank you for the answer.

What systems are in place to measure the success or failure of a particular initiatives that are offered by community sectors and funded by the departments?

J. ABBOTT: Right now each of the community agencies, certain ones we fund, there is an

agreement that will lay out their roles and responsibilities, an evaluation component to determine if they're meeting the objectives of the funding agreement, and then they're reviewed on an annual basis.

L. EVANS: Just moving on now to the line items: 1.1.01, the Minister's Office, there's a decrease in the budget for Transportation and Communications. Is this because the minister lives in the capital, or is it because there are plans to hold more virtual meetings?

J. ABBOTT: Both.

L. EVANS: Both. Thank you.

Moving on, 1.2.02, Corporate Services and Performance Improvement. The spending on Salaries was lower than anticipated. Are there any vacancies here and, if so, what are the positions?

J. ABBOTT: We can provide the vacancies and part of that is that reason.

L. EVANS: Okay. So you will provide them to us after.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

CHAIR: The Member's time has expired.

MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: Under 1.2.02, in 2021-22 Salaries were \$355,700 less than budgeted and in 2020-21 Salaries were \$463,000 less than budgeted. Why the difference? This year you are budgeting \$278,700 more than you used last year. Can you explain?

J. ABBOTT: There are a couple things going on there. One is in terms of we didn't have the staff recruited so that was the savings. We anticipate that we will be able to recruit to fill some more of those vacant positions going forward. There are some smaller adjustments within that, some small changes in positions and salaries, but that is the main reason.

J. DWYER: Okay, thank you.

Why did Employee Benefits exceed the budgeted amount?

J. ABBOTT: That was largely due to an increase of workers' compensation cost. We had a certain provision we had to address and we had to provide some more funding.

J. DWYER: Again, Transportation and Communications, I'm guessing are same reasons as was given before, why that's under budget.

J. ABBOTT: Yes, and that's standard.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Why were Supplies \$9,500 under budget?

J. ABBOTT: Again, we didn't need to spend that amount. Part of it is that we don't have that many staff around, a lot of people were working from home, so we didn't need as much paper supplies is a good example right there.

J. DWYER: Did we buy any new computers for people to work from home?

J. ABBOTT: Most of that we had done on the previous years' budget.

J. DWYER: For Purchased Services, less than 50 per cent of the budgeted amount was spent, and this year you're increasing last year's amount by \$50,000. Can you explain that?

J. ABBOTT: We're, again – I hate to use it, but COVID. So we didn't have as much training activity. We intend now, as people are back in the office, to resume training, and most of that is purchased services.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Thank you, Madam Chair, and I'll wait for the next header.

CHAIR: Okay.

MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: 1.2.02, Corporate Services and Performance Improvement: Why did spending on Property, Furnishings and Equipment run

over budget? I'm not sure if that question was asked.

J. ABBOTT: We did, in this year, provide funding for some more laptops for staff over the budgeted amount.

L. EVANS: Okay, so it was basically to accommodate working from home more than anything?

J. ABBOTT: That's certainly a large part of that, yes.

L. EVANS: 2.1.01, Child and –

CHAIR: We're not there yet.

J. ABBOTT: Jumping ahead.

L. EVANS: I'm jumping ahead.

CHAIR: Yes.

J. ABBOTT: You're going to get put in MHA prison, if there is one.

CHAIR: All right, any additional questions?

J. DWYER: I'm good, thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: Okay, I ask the Clerk to recall the group.

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

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

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subheads 1.1.01 through 1.2.02 carried.

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

CLERK: Child and Youth Services, 2.1.01.

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

MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: Thank you, Chair.

Why were Salaries under budget and this year \$100,700 more than budgeted for last year?

J. ABBOTT: The savings for this past year were again one-time savings due to delayed recruitment vacancies in the department. As you can see, that's a large section of our department. And we are looking and working to make sure we can staff up. And that's why we made sure we had the budget back to its zero-based budget amount.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Again, Transportation and Communications: found that it was significantly under budget. This year, we're budgeting \$560,900 again and that's more than was spent last year.

J. ABBOTT: A couple of things. The savings were again due to COVID: less travel, and the reduced number of staff from what we had planned and which we had budgeted on. Going forward – we see results – we are expanding our fly-in, fly-out model in Labrador, so that's going to obviously chew up more travel dollars. That's the main reason for that increase over this year's budget.

J. DWYER: Purchased Services is approximately \$46,000 under budget and this year the budgeted amount is the same as last year. Can you explain?

J. ABBOTT: Savings again due to Purchased Services, less staff, less copying charges: all those kinds of things that we would normally incur from people because people were working from home. Also, we had some leasing tenders that were delayed or postponed because we didn't need them for the time being. We will need them for the new year.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Property, Furnishings: again, they were \$53,000 under budget last year. This year, the budget amount is the same as last year.

J. ABBOTT: There were less staff in place, ergonomics and all those kinds of things that we could do for our staff. Because we have almost 1,000 staff, if we were fully staffed, so we're always planning for them. We intend to get back to normal this year.

J. DWYER: The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, in its report in 2019-2020, noted 46 recommendations of its 243 recommendations were partially implemented and three were not implemented. Can you provide the up-to-date numbers?

J. ABBOTT: I don't have that in front of me; Susan, I don't know if you have that. We do have that in the department, so we can provide that.

That being said, we are working diligently on all of those recommendations. Some of the recent reports, we're just dealing with those newer recommendations; there were three reports put out in December, for instance. So they'd be in addition to even those numbers. We have a group in the department that are solely working on those recommendations.

J. DWYER: Perfect.

The Review of Child Protection Services to Inuit Children recommended an audit of out-of-community placements. Can you provide the numbers?

J. ABBOTT: In terms of out-of-community placements?

J. DWYER: Yeah.

S. WALSH: We have a joint committee with the Nunatsiavut Government on all of those recommendations. We have a specific position within our department that partners with a director in the department of social health in NG, and we have developed a plan of implementation and work towards each one of those recommendations. The out-of-community review is on the list in terms of all the different

priorities that we're looking at. There is a work plan been established to move forward with that.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Last summer in Estimates I asked about the PRIDE program. Is that being utilized in towns in Labrador, the Indigenous communities?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, it is.

J. DWYER: Okay.

The price of goods, transportation and delivery has escalated in the last two years. What is the increase in financial support since 2020 to Innu children, families and caregivers in the child protection system to reflect the Northern Labrador reality?

J. ABBOTT: We meet whatever the actual costs are. If it is within the Innu communities, we're reimbursed by the federal government and their, I'll say, generous allotment for the program, so there are no challenges there. Then, likewise, we work with the Nunatsiavut Government. If there are any particular challenges, if our current funding and allocations aren't sufficient, then we work with them, but that has not been seen as any particular issue or challenge for the department.

J. DWYER: That program has been developed through truth and reconciliation?

J. ABBOTT: Well, certainly within the spirit and intent. We work, as the deputy minister mentioned, with the Innu, the Innu Nation and the Innu Round Table when it comes to the Innu communities and families. The same with Nunatsiavut. We also work with NunatuKavut and on the Island we are working with Conne River and the First Nation on the West Coast.

J. DWYER: That's excellent. Thank you.

Are you satisfied that all critical issues pertaining to Indigenous children have been addressed?

J. ABBOTT: I think the best way for me to answer that is we know there's a lot of work yet to be done, but we are definitely on the right path. The working relationships between our

department, our social workers and with both the Innu Nation and the Nunatsiavut Government is vastly improved from where we were. We have protocols that we have in place and working on others.

I'm confident we are on the right path. I think it's reflected in the number of Indigenous children coming in care is going down. The supports are happening at the community end and they are staying in community. If not with their families, at least they're staying in the community. So a child coming out of the community and certainly going out of province is definitely a last resort for all of us.

J. DWYER: I appreciate that from the department, knowing that they can stay attached to their cultural heritage and be raised the way they would prefer kind of thing.

Thank you, Madam Chair. That will be it for that section.

CHAIR: Okay, thank you very much.

MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

2.1.01, Child and Youth Services: we amended the *Children, Youth and Families Act* about a year ago now. What feedback are you getting from your staff, Indigenous groups and clients of children in youth services on how these changes are working, feedback?

S. WALSH: Yes, we did amend the act. I think the two biggest changes at that time was a better inclusion respecting the rights of Indigenous peoples, and the second was how we provide services to youth in the province, all youth.

Just to begin with the approach around Indigenous children and youth and their families, I'm hearing that we are doing very well from my staff. I think that people are seeing that the value of a different approach to collaboration and community support is really making a difference in our approach.

The minister mentioned earlier that we have a renewed working relationship agreement that the minister signed with the leadership of both

Natuashish and Sheshatshiu a little over a year ago now, I guess. That protocol has really changed the way we do business; we've shared much more information. All Indigenous communities in Labrador now have ability to receive notification of when we take certain measures under our legislation, the *Children, Youth and Families Act* and/or the federal legislation, so they are much more informed of what is happening, they have a right to appear in certain circumstances, in court matters. I think the collaboration's improving.

It's early days, we have a long way to go; I'm not saying everything is perfect, but we are seeing a change in terms of the number of Indigenous children in care as a consequence and the number of Indigenous children coming into care. So I think there's an increased sharing. I speak, certainly, to the leadership of both governments fairly frequently and I have regular meetings, certainly, with the Nunatsiavut Government deputy minister. It's very positive how we're working together. Obviously, we know we have a long way to go.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

S. WALSH: As it relates to youth, good news story there as well. So we've seen an increase in the number of youth in care and the youth receiving youth services. They're voluntary, but they've chosen to come to us for services. And that's exactly what the act was intended to do, that gap people always talk about with 16- and 17-year-olds, filling that gap and then seeing young people not leave, even at 17 or 18 when they can. Seeing them stay until 21 – as I've heard policies allow – we've seen an increase. Slowly but surely that's going up and that's a good news story in terms of providing services to youth.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

What positions are currently vacant? We discussed that Salaries are under budget, but that's because of delayed recruitment and vacancies, as per your answer to the MHA for Placentia West - Bellevue, but just looking at the positions.

J. ABBOTT: We have that so we can provide all that information to you, but it would be

overall: social workers, social work assistants and the like.

L. EVANS: Okay.

Why was spending on Supplies, Purchased Services and Property, Furnishings and Equipment lower than expected last year?

J. ABBOTT: You said Supplies. Supplies were down, if we're in the same category –

L. EVANS: Supplies, Purchased Services and Property, Furnishings and Equipment, they were all lower.

J. ABBOTT: Lower, yes, and largely because we – I'll call it the vacancies within that program area, so we didn't have to spend those funds.

L. EVANS: Federal revenue is increased here, why are we expecting more money?

J. ABBOTT: Again, that's with the federal government, so they reimburse us for the expenditures in the Innu communities, and the level of activity will increase next year. There's a group home that's established and we fund that in the first instance and then get reimbursed.

L. EVANS: Okay.

Just keeping under Child and Youth Services, what is the salary for the executive director of Choices for Youth?

J. ABBOTT: I don't know.

L. EVANS: Okay.

Is that an appropriate question to ask here?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, I think. I mean, we fund that organization, but I don't know if it fits right in here, but I don't have details on their salaries.

L. EVANS: Okay. Would we be able to get those details?

J. ABBOTT: What I'll do, I will check and see what we have and what we can release. And what we have and what we can release, we'll

certainly be more than prepared to share with you.

L. EVANS: Okay. Thank you.

Currently, the residents of Lily House are being housed in a hotel in the St. John's metro area. Where's the money in the budget line for that?

J. ABBOTT: So if we are providing any additional funding for that type of expenditure, we have a budget, an operating agreement with Choices for Youth and that's funded. Where that is in terms of which line – is that under here?

D. MARTIN: Any funding that we provide to Choices for Youth would be under Grants and Subsidies. As the minister said, we provide them with an operating portion. We're not specifically funding what they're doing at this point in time.

L. EVANS: Okay.

Has the minister had any conversations with the Choices for Youth director to resolve the labour dispute that's ongoing?

J. ABBOTT: Certainly, I haven't or my office. We have, what I call, an improved plan, a straight contingency plan for any of the youth that are under our care and under our youth service arrangements, they are being protected and delivered on. But in terms of the labour relations matter, it falls within the Department of Environment and Climate Change. Whatever information they provide in terms of conciliation and that, that's all we have been apprised of.

That being said, we do our regular checks with Choices for Youth to make sure that if there are any issues that are arising, they are addressed by them or by us. We have not been apprised of any particular challenges at this point.

L. EVANS: Okay. Thank you.

Just one other question. The Martin Martin Group Home for youth and children, would you be able to provide a brief update? Last year, I know there was some contention between CSSD and the board of directors on whether or not it was going to be turned into a Level 4 or if it was

going to have the ability to be able to house children who were taking from their parents, temporarily, until they could actually find somewhere in the community and a lot of that was contingent on the training that was prescribed by CSSD to the Martin Martin Group Home.

So I was just wondering if you could just give a brief update on that progress.

S. WALSH: Yes, we worked with Martin Martin executive; they hired – we supported financially – a consultant and expert group to provide support for training for their staff, development of a policy manual and all of the work they needed to do to prepare to meet the requirements of a group home under CSSD, as you say, Level 4 placement.

They have completed all of that work successfully. I understand that they have done quite well and their licence is imminent, if not already signed-off the last few days.

L. EVANS: And so with that licence, they will be able to provide temporary care for children who have been removed from their homes?

S. WALSH: That's correct.

CHAIR: The Member's time has expired.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

CHAIR: MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: No, I'm good on that header.

Thank you.

CHAIR: Okay.

MHA Evans, do you have additional questions?

L. EVANS: No, I'm good.

Thank you.

CHAIR: I ask the Clerk to recall the group or I should say the subhead.

CLERK: Child and Youth Services, 2.1.01.

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

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Thank you.

On motion, subhead 2.1.01 carried.

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

CLERK: Policy and Programs, 3.1.01 to 3.1.03 inclusive.

CHAIR: 3.1.01 to 3.1.03, Policy and Programs.

MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: Thank you very much.

Salaries were \$14,000 over budget and this year the budgeted amount is \$2,000 more than last year's budget. Can you explain that, please?

J. ABBOTT: The savings in last year's budget were the result of short-term vacancies. Then the increase is a result of some scheduled salary increases within that unit.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Last year you spent less than one-third of the budgeted amount for Transportation and Communications. This year you have not reduced the budget. Have you considered operating as you did last year and reducing the expenditure?

J. ABBOTT: Well, two things; again, we were down one staff and COVID. We expect to get back to some more normal operations and I'm certainly encouraging our staff to get out, when they can, in this case to get out to the communities, work with the community agencies dealing with the seniors' issues, the 50-plus clubs and all of that. That's what we're hoping.

Also the director there has other roles. He's responsible for adult protection, so he has to visit the health authorities on a regular basis. He hasn't been doing that because of COVID. Now we'll expect to see him moving on – sorry, moving out to the regions.

J. DWYER: I understood.

Last year you spent \$100 of a \$3,600 budget for Supplies, and again you're budgeting \$3,600 this year.

J. ABBOTT: Well, again, people were working from home. We didn't need those supplies. We're anticipating now when people get back to the office – and we were down staff as well. So we're going to be at full complement.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Well, the government promote seniors staying in their own residence, on one hand; on the other hand; you've provided a grand total of approximately \$350 this year. Home heating fuel was 68 cents a litre in 2016 and now it's \$1.71. How can they afford to stay in their own home without a home heating rebate?

J. ABBOTT: Well, again, sort of a bit outside our department's, I'll call it, financial mandate, because none of that funding was or is in our department. The Seniors' Benefit and the Low Income Supplement where the fuel rebate was incorporated into those supplements, and they, as you know, in the five-point plan, were increased. We recognize that people would like to see more; we recognize from the government end that we only have a limited amount of funds to allocate and we wanted to get that out as expeditiously as possible without incurring any additional administrative costs.

As a result, we used the existing supplement system to get the money out. I know the Minister of Finance then spoke to the financial planning around all of that in the Budget Speech, but we're monitoring things on the ground. We're working with any of the community agencies to see how we can support them and how they're supporting some of the people that come to them, and that's why we provide funding to Food First NL, as an example. They're closer to the action, literally in the

communities, and we're comforted that we're dealing with some very immediate needs, and we'll just monitor things as we go ahead.

J. DWYER: So with that being said, when you work with Food First, are they distributing throughout the province or just in the metro region?

J. ABBOTT: No, that's right, throughout the province. We have a phone line, and they have an application (inaudible) right now. I guess the applications are probably in for any of the food banks or food programs, as an example, that need some support.

J. DWYER: Okay. And in order to receive the seniors' supplement they said that was part of the home heat rebate, and it was moved into the seniors' supplement, is there a threshold for their income in order to receive that or is it just automatic?

J. ABBOTT: No, it's based on their financial situation as reported in their tax return, and then there's a sliding scale based on their income. So we're taking advantage of that in place to get the money out. Unfortunately, it couldn't happen until July 1, just from the scheduling of the rebate by – because that's all managed by the Canada Revenue Agency, so that's the earliest they could do that.

J. DWYER: Okay.

With the escalating cost of living and the added stress to seniors, and the increase in medical costs, did you calculate the health savings by providing seniors an amount to live in comfort? Because we do have some seniors that have presented that they're making choices between their medication, or taking half a pill where they're supposed to be taking a full pill.

J. ABBOTT: We don't have any data on that or any analysis done. Now, just as a personal observation, when I hear those – because we have the drug NLPDP. So, again, if they're individuals that aren't availing of that program that should be, we should be encouraging them and certainly we need to do that.

So that is the only thing that I can really think of that collectively we need to make sure seniors

know, particularly those who just moved into that age category, that there is a program that is run and it is a good program and it is based on income. But if you're GIS and all that, it is free to the individual.

J. DWYER: So once they retire, are they given a package to say what programs are available to them and what thresholds?

J. ABBOTT: If they were on income support and transitioning over, yes. We start the year before, provide them the information and make sure they know all the benefits they're entitled to.

J. DWYER: Okay.

It is good to see the seniors in the city get a bus pass but what do you tell a person, basically I guess even in my district, that is unable to afford a taxi for a doctor. As we heard here in the House today, there are people who are cancelling their appointments because the taxis are either not available or they're too expensive.

J. ABBOTT: Well, one of the things that we're doing within our program, albeit it's a small scale at this point, but we are encouraging communities through this age-friendly approach to say, look, there is an opportunity here and I would argue responsibility for, I don't care how big or small your community is, that transportation is a particular challenge in your community. How can you, at the community level, come up with an initiative, a plan, a proposal to bring to us that we can fund?

We are seeing success with that right across the province and we are funding all the applications that are coming forward to do that. So we are encouraging through venues like this and elsewhere to encourage communities to start looking at that more seriously. A lot of times municipalities put their hands up, that's somebody else. It is the provincial government or it is the federal government. I argue, no, it is really a community effort and it allows people to get to church, it gets them to go to, as you say, doctors' appointments or what have you. It is a very small investment and a lot of people are volunteering in the community to support that service if we can get the bus or the taxi in place.

J. DWYER: Okay.

The number of seniors we already alluded to are obviously visiting more food centres and food banks, and it's continually increasing. Do you agree that the amount for seniors in the budget was sufficient, and is there something else coming in the following steps of your plan?

J. ABBOTT: Well, all I can speak to in terms of budget is what the Minister of Finance presented. It's a five-point plan and that's the monies we got allocated. My job here, as minister responsible for Seniors, is to listen to the voices, our Provincial Advisory Council, the Seniors' Advocate office, the SeniorsNL, what other measures that we can consider. I will then, as appropriate, bring them to my colleagues in Cabinet to determine then what else we can and should be doing.

J. DWYER: And it was about this time last year that we found out that the Seniors' Advocate would be vacating her position. Is there a schedule to replace the Seniors' Advocate?

J. ABBOTT: Well, I really can't answer that for two reasons: I don't have the schedule, because it's not my area of responsibility. That is an Officer of the House of Assembly, so those questions are best really asked of the Speaker's office.

J. DWYER: Okay, thank you.

CHAIR: Okay, thank you.

MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

Section 3.1.01, Seniors and Aging, the Auditor General released a report back in April 2021 to measure compliance with the recommendations from an audit back in 2017. This report recommended that the department ensure that an assessment of future impacts on aging population is completed on its operations directly related to seniors and related to the role in improving expertise and knowledge to the department on seniors and aging.

My question is: What work has been completed in the past year on this front, and what remains to be completed?

J. ABBOTT: Thank you for that question.

There are a number of things that are happening. We have an interdepartmental committee that is working on aging and dealing with demographics and the impact our aging society is having on policies and programs in government. So that's in place. We have the vulnerable persons task force through COVID, and again seniors were a group within that to make sure that whatever their issues are, were being addressed by the Department of Health or others. We have our Provincial Advisory Council and they're mandated and met with them to identify and flag for us the issues that are concerns that they're hearing on the ground and through their consultations. The same with the 50-plus clubs et cetera.

Also, in terms of the division itself, it's working on policies that need to be addressed. For instance, the *Adult Protection Act*, that took up a lot of time and effort of that division to bring that legislation forward. Also, through the policy side, we work across; we refer to it as horizontal policy development. So the director of Seniors and Aging and the staff in that are inputting their knowledge and expertise into other aspects of our programming, such as our Poverty Reduction Strategy/Social and Economic Well-Being plan.

So they will be contributing to that as well. They oversee as well the various grant programs we have in the department. There's a fair bit of activity going on and we also consult with the Department of Health, because a lot of the issues crossover when it comes to seniors' health care issues and long-term care issues, those kinds of things.

L. EVANS: Thank you, not only for the answer, but for the work you put in to knowing your department. I must say I do appreciate it, and I hope everyone else does too, Minister.

J. ABBOTT: Okay, here comes the hard one.

L. EVANS: No, no.

Has all of the \$200,000 for the Seniors' Social Inclusion Initiative been awarded, and could we have a list of the successful applicants and programs that they're offering out of this money?

J. ABBOTT: Yes and yes.

L. EVANS: Okay, thank you.

The next one actually, I think is pretty appropriate for me after my budget speech today where I talked about my age. I'm not sure if I'm 57 or – I think I might be 57, and if I am I'm going to be 58. So I'm getting in the seniors category. But this question is relevant to a lot of people. Have there been any initiatives in the department recently to examine and address the specific concerns of the needs of the two-spirited, LGBTQ++ seniors as they age? Basically, it's been a group that's been neglected for many years.

J. ABBOTT: No, again, thank you for that. The Minister Responsible for Women and Gender Equality has that file in government. And we are talking with that office on a regular basis as well, where we can. I have met with representatives of Quadrangle, for instance, and have ongoing communications with them.

But you raise, I think, a great issue or a great point is that one of the things we do is try to make sure that other departments and agencies think of seniors within the work they do and vice versa. They will come to us and make sure we are thinking of gender equality issues in the work we are doing. So, for instance, all of our Cabinet papers that go forward have that analysis built in to that. We can't get past go until those conversations and analysis is done. So when we are doing any of our work, we have to incorporate those factors in our policy work.

L. EVANS: I realize that falls under Women and Gender Equality, but of course it is a vast array of people in one group. They get old, too. So it is important to actually examine and address specific concerns for the group.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

No further questions for this section.

CHAIR: Okay.

MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: Under the 3.1.02, Disability and Policy Office, Salaries were \$13,000 less than budgeted and this year approximately \$2,000 budgeted more than last year.

J. ABBOTT: Again, we have vacancies in the division and, as a result, we didn't need all of the funds. We are now at full complement at this point and we will be needing the full funds going forward.

J. DWYER: So those positions that were vacant last year are now filled?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: Okay, Thank you.

Transportation and Communication, again, you used \$7,000 of a \$24,000 budget and this year the budget is \$45,000. Can you explain that?

J. ABBOTT: So the increases, we intend to do a bit more travel, but we also intend to have the Accessibility Standards Advisory Board in place and we will need to support them in their communications and travel as well.

J. DWYER: For Purchased Services, you used \$7,000 of a \$45,000 budget and this year the budget is \$63,000. Can you elaborate on that?

J. ABBOTT: So again, because of COVID and the like we weren't doing as much travel and meetings. For the Disability Policy Office, when we travel we're doing a lot of room rentals, those kinds of things. So we want to make sure we get up and running. Again, the Accessibility Standards Advisory Board will need more money to do room rentals and those kinds of things.

J. DWYER: So any monies that are not used, do they stay in the department or do they go back in general revenue?

J. ABBOTT: I'll say on an annual basis they will stay in the department. If we can reallocate them – there's a process, too, if we want move money to elsewhere, but we can. We would try to keep it so the Disability Policy money is within the programing and services. For instance, we might be able to move it into the grant programs as a one-time initiative if we have some savings, those kinds of things.

J. DWYER: Okay.

I would like to acknowledge the great work that we have seen from our Child and Youth Advocate and our Seniors' Advocate as well. Last year, I brought it to the floor about if we were going to incorporate a new disabilities advocate office. Has this been brought forward to the House of Assembly?

J. ABBOTT: Not yet. We're still doing our exploratory work on what would be an appropriate model for this province. There's not a lot to build on from across the country. There are some examples and we're doing that investigative work. We'll be doing some consultations with the community and then we'll be bringing something forward to Cabinet and then eventually to the House.

J. DWYER: Okay, thank you.

Because I think that would be the next step in this department, obviously. With each vulnerable sector, I find they would need somewhere to have their questions answered specifically. There's no sense of a senior calling the Child and Youth Advocate to get answers, type of thing, instead of having to call the department directly. So I would really appreciate if we can explore that and push that forward as well.

Looking forward to 3.1.03 –

CHAIR: We're not there yet.

J. DWYER: That's not called yet?

CHAIR: Oh, yes it is.

J. DWYER: That's what I thought. I just wanted to make sure, that's all.

CHAIR: Yes.

J. DWYER: Why were salaries \$150,900 less last year and this year is budgeted \$7,000 more than last year?

J. ABBOTT: Again, a very similar answer as before. We had one-time savings and we will intend to be fully staffed in that section for this coming year.

J. DWYER: So vacancies were of last year's budget and now they're filled?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, and there are some minor salary increases, depending on where they were in their classification system.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Less than 25 per cent of the budget for Transportation and Communications was spent last year and this year only \$2,000 budgeted less than last year.

J. ABBOTT: Again, less travel in the past year because of COVID and the like. We expect to be doing more meetings in person, particularly with child welfare matters; we need to have people in the same room where we can. That is what we're planning.

J. DWYER: I understand about COVID, and it probably goes for a lot of the headers that I've asked about for Transportation and Communications. We met expectations last year doing that. Have you considered operating the same, with a lot of similarities this year?

J. ABBOTT: Mr. Dwyer, you asked the question earlier as well. Our approach is we're only going to do the travel we need to do. People are very comfortable now with Zoom, Skype and virtual meetings and I use it quite regularly, where before you – even just in town or even in these two buildings, we're doing that because it's much more efficient. At the same time, there are certain areas, at least in introductory meetings and the like, where it's important for people to get together.

Also, we haven't done any out-of-province travel. I haven't done any of that; usually ministers are gone once a month somewhere for

meetings. There are different portfolios that I'm responsible for and we're doing Zoom. But there is, I'll say, pressure on for us to meet in person so we will be doing that later on this year.

My modus operandi here is that we'll only spend that which we need to. I think this year I don't know if it will be a good year, but we're getting close to a baseline year now and then I think we'll be adjusting our budgets permanently after that.

J. DWYER: Good.

Why is there an increase in the Supplies for this year?

J. ABBOTT: The Supplies: again, we have a training program, Triple P parenting training program, that we will be delivering this year that we weren't last.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Why did Professional Services go \$119,000 approximately over budget and this year the budgeted amount is the same as last year?

J. ABBOTT: One of it was, I'll say, an accounting issue, that we had a late-year payment for last year that we had to fund this year – or, excuse me, in the past year. As well, we have a consultant hired to do some work in that program area.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Why did Purchased Services go up \$70,000 over budget?

J. ABBOTT: We did some first-aid training for foster families, which we committed to, and we were able to deliver on that.

J. DWYER: Are there any new programs being introduced from the child welfare programs?

J. ABBOTT: What we're doing is not so much new as focusing our efforts on areas where we've had challenges, so adoptions, for instance, and in-care programs. So we're going to create – I don't know if it's done yet, but we're splitting a division so that we'll provide where we have one director we'll now have two because we

need them to focus on those areas that, I'll use the word "suffered," but haven't had as much attention paid for different reasons. We recognize that there's an opportunity here to bring in some more expertise to the department.

J. DWYER: Although they're separate towers, they'll still work together?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: Because, obviously, we want some more permanent homes and stuff like that. So I think it would be good, if we are splitting it, to make sure that they're working in concert with each other.

J. ABBOTT: Yes, absolutely.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: Okay.

MHA Evans

L. EVANS: Thank you.

Section 3.1.03, Child Welfare Programs and Policy: what work is progressing on the action plan on prevention or early intervention for families?

S. WALSH: We were successful last year in getting a new branch in the department to focus on prevention and early intervention. That branch is the branch that's focused on – the minister talked about a new social and economic well-being plan. That plan is taking components of a poverty reduction perspective. As well, in the minister's mandate letter it talks about identification of outcomes and improved outcomes for all children and youth in the province. So their focus is on that as well.

It's working collaboratively horizontally across government and with community to really look at how we improve, support the services for families, for children and youth, new and young families, that kind of approach, for early intervention and prevention. That's a new direction for our department and one we're really pleased we're supported to move on.

As it relates to the child welfare piece, we also looked at – well, it's tertiary prevention then because, of course, the child is already identified as may be in need of protective intervention. We are looking at wraparound supports and families, additional supports to families, additional supports to community.

So some of the things, for example, we did was we partnered with the Nunatsiavut Government on supporting our children project. In fact that's where two of our social workers went with them. And we were pleased to see they work out of Goose Bay to work with families throughout the coast to support identification of foster homes and support the foster homes so that children can stay in communities closer to their families to get back as soon as possible.

In addition to that, other supports and services, parent coaching, Triple P parenting the minister talked about earlier. Really trying to put supports and services into families so that children don't have to come into care.

L. EVANS: Okay, so a new branch in the department. Where would the monies come from in these sections?

S. WALSH: So we're kind of a little, from these sections, all over the map. The supports to children from a child protection perspective would be in the one we covered earlier –

L. EVANS: Okay, so it came from different areas.

S. WALSH: Yes.

L. EVANS: Okay, no, that's fine, thank you.

Nunatsiavut is working towards taking over child welfare services because it's their own government. And would you be able to provide an update on this transfer? What's CSSD doing to help Nunatsiavut get ready to take over their own services?

J. ABBOTT: Thank you, Ms. Evans.

We have not really had any, I'll say, formal discussions with Nunatsiavut on this. We know that they announced publicly that they are moving in this direction and we're looking over

the next couple of years. We have, in my public statements, supported and encouraged that and said whatever we need to do to support that, we are more than willing to do that. We think it's definitely moving in the right direction for the Inuit children and families.

So the onus, dare I say, is going to be on Nunatsiavut working with the federal authorities to see how quickly they can move. There's a lot of work that needs to be done because they really have to establish a whole new program for themselves.

But I think the working relationship we have with them right now speaks to how this can be successful and we are obviously working with them. I've talked with the federal minister in the past and told that office that we, as a government, are fully supportive of the federal legislation and intent, and there'll be no barriers put up by us. So the sooner this happens, I think the better it would be for all.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

Would we be able to get a list of the recommendations that are still outstanding from *A Long Wait for Change*?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

L. EVANS: Okay, thank you.

Just moving back now to 3.1.02, Disability Policy Office, that I overlooked there. Since the passing of the *Accessibility Act* what progress has been made in establishing standards to improve accessibility? I know you've been working in this area.

J. ABBOTT: Formally, we're not in the position to do anything particularly on the standard, because we need to have the advisory board put in place. And that's what we're working on right now. We're in the department doing some homework so when the board is in place, we can provide them with the results of our work. When we were getting the legislation ready for introduction to the House, obviously we looked at what was happening across the country to inform our work, and we're keeping that information current. We've talked to the

Canadian Standards Association because they have experience in this area.

So there's a lot we're going to be able to bring to the board and my wish and hope is that once that's established, they will be able to move quickly to come forward with some early recommendations and then really get the ball rolling within the province to move on the standards right across all sectors of our society.

L. EVANS: Okay, thank you.

The Capacity Grant Program, has all the \$250,000 been awarded?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

L. EVANS: And would we be able to have a list of the successful applicants?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

L. EVANS: Okay.

Just looking at a line item now, Purchased Services. Why has the budget for Purchased Services increased so much this year?

J. ABBOTT: So, the Purchased Services, as I mentioned, because the accessibility advisory board will be in place – the standards advisory board will be in place – we'll need to fund them for holding meetings and their activities. That's largely the main reason there.

L. EVANS: Okay. I'm not sure if it fits under the Disability Policy Office, but your bus program, riding for free. I know it was mentioned there by the city saying that the province's share was short. I think it was \$200,000 or something like close to that, and it was putting the program in jeopardy. Now, I mean, a lot of people with accessibility challenges use the bus system to get around. So I was just wondering, are you going to actually help make sure that this ride for free program goes ahead?

J. ABBOTT: I say the simple answer is yes, we're working with the city as we speak in how we can move this forward. There were some issues around the amount of funding; I would argue some miscommunication. So we're

working through those pieces, because we need to make sure that there's a seamless transition into expanding the program for seniors on low income and for youth that are in our service arrangements. I'm optimistic that this will be addressed literally over the next week or two.

L. EVANS: The reason why I brought it is because a lot of times people with disabilities are sort of overlooked when it comes to accessibility for the buses.

No further questions for me for this section.

CHAIR: Okay.

MHA Dwyer, do you have any additional questions?

J. DWYER: I'm good, thank you.

CHAIR: I ask the Clerk to recall the subhead grouping.

CLERK: Policy and Programs, 3.1.01 to 3.1.03 inclusive.

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

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Carried.

On motion, subheads 3.1.01 through 3.1.03 carried.

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

CLERK: Prevention and Early Intervention, 4.1.01 to 4.1.03 inclusive.

CHAIR: 4.1.01 to 4.1.03, Prevention and Early Intervention.

MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Why were Salaries \$1,841,200 less than budgeted?

J. ABBOTT: Essentially, given that our caseloads were down, we didn't need as many staff as we normally would for intake and assessment of applications and follow-up.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Why was Purchased Services approximately \$100,000 less than budgeted?

J. ABBOTT: Again, we had people working from home and that allowed us to reduce that expenditure.

J. DWYER: And why was there a provincial revenue last year?

J. ABBOTT: Provincial revenue: so your question again?

J. DWYER: We spent \$61,900. I'm just wondering what was the need for that? Was it deficient of what we were asking from the federal government program?

J. ABBOTT: I'm not sure if I'm following your question there now, Sir.

I'll just have to read the note here because I'm not – we had additional revenue received from the federal – sorry Pan-Canadian New Horizons for Seniors Program, if that helps.

Yes please, Brian, go ahead.

B. EVANS: It was an overrun from prior year. It was funds that weren't claimed when Income Support was in its former department of IPGS. So it was actually revenue received from prior year, that's why it's in for this year.

J. DWYER: It was a rollover then?

B. EVANS: Yes.

J. DWYER: Okay, thank you.

Moving to 4.1.02, Income Support Program and Policy: Why were Salaries less than budgeted?

J. ABBOTT: 4.1.0 –

J. DWYER: 4.1.02.

J. ABBOTT: 4.1.02, you know I don't have that here. Sorry, I'm in the wrong section.

The savings were a result of short-term vacancies in the department.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Why was Purchased Services higher than budgeted?

J. ABBOTT: Purchased Services were higher than budget and the increase was we had to buy additional data from Statistics Canada. Nothing comes cheap.

J. DWYER: Obviously, again, Transportation and Communications was the same situation. Have we considered doing some more virtual meetings to support keeping that budget down?

J. ABBOTT: In this area, it was largely due to postage as opposed to travel.

J. DWYER: Okay, so \$40,000 –

J. ABBOTT: Yeah.

J. DWYER: And in 4.1.03, Poverty Reduction and Community Sector: Why were the Salaries less than budgeted for last year?

J. ABBOTT: The savings, again, were due to vacancies in the department and in that unit.

J. DWYER: Have they been filled now?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, we're working to get them all in place because we have a lot of work to do.

J. DWYER: Are there any vacancies currently?

J. ABBOTT: In that section? No.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Transportation was \$10,000 less and the same amount was budgeted as last year. Why is that?

J. ABBOTT: Again, because of COVID, no travel to conferences. We intend to get back to normal activity in those areas.

J. DWYER: Can some of those savings go into the bus program?

J. ABBOTT: If needed, sure.

J. DWYER: I'm just wondering, because I know that allocating it to another head is a difficult process.

J. ABBOTT: Yes, we have a process.

J. DWYER: I just want to make sure that that process is available.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: And that's how we're thinking outside the box kind of thing, too. Keep it in the programming that we already have established.

With that being said, are there any new programs in this section for Poverty Reduction?

J. ABBOTT: Most of the activity in Poverty Reduction – again, we had the five-point plan and those things that were announced in the budget, including \$10-a-day child care, those initiatives.

This unit here will be largely working on the social and economic well-being plan. Then in the previous section we're dealing with our income support review this year. So that's most of the activity. They work also with a lot of community agencies helping them address the issues that are coming forward. Our youth-serving agencies, again, are supported through this unit here.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Again, Transportation was \$10,000 less and the same amount is budgeted as for last year. Why is that?

J. ABBOTT: Same thing, less travel, we intend to rev it up.

Again, one of the things that I certainly appreciate that we're – we don't want to be always locked down here in the Confederation Building. We've got to get out to the communities; we've got to get out to the

agencies to see them in action, which is something I do as often as I can.

Organizations are becoming more open to having people visit. Still a lot of organizations are not allowing that, fair enough. So as society opens up, we'll be out in the field, as it were.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Why was Purchased Services \$31,000, approximately, less than last year and the same amount is budgeted for this year?

J. ABBOTT: This is in which –?

J. DWYER: 4.1.03.

J. ABBOTT: Right, 4.1.03, Purchased Services, that was less purchase from data from Statistics Canada in that particular unit.

J. DWYER: Okay.

I appreciate the five-point plan and I guess somebody in my position is very anticipated to see the other four points because, like I said, there is a great need now with the increase in fuel costs and food costs. We have a very vulnerable group that we don't want to fall through the cracks but we want to be there to support them. Like I said, I guess I'll wait to see where the other four points go and what other programs or initiatives are introduced.

Thank you.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: MHA Evans.

L. EVANS: Thank you.

4.1.01, Income Support Regional Client Services: What was the most recent number of income support recipients? Also, which region per capita has the most income support recipients?

J. ABBOTT: The latest number we have is 20,000 on the monthly annualized basis. So we track that very closely as you can appreciate. Right now, we're at 20,000.

In terms of the region, again, really it matches where the population is, so it would certainly be the St. John's metro area, that would be the larger numbers. Within that, it would be single males are the largest component of our caseloads – significantly so.

L. EVANS: What I was referring to was per capita. I was looking at the percentage. Say, for example, my region, the population is low but we have a high percentage of people –

J. ABBOTT: Oh, I understand. I haven't seen that type of analysis but it is easy to do.

L. EVANS: Would we be able to have that analysis done?

J. ABBOTT: Sure, yes.

L. EVANS: That would be great.

J. ABBOTT: I'd be interested in that.

L. EVANS: I'm looking at 4.1.02, Income Support Program and Policy: When was the last time there was a review done on the income eligibility threshold for the provincial drug card program under The Access Plan?

J. ABBOTT: That falls under the Department of Health and Community Services. So if you are on income support, you are eligible. If you are a senior with GIS, you are eligible. That is the extent of our direct involvement in that.

L. EVANS: Okay, that is good to know. Thank you.

I had a couple of questions there regarding to the card. Moving on, how many hearings did the Income and Employment Support Appeal Board hear last year, and what was the average time it takes for a case to be processed in entirety from the review to the hearing?

J. ABBOTT: Susan is going to answer that.

S. WALSH: So the average amount of time it takes – they hear roughly five a day when they have a hearing and they are heard within 30 days of being received by our department, sometimes

less. The average number that we hear – I am finding trouble remembering.

B. EVANS: In '21-'22, the board heard 30 appeals over nine separate hearings. There were no hearings in May, October or March because there were no applications received.

L. EVANS: Since the end of the federal supports for people, like the CERB and the federal support programs, whose job and income have been affected by the pandemic, have you noticed any changes in the number of people applying and receiving income support?

J. ABBOTT: Again, we were monitoring that very closely and we saw a drop-off of over 2,000 clients from our caseload. We look at that on a month-to-month basis. We have seen over the winter months, I will call it, a small increase on a monthly basis but we are still only up to the 20,000 cases. So we had dropped down to just over 19,000, 19,500. Now we are up to 20,000.

So it has been a relatively small increase, relative to the 2,000 that dropped off our caseload as we think – largely through CERB. But we also know that the economy is working quite well and certainly, I will say, on the Island for sure. But, as I said, we are monitoring that very closely. And it is reflected in our budget numbers. We have been able to budget a bit less because of that.

L. EVANS: And just a general question along those lines. Was there a high percentage of people on income support that actually double-dipped with the CERB and now they're being penalized?

J. ABBOTT: Based on the evidence we've had, there was a very small number.

L. EVANS: A very small number, okay, that's good to know.

J. ABBOTT: Yes. Urban legend.

L. EVANS: Not in my district, unfortunately, because I deal with them personally.

Why were the provincial revenues lower than expected this year?

J. ABBOTT: Which –?

L. EVANS: We're still in 4.1.02, Income Support Program and Policy.

J. ABBOTT: Brian, if you can answer that (inaudible).

B. EVANS: Collection of overpayments represents a source of revenue here, but the most significant change was actually a regulation change in 2019 to exempt child support and CPP children benefits from income support financial eligibility. So because of that change in 2019, we're seeing a drop in revenue there.

L. EVANS: Okay.

Just another general question. People on income support, some people in my district received a letter and the letter required them to actually reply. Because they didn't reply, they lost their income support. That's what me and my assistant are finding. So I was just wondering, what was the rationale behind that, I guess, policy?

J. ABBOTT: It would be again apart of our auditing process, verification. Just confirmation that this person is still there. Because from time to time, cheques get issued and the individual is no longer, literally, in the community or may be even deceased for that matter. So it's just part of that.

Now, is there a better way of doing that? That's something, in your communities, I'd be more than happy to talk about that, because we don't – certainly the intent is not to deny anybody the income support they're eligible for. But if some of our administrative practices are not effective or too zealous in a community, then we want to address that. So we can certainly have that conversation.

L. EVANS: I really would like to have that conversation. I will say that it actually harmed a lot of people.

J. ABBOTT: I apologize for that.

L. EVANS: But maybe in the future when you're going to deny somebody income support because they didn't reply, you might want to look at your clientele and the policy.

J. ABBOTT: Yes, understood.

L. EVANS: I'm finished with this section.

Thank you.

CHAIR: Okay.

MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: I just picked up on something there and it was of interest to me as well about the people that availed of CERB while they were on income support. I know you said it is a very small number, but I guess that is relative to the recipient that is hearing the news. I'm just wondering if you can quantify that.

J. ABBOTT: Now, do I have that number? I don't know.

Susan is telling me, I think, we're at maybe 162 cases.

J. DWYER: Okay.

J. ABBOTT: But we'll confirm that. In our case, we do have a payback policy; it is five per cent up to \$25 a month max.

J. DWYER: I saw that in the policy book and I appreciate that.

My last question is that – oops, sorry, go ahead, Susan.

S. WALSH: So there were 770 people suspended and then 162 of those returned. It really depends on the question you're asking. It could potentially be some overlap in between, so we really should get the right –

J. ABBOTT: Okay, you'll clarify that –

J. DWYER: I appreciate that and if you can include that in the binder, that would be fine.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: My very last question is: How many people, currently, are availing of income support? How many recipients.

J. ABBOTT: Twenty thousand clients.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: You're welcome.

MHA Evans, can I confirm that you are finished?

L. EVANS: Yes, I am.

Thank you.

CHAIR: Okay.

MHA Trimper.

P. TRIMPER: Thank you very much for the opportunity. I thank my colleagues on this side of the Committee.

I just have one, sort of, themed question that I'd like to explore with the department while they're here. As I said in Newfoundland and Labrador Housing, I would like to acknowledge, Minister, the team that you have in Labrador that work with us in Lake Melville, and frankly we do get involved in files throughout Labrador, but particularly with Torngat Mountains – our two districts. So many of the issues are actually very closely related and I enjoy a good working relationship with my colleagues, so all good in that respect.

One of our challenges, however, is the two aspects of the team that you have in Labrador: one is the turnover and the high caseload for those who remain. I think I have sat in on maybe six or seven different Estimates and this is a common theme. I am just wondering if you could discuss, perhaps, the trend; where you see it going; how you see it could be addressed. I am aware of some of the numbers. I don't want to guess because we're being recorded but perhaps you may have them there, in terms of number of case files per social worker in Labrador versus in Newfoundland. It's not a competition, I'm just trying to explain how overloaded some of

the folks are that we depend on and that the families depend on.

And then, finally, I heard you mention earlier in your remarks about the, you know, using a fly-in, fly-out model with the colleague from Placentia West-Bellevue as part of the solution. Yes, it is; however, some feedback for you. Some of the families are saying that they feel they need to start over again when a social worker shows up, to explain their file.

We're doing our best to support you and your team and we don't mind doing that. We feel that – well, frankly, it's an accurate reflection. There's no deliberate attempt to protract or delay resolving a situation; however, that is the reality.

I'll just leave you all with that bunch of thoughts and see what you have to say.

Thank you.

J. ABBOTT: Okay.

Mr. Trimper, I'm going to ask Deputy Minister Walsh to give an answer and expand, because she's obviously much closer to it and I know has been working hard on the issues that you've addressed.

As a department, we're committed to making sure we can provide – quote, unquote – the same level of service and even more because of the issues in Labrador, some of the communities are much more complicated given the circumstances that we're dealing with there. So part of our effort is certainly at the executive level to make sure we have a good working relationship with the Indigenous leadership in Labrador. That is certainly there and has been paying dividends, because it's able to smooth out a lot of potentially rough edges, particularly when crises arise.

When COVID hit, the last round in late fall, we were able to pick up the phone and work through the issues on how we're going to deliver our child protection services when the community is shut down; individual homes are shut down, they don't want people in. That's been a large part of our effort to deal with that in a broader sense.

I'll get Susan to speak to, then, the specific initiatives that we're trying to do in terms of recruitment, retention, working with NAPE and others.

So there are a lot of positive conversations taking place. We're working with the School of Social Work to increase their number of students that they're taking in. I'm told it's going to happen, so they're seized on it. We're working with our social workers here in this part of the province to, at least, as we say, fly in to make themselves available, recognizing they want to be able to help their colleagues.

Everything is recognizing that we have a particular challenge in Labrador, albeit other parts of the province are facing somewhat similar situations in terms of caseloads. We're very conscious of that. We have other measures that we're contemplating.

I'll set Susan sort of expand on those.

S. WALSH: We certainly concur that there are some significant and unique concerns in Labrador and, as a consequence, we have been very focused on trying to not just recruit but retain in a big way. Child welfare is not easy social work. It's the most demanding social work you're going to do; however, it's very rewarding when you're able to do it and supported to do so.

The relationships in many of the communities in Labrador makes it really good social work because you have to work collaboratively, you have to know your partners. So there are some really unique opportunities and we've used that kind of approach in trying to recruit people who like that type of work and want to work and live and be part of these communities and work in Indigenous culture. Most of our staff are not Indigenous, so we're really trying to learn the culture, work collaboratively with those who do and learn from them as well.

We've had a number of initiatives. I mean, we've talked here in the House before about we have sign-on bonuses, we have attention bonuses; we've introduced numerous fly-in and fly-out models to try to give people opportunity to come in and work in community, get to know partners.

To your question or your point around families feeling like they need to retell their story. Certainly, on turnover that is 100 per cent true and difficult and unfortunate because these aren't easy stories to tell; however, when we have fly-in, fly-out models and our staff stays somewhat consistent, then we assign families to one social worker. That social worker, when they're out of community, have a buddy and that buddy is filling in as is needed for any kind of requirement. But for the most part, the primary social worker is the social worker who goes in every two weeks.

Of course, if something comes up, the buddy definitely cuts in, but, again, it should be the same buddy every time. So we try to cut down on that kind of discrepancy for families as best we can, but the turnover doesn't help that cause by any stretch. I appreciate that.

In addition to some of the efforts that we had been putting in to try to recruit and retain, we have also been working across the country with universities. We actually have had a number of sessions in numerous universities and we have others scheduled to really try to recruit from universities throughout the country.

As the minister said, we know that the graduates from Memorial University – we are actually going to retain 25 of them this year, which is wonderful. A number of them are going outside St. John's – three definitely so far to Labrador. But we know we need more than that and so we have worked with the School of Social Work. They will be increasing their program to 20 new BSW seats come the fall and 10 new MSW seats.

But in the interim of those seats showing fruition in four years, we have seen some real benefits of having some of our staff, who have lived in Indigenous communities, be part of these sessions right across the country to say their experiences having worked in these communities and worked in partnership with Indigenous governments, organizations and some of the success they felt from a professional perspective to try to help with the recruitment aspect. So that is ongoing.

We also have a relationship, as the minister indicated, with NAPE. We have a NAPE/CSSD Joint Committee. So every region of the province, at a social work level, is represented with NAPE members with our management staff as well. Through that, we have identified the key areas that people are struggling with to provide these kind of services: safety, workload, support, those kind of things. So we have brought in a number of measures.

We introduced safety devices last year and we have piloted those, rolled them out and then the learning was: Do you know what? We would like not just to be able to say we are safe or unsafe when we are out doing visits, we would like to be able to talk to our supervisor, we would like to be able to do some sort of communication. So we are purchasing new devices, getting them out this year. It was a learning and we are happy to do that if that will help staff feel safe and families to be supported because any kind of decision-making can happen more quickly.

In addition to that, we are almost ready to put out – hopefully next week – a RFP to hire a consultant to do a full review of our delivery structure in child welfare and can we do it better? Are there other skill mixes that would help us improve services to children, youth and families? So we look forward to that. We've worked with NAPE on that. I've had consultation with the College of Social Workers on that.

So we see we have a lot of irons in the fire, we know we need to improve and we're hopeful – very.

P. TRIMPER: Thank you.

CHAIR: Okay.

I ask the Clerk to recall the subhead grouping.

CLERK: Prevention and Early Intervention, 4.1.01 to 4.1.03 inclusive.

CHAIR: Shall 4.1.01 to 4.1.03, Prevention and Early Intervention, carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, subheads 4.1.01 through 4.1.03 carried.

CLERK: The total.

CHAIR: Shall the total carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

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

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

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

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

CHAIR: I just want to thank everybody. Thank you, Minister Coady. It's been a long evening but very informative.

The next meeting is Tuesday, May 2 at 6 p.m. to consider the Estimates of the Department of Health and Community Services.

Can I ask for a mover for motion to adjourn?

J. DWYER: Before I move to adjourn, I would like to say thank you to the staff at CSSD for making time to do this. I appreciate, Minister, your knowledge of the department, being fairly

new still I guess kind of thing with an election only one year away or us being sworn in actually a year from today.

I would also like to acknowledge Deputy Premier Coady and thank you for putting together the budget and taking into account the situation that this vulnerable sector is in and knowing that we need to do more going forward is much appreciated. I thank you for that.

I thank everybody else that came to the meeting tonight, especially the table staff. Because, like I said, these are long hours for you guys as well.

I thank you, Madam Chair, for keeping us on track.

I so move for adjournment.

CHAIR: Meeting adjourned.

Thank you.

On motion, the Committee adjourned.