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Social Services**

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

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Honourable Derek Bennett, MHA

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

Clerk of the Committee: Mark Jerrett

Appearing:

Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development

Hon. John Abbott, MHA, Minister
Allan Doody, Deputy Minister

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, Community Partnerships and Homelessness

Also Present

Hon. Siobhan Coady, MHA, Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board
Craig Pardy, MHA
Chris Tibbs, MHA (for a portion of the meeting)
Jim Locke, Government Members' Caucus
Darrell Hynes, Official Opposition Caucus
Scott Fleming, Research, Third Party

Pursuant to Standing Order 68, Craig Pardy, MHA for Bonavista, substitutes for Joedy Wall, MHA for Cape St. Francis.

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

The Committee met at 5:36 p.m. in the Assembly Chamber.

CHAIR (Gambin-Walsh): Okay, we're going to call the meeting to order.

We have some substitutes tonight: For MHA Wall we have MHA Pardy; for MHA Pike we have Minister Coady; we will have MHA Dwyer for CSSD and MHA Tibbs for Newfoundland and Labrador Housing.

Is that correct? Okay.

The other thing is, too, if an independent comes, there has kind of been – just want to remind the Committee – an agreement that, at the end, the independents get 10 minutes each just to ask questions, if they come and want to ask questions. If Committee is okay with that. All hands okay with that? Okay.

I think we need to have a break between Newfoundland and Labrador Housing and CSSD for the seating plan over here. So if I go on, someone remind me that we need to break.

Also, if the tally light doesn't come on, I ask you to just put your hand up because last night they were having difficult seeing behind. Please try to speak a bit loud so they can hear you up in the back room.

First, I'm going to ask the Members of the Committee and staff that are here to introduce themselves.

We'll start down here at the end with the NDP.

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

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

J. DWYER: Jeff Dwyer, MHA for Placentia West - Bellevue.

D. HYNES: Darrell Hynes, Director of Legislation and Regulatory Affairs with the Opposition Office.

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAIR: Okay, Minister, I will ask you just to introduce your staff now, but not to introduce the department until we start reading the heads.

J. ABBOTT: Okay.

John Abbott, Minister Responsible for the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation and Minister of Children, Seniors and Social Development.

I'll get each of the staff to introduce themselves starting to my right.

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

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

M. THOMAS: Melanie Thomas, Director, Community Partnerships and Homelessness.

J. MERCER: Joe Mercer, Executive Director, Regional Operations and Program Delivery.

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

CHAIR: Thank you.

So I just ask the Committee now also to move the minutes. The minutes are dated April 4, 2023. You should have a copy on your desk.

S. REID: So moved.

CHAIR: So moved by MHA Reid.

Seconder?

L. STOYLES: Seconded.

CHAIR: MHA Stoyles.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Carried.

On motion, minutes adopted as circulated.

CHAIR: First I'm going to ask the Clerk to call the heading and then, Minister, you can say what you want to say about your department.

CLERK (Jerrett): 1.1.01 to 1.1.02 inclusive.

CHAIR: 1.1.01 to 1.1.02 inclusive, Housing.

I just want to clarify something. For Newfoundland and Labrador Housing, MHA Tibbs, you're the one asking all the questions, correct?

C. TIBBS: Yes, Ma'am.

CHAIR: Okay.

Go ahead, Minister Abbott.

J. ABBOTT: Thank you, Chair.

Good evening everyone and thank you for coming here to the Social Services Estimates Committee for the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation.

As minister, I'm pleased to be here to discuss this year's Estimates for the corporation. As we all know, access to safe, adequate and affordable housing is one of the primary social determinants of health. I'm very pleased to advise that *Budget 2023* provides a record level of provincial investment in housing to help ensure that everyone has a safe and affordable home.

Through *Budget 2023*, our government will provide an investment of over \$76 million to the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation. Together with our federal partner, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, over \$140 million will be invested in the delivery of vital programs and services that address a diverse range of housing needs throughout the province.

Budget 2023 announced a significant investment of \$70 million over three years for a new affordable housing program. This program will see the construction of over 850 new affordable homes in the rental market, through both private and non-profit sector partnerships. This investment builds on the over 750 new housing options advanced since 2021, including the provision of the new Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Benefit to over 500 households to access affordable housing in the private rental market; more than \$24 million being invested to construct over 90 new NLHC units; a \$12-million partnership with the federal government and The Gathering Place to construct 56 new transitional and supportive housing units along with 40 low-barrier emergency shelter beds; support for the opening of a 20-unit

supportive housing at the Centre of Hope in St. John's and expansion of non-profit emergency shelter capacity throughout the province, including close to 70 new beds here in St. John's with further expansion under way.

With a focus on seniors, the new affordable housing program will also include young adults, Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, immigrants and people experiencing homelessness. We anticipate issuing a proposal call and related information on the program details in late May. The proposal call will be open to private and non-profit groups, including municipalities and Indigenous organizations. The \$70-million program also represents significant opportunities to contribute to the provincial economic activity through the engagement of contractors, building supply businesses and related economic spinoffs.

Cost-shared investments of \$57 million will support operations of our public rental housing portfolio, as well as partner manage and cooperative housing throughout the province providing homes for over 13,000 low-income individuals and families. Over \$17 million will be invested in 2023-24 to repair and renovate our public housing rental housing units. This includes \$1 million to complete major repairs on vacancies so these can once again become homes for families in need.

Through *Budget 2023*, government has continued its investment of over \$9 million to further support housing affordability through the provision of heat subsidies to NLHC tenants. Work continues on projects funded under the Low Carbon Economy Leadership Fund that would result in electric conversion of oil heating systems and other energy efficiency improvements on 178 of our units that will be completed by the end of '23-'24. *Budget 2023* also invests \$18.5 million to provide rental assistance in the private market, expanding available housing options and assisting over 2,600 low-income households to find safe, affordable

homes, and over 50 per cent of these clients are seniors.

The rental assistant budget includes \$2.8 million of new provincial and federal cost-shared funding to launch a pending co-design expansion of the Canada Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Benefit, with a focus on survivors of gender-based violence. Over the next five years, an additional \$17.1 million will be invested to expand this program to over 500 households. An investment of \$10.7 million for home repair programs will support low-income homeowners through the province, most of whom are seniors.

Serving over 2,000 households this past year, these financial assistance programs support much-needed home repairs and improve housing accessibility and energy efficiency allowing individuals to remain in their homes.

Budget 2023 also includes investments to work with our many and valued partners in addressing homelessness throughout the province. Over \$8.7 million will provide emergency accommodations, food, transportation and support 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 individual supports to foster long-term housing stability.

Budget 2023 also includes an investment over \$30 million for the construction of an integrated health, housing and supportive services hub to support those experiencing homelessness in the Happy Valley-Goose Bay area.

Additionally, an investment of over \$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.

A further federal-provincial investment of more than \$4.8 million was recently announced to support the Hope Haven Transition House in Labrador City to construct a new seven-unit, second-stage housing project.

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 investments and now I am certainly open, myself, to a few questions.

Thank you.

CHAIR: The Committee has a little minor issue first that I have to address. MHA Dwyer is actually the Member for the Committee but MHA Tibbs is here technically substituting, so I just have to make sure that you're okay with MHA Dwyer being in the room while MHA Tibbs is here. Is that okay?

Okay, sorry about that, but I had to do it officially.

We are ready to go.

MHA Tibbs.

C. TIBBS: Thank you very much, Minister, for your opening remarks. We all know Newfoundland and Labrador Housing and housing across the province and have proper shelter for families across the province is much needed, of course, in rural

and urban areas and we're looking for equality across the board.

I do want to go on record, you have a gentleman working for yourself, Wayne Follett, an absolute godsend in Newfoundland and Labrador Housing; he is a fantastic individual, he has helped me out and he has a heart and he cares. I just want to go on record by saying that gentleman is doing his job right.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

J. ABBOTT: We'll pass that on, thank you.

C. TIBBS: We'll start off at 1.1.01, Minister. What is the current wait-list for a rent supplement unit, average?

J. MULLALEY: From the program perspective, individuals would apply to Housing for housing in general. We don't specifically carry wait-lists for rent supplement. We would do it and then whatever comes up first or of a choice between the rent supplement and our own units. Currently our wait-list is just over 2,300.

C. TIBBS: Thank you, 2,300.

Does the minister agree there is a housing crisis in St. John's?

J. ABBOTT: What I can and I think the best way to answer that, is there is a housing shortage right across the spectrum, whether it's low-cost rent to any rental opportunity, as well as for those wanting to purchase homes. If you look at the real estate market, the prices have gone up and the supply has gone down. As a result and we recognize that, that's why we are doing investments that we've done so far, and obviously more and more to come.

C. TIBBS: Thank you, Minister.

How many people are still being housed in a hotel in Goose Bay?

J. ABBOTT: Well, that will depend night by night. We're probably averaging between 25 and 30 over the winter. The number may increase in the spring, depending on what happens. But right now, just in total, we have roughly 300 people in shelters across the province, including Labrador.

C. TIBBS: Thank you.

Is there any programming available to these individuals? Because according to the hotel manager, there is not.

J. ABBOTT: Well, for those that are, I'll call, sponsored and funded by the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation, they are screened and they're then recommended to the Labrador Inn, for instance, through the current housing hub in Happy Valley-Goose Bay that's operated by the Nunatsiavut Government. Then we'll know what supports are needed. Certainly, Labrador-Grenfell Health will provide services, so there are drop-in services available. They're not left on their own.

That being said, it is a hotel and it's not a shelter in the formal sense.

C. TIBBS: Thank you, Minister.

What is the current wait-list for the Home Repair Program, by region, if you have that breakdown?

J. MULLALEY: There's actually no particular wait-list because, as an individual would apply for the program, we accept the application if they're eligible and then they just are served as the inspections are done and so forth. There's not actually a specific wait-list for that.

C. TIBBS: Is there a number for how many people are waiting?

J. MULLALEY: Pardon?

C. TIBBS: Is there a number of how many people are waiting?

J. MULLALEY: I guess there's no specific wait-list.

C. TIBBS: It's a moving target, I guess.

J. MULLALEY: Well, everybody who applies, and is accepted, then the process starts on a scope of work and inspection and those sorts of things. So there's not actually a wait-list per se.

C. TIBBS: How many were turned away for the Home Repair Program? How many are turned down?

J. MULLALEY: From an eligibility perspective?

C. TIBBS: Sure.

J. MULLALEY: I don't have that number here. If they don't meet the criteria from an income level?

C. TIBBS: Yeah.

J. MULLALEY: We can certainly look to see last year on how many applied and were not eligible.

C. TIBBS: Perfect, thank you.

What effect has inflationary costs and labour shortages had on this program and has the minister had any studies done?

J. ABBOTT: In terms of the program as it's currently structured, we're obviously providing the grants to the individuals, for instance, up to \$5,000. Our actual spend, on average, is just below that. So inflation we know is having an impact but it's not materially affecting the program presently. That being said, we're obviously conscious of that.

What we are doing at the present time is we're reviewing all of our programs when it comes to affordability, income thresholds and the like, as part of our housing

homelessness plan process and we'll be looking at that over the next year.

C. TIBBS: Thank you, Minister.

Has Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation given any thought to doing a pilot on communal or shared living, for example, two single parent families share a four-bedroom unit and so on and so forth.

J. ABBOTT: I know there are some examples of that in the province. I know, for instance, Connections for Seniors is doing that for senior males that could and would benefit from that kind of approach. So we're obviously looking at that experience.

As a matter of fact, I was speaking with one of the individuals in the downtown at the Tim Hortons just recently and he was talking about his experience. I asked him what it was like. For him, who had been in a shelter, he said it's been ideal. But he said we have to learn how to live with each other and that's always going to be the challenge.

C. TIBBS: I'm sure it would be a challenge.

Thank you, Minister.

How many units are fully accessible?

J. MULLALEY: From an accessibility perspective, we have just over 80 that's kind of fully accessible. We also have over 500 visitable and, from the perspective of moving forward, we recognize that, certainly, accessibility is an issue that we continue to commit to improve and increase.

So for any new builds now that we're moving forward and we've been doing that throughout the year, we've had 10 builds happening throughout the year, we're doing 50 per cent accessible units as we're moving along.

C. TIBBS: Thank you.

How many new affordable units were created last year under the National Housing Strategy?

J. ABBOTT: As I mentioned in my opening comments, right now we're looking at probably around 90, I think, new units that are committed or under construction.

C. TIBBS: Thank you, Minister.

How many units are vacated by region and what is the plan to fix them?

J. MULLALEY: Currently, there are 290 vacant in any of the areas in demand. Currently, there are 226 or 78 per cent of those are in progress of having some level of repair done and turned over back into free units of individuals; 28 currently are under major repair but they are all funded and they are in different levels of progression, they'll be all completed within three to 12 months; there are another 36 in an area of our province that require some major repair that we're actually looking at a redevelopment plan, for now.

C. TIBBS: Thank you.

Do we have a breakdown of those by region by chance?

J. MULLALEY: I can certainly get that.

C. TIBBS: Okay. Thank you.

What is the average length of time a unit sits vacated waiting for repair?

J. MULLALEY: Pardon me, I missed that.

C. TIBBS: I sure it would depend on the unit as well.

J. MULLALEY: I apologize, I didn't –.

C. TIBBS: No, that's okay. What is the average length of time –?

J. MULLALEY: Oh, the turnaround time for the unit? It does depend, obviously. It certainly depends on the level of repairs. Sometimes there are very minor repair and can be done quite quickly and other times they can range up to 12 months, depending on the level of repair from that perspective. So they do range quite diverse.

C. TIBBS: Thank you.

Can the minister provide an update on the Home Energy Savings Program and was all the funding allocated?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, we have allocated all our funding for that. There will be some that, obviously, carry into this year from last. It's been very successful. We've had, I think, over 200 over the past year or so that have availed of that program.

C. TIBBS: Thank you, Minister.

Can the minister provide an update on the First-time Homebuyers Program? Was there a wait-list and how many families were turned away from that?

J. ABBOTT: Now, we did run that program before, but not currently. Again, that's something we are continuing to explore.

C. TIBBS: Sure.

Can the minister provide an update on the Home Purchase Program and has Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation looked at rolling this into one program?

J. ABBOTT: Well, I guess it would be the same answer. We don't have anything at current, but it's something we are also looking at. There's some benefit in doing that. There's a cost obviously, so we're trying to weigh those two factors.

C. TIBBS: Thank you, Minister.

Can the minister provide an update on the number of nights and costs for emergency shelters and accommodations this past year?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

As mentioned, we've spent over \$8 million in our program this past year. We are seeing now, currently, roughly 300 shelter beds per night that we are funding. That's up considerably from the pre-COVID period. That runs right across the province. We've committed, as an agency and as minister, that any individual, if they cannot find suitable housing in need – quote, unquote – a shelter, that shelter space will provide including a hotel room if and when that is needed.

C. TIBBS: And it's been needed in Grand Falls-Windsor.

J. ABBOTT: And we are expanding our shelter services across the province, literally, as we speak.

C. TIBBS: Yeah, and it's a fantastic program. We have tons of people in Grand Falls-Windsor as well in the Mount Peyton and it's helped quite a few people.

Does the department do any inspections, site assessments or periodic visits to these homes?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, and regular, so on any approval of a shelter that's done, then we will monitor that throughout the year and if there are any issues, any complaints, then there's an automatic inspection.

C. TIBBS: Excellent.

Can we get a detailed list of salary estimates as well?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

C. TIBBS: Thank you.

Can the minister provide an update on the \$74 million Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Benefit?

J. ABBOTT: Yes. That again is a multi-year agreement. We have, right now, approximately 500 housing benefits, i.e., rent supplements that are in place. We will expand that, add another 100 this year and continue on through the life of the agreement.

The positive thing about those is, one, they are portable; all apartments then are inspected before an individual is housed; then people do rotate through that program. So, I think, even though we spent the current federal program plus our own provincial dollars, we probably put through 1,000 people through a run of a year, through those supplements.

C. TIBBS: Okay. Are those 500 that are already created plus an extra additional 100?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

C. TIBBS: Okay, perfect, thank you.

How many of the new 800 spaces were created last year?

J. ABBOTT: So I'm not sure if I followed. You said 800?

C. TIBBS: Yes.

J. ABBOTT: So the number we've quoted in terms of placements, we've put 500 over the past year in rent supplements, then we added shelter beds, new housing units, and that gives us a total of 750 new additions to the housing program.

C. TIBBS: Are we still on target to create 800 over six years?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

C. TIBBS: Okay, perfect.

Chair, can I go on with questions for 1.1.02 or no?

CHAIR: Yes, because it's all under one heading. Yes, you can.

C. TIBBS: Okay, perfect. I just have a couple of more questions here, Minister.

How many new units will be created this year and what is the breakdown for outer years?

J. ABBOTT: So in terms of the new affordable housing program, we are allocating 850 over three years. We will approve right now a couple of hundred certainly in year one and we will then, as soon as we can, make sure we can approve the 850 and then we'll cash flow that basically over three years.

At the same time, as we said, with the Housing Benefit, there is new construction in place. We've already announced that but we're going to be building in Pleasantville and we're up in Labrador West with a shelter. There is some other shelter in housing being built in Labrador and here in St John's and out in Central, but the new – I'll call it the new, new money that's in this budget, it's for the 850 units over three years.

C. TIBBS: Are they going to go public, private or P3?

J. ABBOTT: There's going to be a combination and that will be based on proposals that we receive once we put out the proposal call in late May.

C. TIBBS: Thank you, Minister.

I have one last question. Is the minister worried inflationary measures, limited labour supply and busy construction companies is going to limit take up and drive up costs. Will it become an issue, Minister?

J. ABBOTT: Well, I don't know would probably be the simple answer or correct answer. With that being said, I've been talking consistently now over literally the past two years with developers, landowners, municipalities presented and had a lunch with the homebuilders association yesterday. They are saying they're ready to go.

Labour supply is going to be a challenge. It's a challenge to them right now but they're confident because a lot of these are small businesses that they can get access to labour and they will have to work that through. Then the fact that we're out with a three-year plan, that will also allow them to plan those builds and the land, in most cases, is probably going to be in place so that is usually one of the big drivers. That is probably the least driving cost right now.

C. TIBBS: Thank you, Minister.

CHAIR: Thank you. The Member's time has expired.

MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: Thank you.

Thank you, Minister, and I will echo the comments of my colleagues with regard to Wayne and the other staff in NL Housing.

CHAIR: Can we just hang on for one second; I need to get the clock going here?

J. DINN: You can give me extra time.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

CHAIR: MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: I will say, Julia, you guys have been fantastic certainly in my district, you know the housing issues. Minister, you've been helpful as well; I try not to say too much bad about you, but you know.

J. ABBOTT: Thank you. You have to dig deep, I'm sure.

J. DINN: I know.

With the \$70 million that is announced, just to confirm, how many houses will that be built over three years; 850, did you say?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: What's the breakdown of private and not-for-profit mix?

J. ABBOTT: We haven't done that yet because we're really looking for what proposals come in and really it is going to be the best proposals that can give us the most units for the provincial subsidies that we will provide. We're just working with the Home Builders' Association now to finalize the program details. What we want are units that are going to be accessible, they're going to be in locations where there are other services, et cetera. That's really where we want to focus.

Now, for me, and we've said the primary focus is going to be on seniors but we recognize that there are other vulnerable populations that can benefit from this program as well.

J. DINN: So when these units are built – there is a contractor who is going to build it but that private, for-profit organization, they're going to be running it and renting it.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: What is to stop that contractor then from raising the rents?

J. ABBOTT: We will be building that into this so that the rents will be – quote, unquote – low end of market. It will be based on CMHC categorization of rental market. We will be at the low end of that. We will then make sure that those rents are going to be predictable over the life of an

agreement, whether that's 10 years, 15 years, 20 years.

So the ideal situation, for me, would be that we'd have a proponent, profit or non-profit say look, for the amount of money you're prepared to subsidize us, we're prepared to enter into a – quote, unquote – 20-year agreement would stabilize not necessarily flat rental increases but certainly predictable rent increases and that meet these criteria that we think are going to be important.

J. DINN: Has there been any discussion with the Co-operative Housing Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, CHANAL?

J. ABBOTT: We've had conversations with them, not on this program, right up until now, but certainly we will be eligible to look at that. We know that the federal government is really anxious as well to support co-op housing and we're supportive of that, but we're waiting for the program details to come from Ottawa as well.

J. DINN: I will make a plug for not-for-profit and I will tell you that most of the issues that come across our office have to do with for-profit and the rents that go up. I'm thinking of these REITS where if you sign a one-year lease, each year they can jack up the price or bimonthly they find ways of getting around the restrictions on rent increases, but invariably it drives people out and they do force them towards homelessness. You heard me making that spiel before.

J. ABBOTT: But, if I may, that's not our experience with the program that we've had in place up to now. So it will depend on what arrangement is in place, but the one you're describing is private and wouldn't have any provincial funding.

J. DINN: Okay.

How many positions in NLHC are currently vacant?

J. ABBOTT: Sixty.

J. DINN: Sixty vacant. Where would they be? Would they be in the maintenance or –?

J. ABBOTT: They're right across our operation. Some of those are long-term vacancies that we probably won't be filling. Twenty-three are under active recruitment, 10 are currently on short-term leave and nine are due to permanent incumbents are temporarily being assigned to another role. The balance is long-term vacancies, no current recruitment action.

J. DINN: Again, so there's no way of knowing if they're in maintenance or –

J. ABBOTT: Yes, we can provide that information.

J. DINN: So including the ones that are vacant, I guess how many people would be employed in the department overall in housing? And I'm assuming the number you are giving me will be –

J. ABBOTT: So our total complement is 317.

J. DINN: So 317 then less the 60.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: Okay. How many staff are currently involved in inspections of the unit both of NLHC owned stock and units rented by Newfoundland and Labrador Housing clients using the rent supplement?

J. ABBOTT: We'll have to provide that one for you.

J. DINN: Thank you.

How many social workers are employed by the NLHC and would it be possible to have a breakdown by region?

J. MULLALEY: NLHC currently has nine social workers employed across the province. We can provide a breakdown at a later point.

J. DINN: Okay. How many clients then would they have on their list? Would that be 2,300? No, that's the wait-list. How many clients would they be responsible for? I guess I'm looking at how many people they would serve.

J. ABBOTT: They would cover all our program areas. So for all the social housing units that we rent, when it comes to the families, individuals in total, it would be 11,000 people. So it would depend on the need and ask in a particular program area such as our – if you look at some of the challenges we might have in some of our social housing units, that would be the areas that they would focus on.

J. DINN: So about 1,000 or so per social worker.

J. ABBOTT: Well, if you did the straight math, yes. But in terms of actual active cases it – maybe we can get that information for you as well.

J. DINN: Okay. Thank you.

J. ABBOTT: I will call it active cases.

J. DINN: What kind of services are they equipped to provide?

J. ABBOTT: They're providing counselling; housing supports, obviously; I'll say triaging issues in providing direction to our other programs; social services, whether it's health; other community supports that are required.

J. DINN: And the current vacancy rate for available NLHC housing stock. You may have answered that.

J. ABBOTT: I'm sorry. You asked –

J. DINN: I'm just wondering what –

J. ABBOTT: I thought you answered your question. I'm sorry.

J. DINN: I was wondering what the current vacancy rate is. I thought it may have been asked but I didn't hear the number.

J. ABBOTT: So 290 out of our 5,500 are – quote, unquote – vacant.

J. DINN: Okay, and they should be taken care of through the program?

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, we have plans for all of those.

J. DINN: Excellent.

I think during that week in the middle of the winter when we had that cold snap, we had almost – if I remember correctly – 300 people in emergency shelters.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah.

J. DINN: What's that number now?

J. ABBOTT: Roughly about the same.

J. DINN: Wow.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah.

J. DINN: Is there a reason for this? I ask this because back in 2019, when I was first elected, we had a problem. I think the number went down, so now the number has shot up and it's staying up. What's the reason for this?

J. ABBOTT: Well, part of it is just availability of rentals, low-cost rentals throughout the province. But the significant issue is that individuals are vulnerable, mental health and addiction issues are prevalent and not having supports in place wherever they may be residing. Some within that are very hard to house individuals, i.e. because of capacity issues in terms of being able to maintain a home, income aside. So we're facing all of those issues.

There's a lot of mobility, a lot of people – just take in St. John's that I would know

best, when it comes to that – coming into the city from other parts of the province and are finding that there is nothing available for them.

J. DINN: Okay, that's where I was going with it. So where are the numbers coming from? Are they people who've lost housing in the city? But there is an influx of people coming from other parts of the province.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, there's a combination of all of that. I recognize that, of course, that's why we are working with The Gathering Place to put in the appropriate housing, the supportive housing and expanded shelter. That will go a long way to addressing the housing needs here or the shelter needs, certainly, and that's what we're doing up in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. When we get those in place, that will significantly reduce the pressure on – quote, unquote – shelter beds.

J. DINN: Thank you.

CHAIR: The Member's time has expired.

MHA Tibbs.

C. TIBBS: Thank you.

Minister, we discussed that there are 290 vacant units. How many of those 290 are on the Northeast Avalon?

J. ABBOTT: Do you have that there?

OFFICIAL: (Inaudible.)

J. ABBOTT: Okay.

We don't have that here but we will get that for you.

C. TIBBS: Thank you, Minister.

Is it a possibility to get a copy of the minister's briefing book?

J. ABBOTT: Absolutely.

C. TIBBS: Thank you.

That's all the questions I have, Chair.

CHAIR: Okay.

MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: I do have much more than the 10 minutes allotted. What I might do is I'll go through them and send the rest in writing.

J. ABBOTT: (Inaudible) of the Chair.

J. DINN: Yeah.

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

J. ABBOTT: One of the things that we're certainly focused on – and it was a previous Liberal administration that put all the housing programs together and placed in NLHC that has been a significant advancement in terms of trying to break down the, I'll call it, previous silos.

Certainly what we are doing – and you referenced Wayne Follett as somebody who's been very diligent and active in doing that – we have provided our staff – and Wayne as an example – of addressing the housing needs however they can be best addressed.

What I have been suggesting to our staff is that we look at it from a social determinants lens because you can apply and you meet certain criteria, but if you take the full case or the case study of the individual to realize that, yes, they have a housing issue, but there is issue about where their children are going to school, where their social supports are, et cetera, et cetera. We are taking that approach to make sure we are doing the best we can to help individuals.

Then, of course, we are working with the City of St. John's and making sure who can help and place the individual appropriately. We'll be working and worked with the Health Authority on any program and social issues that need to be addressed, certainly through education and what have you.

But having it with Housing, we now can reach out to all the other agencies to make sure we have a plan in place for an individual or a family so that they're not left trying to navigate, which is a very complicated system for us, but I've asked our folks to take ownership of that.

J. DINN: Thank you.

How many housing units are expected to be built this year from the funding through the bilateral agreements with the federal government as part of the National Housing Strategy?

J. ABBOTT: As I mentioned, we have 90 that we've, I'll say, approved in last year's budget, but that will be cash flowed and built over the next two years. Then we have the housing benefit, the same thing, and some of the shelter beds and the like that we'll be adding.

J. DINN: So has the provincial government unlocked its share of the funds it needs?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: And it just needs the federal government to cough up the rest then?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: Okay.

How is work progressing on the 132 affordable housing units announced with The Gathering Place from the federal government for the vulnerable population? How are they moving ahead?

J. ABBOTT: That is a few months' delay. We did a tour of the facility there just before Christmas, so they're ready to roll and we're looking forward to that being in place over the next year.

J. DINN: So ready to roll, you mean within the next year those units will be up and running?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: Perfect, thank you.

Is there anything that NLHC can do to eliminate the practice of no-fault evictions in its own units? What about other community or publicly provided housing?

I ask this – I'm going to put you on the spot now, Julia, or Minister, too, because it's one thing when we get people evicted in the private sector, no fault, but there's not a whole lot of recourse to go through sometimes. So I'm just wondering within the department and you look at the resources that could be available in the social workers and so on and so forth, is there anything we can do to eliminate no-fault evictions for housing?

J. ABBOTT: Well, again, in terms of our approach and our policy around this, is that if there are any evictions from one of our public housing units, it is past the last resort. It is something we don't want to do and knowing if they have to move out of ours, where are they going? In saying that, we will work with that individual to make sure they find appropriate housing.

So it's a rare occasion when we have to do that, but we have used and exhausted every mechanism and support that we can. With some individuals, if they're violating both the actual law of their tenancy that's one thing, but the social norms within the community in which they live, then we have to make sure that we are supporting the whole community around that.

In that regard, it's something we've – and I know, at the end of the day, it is brought to the attention of the senior management before any decision like that is made.

J. DINN: I'm just wondering in terms of – sorry, go on.

J. ABBOTT: No.

J. DINN: I'm just thinking in terms of you look at social workers, 11,000 I think it was. I'm just looking at the supports that would be in place because I would say these people are going to be difficult to house, there's no two ways about it.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: But I am just looking at what kind of supports. I have asked this before; do you have people check in on them on a regular basis, a weekly basis, monthly basis, anything else to make sure that they are adhering to their requirements? Or is it that we're being reactive, if we hear a complaint then the department or Housing responds; or is the department being proactive, we know that this person is a difficult person to house and we're going to be there each day or each week and whatever else? I'm just trying to look at the kinds of supports when we say –

J. ABBOTT: And there is a combination of supports and of the activities you mentioned. Of course in some areas we have our community centres. They act as a support to the families and that is beneficial. We're looking at areas and how we should expand those types of supports. Then we, obviously, call on, through the Health Authority and others in the community, to provide assistance and advice for those that are – quote, unquote – difficult to house.

J. DINN: Right now – you may have answered this but I'll ask it anyway – how many NLHC units are currently unavailable due to past repairs? I think you may have

mentioned it. How many units are currently unavailable?

J. ABBOTT: The current vacancies in the position of being repaired and what have you to make ready for occupancy is 290.

J. DINN: Again, would this be due to a lack of maintenance staff?

J. ABBOTT: No, it is just a timing issue. We have the budget in place and if it is a major repair, we'll usually contract that out.

J. DINN: Okay, thank you.

Would it be possible to have a list of the companies that do the subcontract or maintenance work for Newfoundland and Labrador Housing?

J. ABBOTT: We can provide that.

J. DINN: Thank you.

Although there are some priority wait-list closed for people with varying urgency and need of housing, is there anyway your department could quantify an average wait time for housing when someone is initially put on the wait-list for Newfoundland and Labrador Housing? Has this wait period increased or decreased over the last year?

J. ABBOTT: Again, I don't know if we can give you that – I was going to say give you that information, because I guess the question is how useful it is because we do categorize it based on urgency. So somebody could literally have applied one year ago and assuming a vacancy came up one year later. But then, if we have, certainly, women fleeing violence, obviously we will provide that. We've had those individuals who are going to be homeless tomorrow, then they come up the priority list. So it's literally a moving target.

J. DINN: Yes, fair enough.

So wait times or that increase of people who might be fleeing violence or in an urgent situation, have those wait times increased? Like if someone calls in, I've got to get out of here, what –?

J. ABBOTT: They haven't increased but the numbers are creeping up at this particular juncture.

J. DINN: Okay.

Have there been additional resources added to the emergency shelter line?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, both human and technology-wise.

J. DINN: Last year it was mentioned that the NLHC was reviewing the Home Repair Program to see whether it would be adjusted as a result of increased cost of building materials. What has been the result of this review?

J. ABBOTT: Well, as I mentioned earlier, we are still reviewing that program but based on the grants that we made available, the average cost of actual repairs is less than the amounts that we've allocated so the cost of materials per se has not significantly impacted the program.

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

MHA Tibbs, do you have any additional questions?

C. TIBBS: That's all I have, Chair.

CHAIR: MHA Dinn, do you have additional questions?

J. DINN: I'll ask one additional question – the rest I'll send in writing because I know we've got more to get through – it's from my colleague in Labrador West: A significant housing shortage in Labrador West with rising housing costs have put stress on family budgets. Has there been any action

to alleviate the housing crunch there? And actually, I'll throw this in for Nain as well and some of the northern communities like my colleague from Torngat Mountains where just the price to service a piece of land is extraordinary.

J. ABBOTT: If I maybe just answer in reverse. So when it comes to Northern Labrador, I was up in Nain in the latter part of January and we had a meeting with President Lampe and members of his executive government to talk about a range of issues, housing being one of those for sure, and we took a tour of different housing units in the community. We're working now with their new housing commission to do an assessment of the units that they have and we have and look at what repairs need to be done. We've committed to working with them in terms of how we can expand our collective presence there.

There's a lot of federal money targeted to housing in the North, so we want to make sure we can support them in whatever way they need us to do that. When it comes to Hopedale, for instance, we now will be joining the commission and putting out a joint tender for doing the repairs there in our units. So we're going to work hand in hand with them.

When it comes to Labrador West, we certainly have been having numerous conversations with the Member there in terms of what can we do and focus on seniors' housing both in terms of new apartments. We're working collectively on a joint project looking to the federal government to get funded. We're prepared to support that financially. We are upgrading our housing units and that's underway. We've got a shelter and support that. That's in place. We've just worked with Hope Haven; they're going to be building now some second-stage housing.

So we're very cognizant of the challenges there but that's, you know, consistent with some other communities but Labrador West

does provide a unique challenge because of – one thing is cost and getting contractors interested in doing something there.

I've had conversations with the Minister of Health in looking at what are some options for personal care home as well for seniors who need that type of support. So there are a lot of conversations and activity going on in government to make sure we can find solutions for Labrador West.

J. DINN: With regards to that then, the given comments made by the federal housing advocate regarding the condition of housing in Nunatsiavut. I just listened to some of your discussion that you had with the leaders in the area.

What actions has the department taken or is planning to take to narrow the gap in housing standards between the North Coast and other parts of the province.

J. ABBOTT: Well, again, we're doing, right now, a joint assessment with the Nunatsiavut Housing Commission to make sure we are working from the same standard as we move forward with any additions or any repairs to existing housing stock.

That's one of the, again, challenges getting contractors in place in Labrador to do the work. We've had a number of situations since I've been in this role, over the past two years, where we thought we had a contractor lined up, we've signed on the dotted line and they didn't show up because he or they were pulled off to another site.

We figure by working with the Housing Commission now we'll have bigger tenders, more interest by the contractor community to go on site.

J. DINN: Are there any routine or regular inspections of private housing shelters done by Newfoundland and Labrador Housing, not the initial one but –

J. ABBOTT: Well, we do go from time to time, but then it's also complaint based. So if we get any complaints we're literally in there that day or the next to determine what is happening, if there was a violation and how that gets addressed.

J. DINN: Thank you.

Chair, I'll leave that there for now.

CHAIR: Okay.

I'll ask the Clerk to recall the headings.

CLERK: 1.1.01 to 1.1.02 inclusive.

CHAIR: Shall 1.1.01 to 1.1.02 inclusive carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Carried.

On motion, subheads 1.1.01 through 1.1.02 carried.

CLERK: The total.

CHAIR: Shall the total carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Carried.

On motion, Newfoundland and Labrador Housing, 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: Carried.

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

CHAIR: Okay, we'll take five minutes now while they switch over and start back at 6:36 p.m.

Recess

CHAIR: Okay, we are going to call the second part of the meeting to order.

Before I start, I just want to say there are water coolers on each end, if anybody wants a glass of water.

Okay, I'll call the Estimates for the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development to order and I'm going to ask the Clerk to read the first subhead.

CLERK: 1.1.01 to 1.2.02 inclusive.

CHAIR: 1.1.01 to 1.2.02 inclusive.

Minister, would you like to introduce your staff?

J. ABBOTT: John Abbott, Minister and Alan Doody, Deputy Minister.

CHAIR: Okay, if you have a few words you'd like to say.

J. ABBOTT: All right.

Again, good evening colleagues and thanks for participating again in the Estimates for the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development.

My department consists of 11 lines of business, which includes Child Protection, in-care services, adoptions, Youth Services, youth corrections, Adult Protection, persons with disabilities, Seniors and Aging, Social and Economic Well-Being, Income Support and the community sector. I'm just going to give you a highlight of some of our activities and progress over the past year.

When it comes to Adult Protection, last year the updated *Adult Protection Act* was proclaimed. This legislation ensures that we continue to protect vulnerable adults, while also upholding and strengthening the rights of those adults.

When it comes to Seniors and Aging, last October, during the Speech from the Throne, a Cabinet committee on seniors was announced. This Committee is focusing on how the provincial government can address seniors' issues including helping seniors age well in the right place with dignity.

In *Budget 2023*, my department has a number of investments to help support seniors and older adults including the Age-Friendly Newfoundland and Labrador Communities program of \$95,000; the Newfoundland and Labrador Community Transportation Program of \$300,000; and \$200,000 for the Seniors' Social Inclusion Initiative.

In terms of disability policy, as a first step under the province's first *Accessibility Act* that became law on December 3, 2021, we established an Accessibility Standards Advisory Board last June. This board plays a pivotal role in advising and developing standards, regulations and policies to identify, prevent and remove barriers to inclusion throughout the province.

I'm pleased to support the development of the first two standards by the Committee, which are a customer service standard, which will be developed first, and a communications and information standard to follow.

The *Accessibility Act* requires public bodies such as government agencies to develop accessibility plans. Our Disability Policy Office is developing and facilitating educational sessions to assist government departments, agencies, boards and commissions to create and implement accessibility plans that help to address the

prevention, identification and removal of barriers in policies, programs and practices.

In *Budget 2023*, 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; \$325,000 for inclusion in Capacity Grants; and \$94,500 for paratransit.

When it comes to Social and Economic Well-Being activities, I remain committed to supporting the overall well-being of all Newfoundlanders and Labradorians with the development of a social and economic well-being plan. I anticipate releasing this plan later in the year.

To date, we've undertaken extensive research with people with lived experience, food insecurity and housing stability, community partners, front-line staff and other government departments and agencies. To help inform this government-wide plan, my department is reviewing the Income Support Program and have received feedback from people who receive income support, community partners and our service delivery staff. Last fall, I announced a 5 per cent increase in the basic income support rate costing us \$6.1 million.

In addition, based on the early learnings from the income support review, my department has also become more responsive to the needs of income support recipients by streamlining the financial eligibility assessment, supporting educational outcomes and enhancing supports for persons with disabilities. All combined, that is going to cost us just over \$700,000 in improvements.

My department is also looking at social determinants of health and the work of the minimum wage review, the Health Accord and examples from other jurisdictions. In addition, our government has established an All-Party Committee on Basic Income – several Members are here tonight. In fact, in

October, we were also pleased as a department to announce a targeted Basic Income Program for youth receiving residential services, which began this past January.

I was also pleased to officially launch the Employment Stability Pilot Project in mid-January. Currently, there are 105 participants enrolled in the pilot project and over 10 of these participants already no longer need income support to supplement their earnings.

In terms of child welfare, my department remains committed to reducing the number of Indigenous children and youth in care. In fact, there has been a 21 per cent decrease from June 2019 to December 2022. We had 385 Indigenous children and youth in care in June 2019, compared to 305 Indigenous children and youth in care in December of 2022.

The work with Indigenous governments in Labrador has helped to reduce the number of Indigenous children and youth coming into care by 50 per cent over that same period, from 70 children and youth came into care in 2019 down to 35 in 2022.

In terms of adoptions, last October the amended *Adoption Act* became law. Amendments to the act have strengthened the province's adoption legislation by expanding the best interest principle and recognizing the unique needs of Indigenous children and families involved in the adoption process.

So these are just some of the highlights of the work from my department over the past year supporting individuals, children and youth, families, seniors, persons with disabilities, persons experiencing poverty, as well as those working closely with the community sector.

We will continue to work with community organizations and across government to

support the overall well-being of people in the province.

Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister Abbott.

Just as second to reset the clock here.

MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: Thank you for your opening remarks.

I feel that the department is going in the right direction in certainly promoting the values of inclusion, diversity and healthy active living. I think it comes down to, a lot of times, being open and being able to communicate with the people that need these services. I appreciate what the department is doing to date.

Can we obtain a copy of your briefing binder?

J. ABBOTT: Absolutely.

J. DWYER: Are you applying zero-based budgeting?

J. ABBOTT: We are.

J. DWYER: Are there any errors in the published Estimates book?

J. ABBOTT: No.

J. DWYER: How many people are employed in the department and how many retirees have occurred in the last year?

A. DOODY: So there are currently 763 people working within the department. We had 25 retirements in the last fiscal year.

J. DWYER: How many retired you said?

A. DOODY: Twenty-five.

J. DWYER: Twenty- five.

How many vacancies are not filled in the department to date?

A. DOODY: There are 1,013 approved positions within the department. There are 250 vacant positions.

J. DWYER: Two hundred and fifty?

A. DOODY: Yes.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Have any positions been eliminated and what are they?

A. DOODY: There were two positions eliminated; however, they've been actually reallocated more so than eliminated through a restructuring. I don't have the details of exactly what those positions are but I can get that for you.

J. DWYER: I would appreciate that, thank you.

How many layoffs have occurred in the department in the last year?

J. ABBOTT: Zero.

J. DWYER: That's what I thought.

How many new hires took place in the last year?

A. DOODY: Fifty-six new hires.

J. DWYER: How many contractual and short-term employees are there in the department currently?

A. DOODY: There are 56.

J. DWYER: Did your department receive any funds from the contingency fund and, if so, what was it for?

A. DOODY: We did receive \$5 million, which will be a dropped balance. We needed that to carry through. We didn't

actually need the money. It's the way the system works. We just needed to have the money that way.

J. DWYER: Oh, okay.

Can we get an update on the new provincial disabilities act?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Moving right along, first, we'll look at the Minister's Office and on Operating Accounts. Under Transportation and Communications, why are you budgeting \$41,000 this year when you only spent \$15,000 last year? Is there an opportunity for savings?

J. ABBOTT: The amount was budgeted based on what I would call a normal activity year, which we were in post-COVID. Most of that would either be for travel around the province, including Labrador, and any out-of-province travel and there will be some ministerial meetings now face to face that have been scheduled this year.

J. DWYER: Okay.

On to Executive Support, Salaries; can the minister explain the revised amount of additional \$283,900? Was this a new position?

J. ABBOTT: What number was that there, Jeff?

J. DWYER: 1.2.01, and the budget page would be 177.

J. ABBOTT: Okay. The change in salary basically would be related to salary increases that were awarded and we had some overrun in the current year because of that. Then we've stabilized that in this year's funding.

J. DWYER: Under Transportation and Communications, why are you budgeting \$25,300 this year when you only spent \$15,000 last year?

J. ABBOTT: If I may, it would be very similar to the previous answer when it comes to transportation. We obviously minimize what we need to do but again, post-COVID, we think we're going to back to normal in transportation requirements, particularly when it comes to out-of-province travel and given the cost increases there, we felt that was appropriate to do.

J. DWYER: Under 1.2.02, Corporate Services and Performance Improvement, Salaries, the budget ask is an additional \$2 million. Can the minister explain the necessity for that?

J. ABBOTT: There are two components to that. One was salary increases for the existing staff. We also did a corporate restructuring and allocated more staff to this area or moved them into this area from another branch, and that's the difference. There was no increase in staff overall. It was just the realignment in the department.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Under Employee Benefits, why was it revised expenditures in \$125,000 more than budgeted?

J. ABBOTT: The Employee Benefits – so as a result of increased workers' compensation costs, and they were for the department but administered under this division.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Under Purchased Services, can you explain why you budgeted \$105,200, only spent \$57,600 last year, but you're requesting \$77,000 in this year's budget?

J. ABBOTT: So when it comes to Purchased Services, in that regard, we

reduce our expenditures significantly, then from a zero-based budgeting perspective, we built it back up to meet that. A lot of that, all the departmental photocopying, all those costs come out of this account.

J. DWYER: And the difference was because of COVID and we didn't need all those services?

J. ABBOTT: That's certainly because we have all staff – well, not all staff – a good number of staff back in the department at headquarters and elsewhere.

J. DWYER: Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: Okay.

MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

With regard to zero-based budgeting, Minister, could you give me an idea – how does this look when we do zero-based budgeting –?

CHAIR: Hold on one second, please, sorry.

AN HON. MEMBER: (Inaudible.)

CHAIR: Oh, okay.

Go ahead. I am sorry, MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: I am just wondering how zero-based budgeting actually works in a department where you are dealing with so many vulnerable people. How does that work?

J. ABBOTT: So for our, I'll call it, operating accounts, which most of this is what we've talked to so far, we'll look at the number of employees, what their needs are in terms of office space, office supplies, transportation and any special circumstances that they would know developing this budget. So when we talk about zero base, you start from zero, now you have to tell me what you

need to deliver your program for the next 12 months. So that's what zero based means.

When it comes to our program services, supports for children and youth, we have a lot of contracts in place, we look at the number of staff that would be employed to deliver the service and then what would be the particular needs of the children we have in care, then all that gets added up to whatever that number looks like.

What you will see from time to time is there are changes in monies from one program to another, again based on that need. We have not reduced any spending in total for those services. As a matter of fact, for our youth in care, that number has gone up significantly over the past year because we've had more individualized living arrangements. I know we'll talk about that in a minute, but that is a reflection of the actual need for any particular service.

J. DINN: I know where I'm going with this, considering an answer you gave in Housing with regard to the number of people in emergency shelter and the number of people coming into the city, into the metro area, I would assume then that you're looking at if your workers are saying we're noticing a huge increase from last year, we're going to need more funding.

J. ABBOTT: That's right and then we would reallocate. If there isn't sufficient in our overall budget, then we go to the Treasury Board to ask for increased funding and that gets decided during the budget process.

J. DINN: Okay.

What is the current ratio of social workers to cases or to clients? I think in Housing it was roughly 9,000 to 11,000.

J. ABBOTT: So our standard is one to 20 across the province. So that's the stated norm, then that varies by region and then it's going to vary by the availability of social workers in any particular region.

J. DINN: So roughly how many social workers do we have right now that's part of your staff?

J. ABBOTT: We have just over 250 social workers and we have a vacancy of probably another 50 or 60 that obviously we're looking to recruit.

J. DINN: Did you say that was 250?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: So roughly then, if I'm looking at the cases then, I can look at – when I'm looking at that I can multiply the 300 or so, 310, by the 20 and that is roughly how many social workers there should be.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah.

So, again, we have the children in care, children who are in family placements and who are in kinship arrangements or not on a protection order but we are working with the families to avoid the children coming into care, so the social workers cross that full spectrum of services.

J. DINN: So, right now, the 50 to 60 vacancies, how long have they been vacant?

J. ABBOTT: Well, the individual decision may vary, but over the past two years, since I've been in this role, we have been averaging around that 50 to 60 vacancy. We have been hiring new social workers; others have retired; moved on to other services.

J. DINN: Okay. So I guess the easiest way is how long have these 50 to 60 vacancies been vacant? A month, two months, a year?

J. ABBOTT: Oh, it could be, yes, up to a year for sure.

If we look at Labrador, for instance, there have been vacancies in absolute numbers for over a year. Though there are people coming and going, we have the fly-in, fly-out

model to make sure we meet our requirements there for the children and families.

J. DINN: How many of those did you say are vacancies of people retired?

J. ABBOTT: We have retirements; the total is 25 retirements throughout the department. I don't know how many of those were social workers at the present time.

J. DINN: So let's assume for the moment that those 25 are actually social workers, let's just assume for that that they retired. Then by my calculations, you can have anywhere from 25 to 35 social workers who have left for other reasons.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah.

J. DINN: Any exit interviews or reasons why they're leaving? Is it the stress of the job, the lack of resources, the lack of family time, the difficulty of the cases? That's where I am going with this.

J. ABBOTT: I would say all of the above based on the conversations and the work we've looked at. We have a committee in place with NAPE to address the particular challenges that our child protection social workers are facing in their work so that we can support them and to retain them. So it's the full gamut.

J. DINN: Okay. And with that, I'm assuming, and I'll use my analogy in teaching. I could have a class of 30 as I had in high school, academic level students who move swimmingly along. I could have a class with 10 that can put me through my paces and make me want to retire that day.

So what I'm asking right here is with regards to the caseload, not only the number but the complexity. When you're looking at the caseload, is there a consideration, too, of the complexity of the cases?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: So that if you're a social workers that's got a mixture – I've got really two or three very difficult cases but the rest are okay, they're the run of the mill, I guess, as far as run of the mill goes, versus a social worker who may have 20 very difficult and very challenging cases. I'm just wondering in the mix of how that's connected.

J. ABBOTT: So we can constantly look at that to make sure that we assign the appropriate case to the appropriate social worker in each of the regions and then we're conscious of that mix as you suggest. The supervisor and zone manager then are responsible for making sure that those cases are distributed appropriately and we'll make sure we've got the resources in place to do just that.

J. DINN: Are there exit interviews carried out at the (inaudible)?

J. ABBOTT: From time to time we do those, yes.

J. DINN: That might be worthwhile as a practice.

With regards to the 56 new hires and then the 56 contractual short term. Are they one and the same? So are the 56 new hires actually the 56 contractual or short-term hires?

J. ABBOTT: The 56 new hires came from outside of government. So they were not reallocation in the department.

J. DINN: Right.

J. ABBOTT: Some may have been contract and some may be permanent.

J. DINN: In the answer to my colleague's question, he asked how many new hires and how many contract. The answer was 56 new hires and then in contract, the short term was 56.

J. ABBOTT: That happens to be the same number but not the same individuals.

J. DINN: Okay, good enough.

How is the fly-in, fly-out model for service delivery working for the social workers on the North Coast of Labrador? Has it actually resulted in improved services? Are there any new challenges that have arisen that need to be, maybe, addressed?

J. ABBOTT: So the fly-in, fly-out model is working in the context that we're able to meet our commitment under legislation, the policy to address the needs. The challenges are the consistencies in terms of social workers being there in the community over time. I've talked to several of the social workers as they have done that and they were appreciating the opportunity to do that and to certainly make a difference.

We would prefer more stability and long-term commitment to the community in which they work, and that's something we're obviously striving for; but we work very closely in Labrador with both the Nunatsiavut Government and the Innu Nation, the two chiefs, to make sure that the services are complementary to the work they're doing as well in the community.

CHAIR: The Member's time has expired.

MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: Just to expand on one of the points I picked up on from my colleague's questions. We have 250 social workers and 50 to 60 that are to be recruited. Is that process ongoing right now, for the 50 or 60 recruits?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, it's continuous and it's ongoing. Obviously now with the graduation at the university with the School of Social Work, we're trying to make sure we attract them. We have placements throughout the year. The university has expanded the number of seats for the social work school

so that will help us in the long term. Interestingly enough, the social work profession is in very high demand; it continues to expand right throughout, I'll call it, the social sector. So we're in a competitive mode there as well.

One of the things we need to do, and are working on and continue to work on – and I've been dealing with this now for probably 30 years – is how we can support those doing child protection and we have retention bonuses and incentives for recruitment in place as well. That is starting to pay dividends.

J. DWYER: The 50 to 60 recruits, are the majority of those in Labrador or on the Island?

J. ABBOTT: It will be across the province. Again, the majority will be on the Island just based on the number of cases.

J. DWYER: Population.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: Last year when we done Estimates, I remember that on the Island the caseload per social worker was 19, I believe, which we kind of garnered to the number of 20; but, in Labrador, last year at this time, it was 30 per caseload per social worker. Has that number come down off 30?

J. ABBOTT: Not significantly, marginally. Because of the number of cases, it's actually starting to drop.

J. DWYER: Right.

But what have we done to support our social workers in the Labrador region?

J. ABBOTT: Well, again, we've sent up social workers from the Island to provide support in the offices there. We have a fly-in, fly-out model. We've got the retention bonus and we've also got the incentive

bonus for new recruitment. So those are the measures we have in place.

Interestingly enough, when you talk to many of the social workers who work in Labrador, they love their work; they enjoy that. The issue that comes up from time to time is isolation from family and friends if they don't live in the community. That is something for each individual then to have to address. We'll support them obviously in going back and forth, but that tends to be the issue. It's not the work; they generally love the work because it is a very specialized area within child protection. They feel supported by the communities, but it's that social isolation that is a factor and that's why we're trying to – where we can – make sure the individuals have an attachment to Labrador, for instance.

J. DWYER: It's kind of funny because while they're there, they're learning the new culture and stuff like that, yet they still, from my experience and in talking to social workers, is that it is that disconnect from their own family. It's not that they don't want to learn the new culture or anything like that and understand that new culture; it is the fact of being away from their own family.

The last question I would ask is that when social workers are recruited to go to Labrador, are they provided housing?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: So that's part of their incentive package or do they –?

J. ABBOTT: Certainly in Natuashish, for instance, and in Nain and Hopedale, we would provide housing.

J. DWYER: But not so much like in Wabush or Goose Bay?

J. ABBOTT: No.

J. DWYER: Okay, because that might be an incentive to get some there because then

the ones that are already there might move out to the coast a little bit more. But just a suggestion, that's all.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: Okay.

MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: Yes, just with regard to when it comes to the fly-in, fly-out and the ratio, so geography and travel factored into the caseload of a social worker or is it just strictly a 1 to 20 number?

J. ABBOTT: Again, it's the case itself. So those factors wouldn't impact that ratio, as it were. What we are trying to do obviously is improve and support those social workers. When it comes to both the Nunatsiavut Government and to Innu communities, our working relationship with their governments is making a significant impact positively on how we conduct child welfare services in those communities.

Because now we're working as a team. No child is removed from their home and/or the community without the tacit support of the leadership in those communities. Because what we all agree is keeping the children in home, in their community, is most important. As we've seen, the number of children now coming into care in those communities has dropped 50 per cent in two, 2½ years. That's a significant improvement, which tells me we are finally starting to do this right.

J. DINN: I guess I would hear from school counsellors, certainly when I was president, that the ratio of 1-500 works in a large urban area, but they would often find that in rural areas you could have the same ratio apply, but the counsellors would then be responsible for three or four schools over a significant geographical area. That made it difficult for them – like you talked about the consistency piece. We joke around that if you're going to have a crisis, you better

hope it's on the day that the counsellor is there.

One of the things they're asking for is we really need to have the geography, the travel time and the number of schools; you can't just look simply at the numbers. That's why I'm asking –

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, I understand, yes. The solution to that is recruiting more social workers for those communities to bring that ratio in line where it should be.

J. DINN: With regard to social workers in Labrador my colleague mentioned housing. I think, Minister, you spoke about the family commitments and that they're away from home. I know that the Faculty of Education had an IBED program for I think it was Innu/Inuit at the time, but to train the educators to go back in the community.

Is there a similar program then for social workers so that you're training people from the communities? I mean if people have grown up in a culture they know the people, they know the culture and therefore it's about having that connection to it. Is there any –?

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, and the School of Social Work is certainly focused on that. I've talked to them and they're very sensitive to that and making sure they have the supports for those social workers and that we have placements during their training in Labrador.

I think all the parties are focused on that but the challenge now is just getting people, usually young people, to want to work in Labrador.

J. DINN: But is there any incentive? Is the department, your department offering incentives maybe either through the School of Social Work to attract people from the communities, Inuit or Innu, to train them to be the social workers and to work in their communities?

J. ABBOTT: I understand.

J. DINN: That's what I'm looking at, as an incentive. You can put me in the community all you like and I will do my best to be the most sensitive teacher and everything else there, but I am still at a disadvantage and I would argue, sometimes, maybe even the people I am trying to help might be. So I'm just looking at it in terms of an incentive. One way is just to train people from the area. There's an opportunity to – and look at reconciliation. That's what I'm looking at.

J. ABBOTT: I understand your question and that's through our conversations with the School of Social Work. That's the key to that because all their graduates are literally hired immediately and we agree that they can support the children through their students. That's what we're focused on. So we continue to work with them to target those students that come from Labrador to support them in going back.

J. DINN: Thank you.

That's it, Chair.

CHAIR: I ask the Clerk to recall the subgroup.

CLERK: 1.1.01 to 1.2.02 inclusive.

CHAIR: Shall 1.1.01 to 1.2.02 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 subheading.

CLERK: 2.1.01.

CHAIR: 2.1.01.

MHA Dwyer.

MHA Pardy.

C. PARDY: Thank you, Chair.

I think my learned colleague, teaching colleague, has got all his questions asked on this section, anyhow, so at least I can start on ours.

If I can harken back on a couple of questions on Housing. In the budget, it had mentioned, Minister, the \$70 million for 850 units to be built, which is good. If you divided and averaged that out in a very linear form, it's about \$82,000 a unit. What would these units look like or what do you envision with this money in order to get 850 units?

J. ABBOTT: So I will start by saying –

C. PARDY: Wrong section.

J. ABBOTT: We're not doing the Housing Corporation, but I'll give you a quick answer. What we're doing is that \$70 million will be a series of subsidies provided to private sector and others to go towards the capital cost of a facility and it allows them to reduce the rent.

So we've had this program in the past. We now will update it and refine it so that if a unit to build would be \$250,000 or \$300,000, we will put a subsidy towards that.

C. PARDY: Understood, thank you for engaging.

The last one on that section before I move on – if you'll allow me – do you have areas where tentatively these units are going to be offered? I'm sure you have data as to where the needs are out there in the province.

J. ABBOTT: Well, what I can answer –

C. PARDY: I'm thinking Port Rexton, Bonavista. They just come to mind.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, I recognize there's need right across the province. I've spoken to a lot of community leaders and others, but we have not designated any units for any location at this point. It's going to be based on the proposal call, what we get back; we'll assess those and then allocate the subsidies accordingly.

C. PARDY: Thank you for accommodating those questions.

J. ABBOTT: Get working on your district now and the proposals.

C. PARDY: Good.

A couple of questions first on the line items here, four quickies. 2.1.01, Salaries, Salaries decreased by \$2.3 million but I know they're forecast to go up.

J. ABBOTT: So, again, with some vacancies we were just alluded to earlier, because most of the activity is in child protection social workers, that would be funded through this account. Again, we are anticipating that we will be successful in recruiting, plus salary increases. That's why the amount is back up to the \$45 million number.

C. PARDY: Okay.

Professional Services, the nature of the unbudgeted \$290,000 expenditure last year?

J. ABBOTT: Just bear with me for a second.

C. PARDY: It was budgeted – \$290,000 budgeted.

J. ABBOTT: Okay.

C. PARDY: But unused.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, can you just recite the number on that one.

C. PARDY: Oh, sorry, not budgeted and revised, I'm sorry.

J. ABBOTT: Can you recite the number? Which account for that?

C. PARDY: Professional Services, 2.1.01.

J. ABBOTT: Okay. That's, for whatever reason, not showing up on my page here now.

Can you just, again, I'm sorry, can you just quote the actual revised number there?

C. PARDY: On the copy that we have on Professional Services, 2.1.01, it's \$290,000 revised for '22-'23.

J. ABBOTT: Okay, gotcha, all right. Interestingly enough, that didn't show up in my sheet here, so that's why.

That was for some consulting work we have been doing in the department.

C. PARDY: Consulting work for ...?

J. ABBOTT: For Youth Services.

C. PARDY: Youth Services.

Would you know who did that?

J. ABBOTT: Ernst and Young, sorry.

C. PARDY: Ernst and Young.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah. That's just now coming back to me. Again, looking at the workloads for our social workers providing job protection services in particular for Child and Youth Services and looking at what ways we can redesign the work and the workload to address many of the issues we were just talking about. For example, can we have more social assistance workers

working to support our social workers, for instance?

C. PARDY: Okay.

Allowances and Assistance, 09, increased from \$73 million to \$91 million.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, well, we had a lot of conversations with the Minister of Finance on this particular one, so I have to keep my head down.

What we have seen is that the number of youth that have come into care and have stayed in care, the complexity of the cases has required us to do more independent living arrangements. The cost of those has grown significantly. We could spend \$300,000, \$400,000, \$500,000, \$600,000, \$700,000 per case, depending on the needs. The numbers of that have come up this year.

We're normally in the range of 50 to 60. This year we were probably at one point over 80 cases. Those numbers will carry through. That was the reason for that increase.

C. PARDY: Are you expecting the \$77 million is going to be able to do it this year?

J. ABBOTT: Yes. So we're putting in a plan and we started that in terms of how we can look at how we can reorganize some of the supports around those youth and rely less on single, individual living arrangements and starting to provide having two or three that share similar case definitions, shall we say, and how we can support them better there. Because just having them in an individual living arrangement in itself doesn't necessarily mean we're providing the best support. So that's how we're going to reconfigure that work over the next 12 months.

C. PARDY: Okay, good.

The final one there, Grants and Subsidies, the budget dropped from \$43 million to \$40 million but requesting \$45 million this year. Would the breakdown be in the binder that we'll receive?

J. ABBOTT: The main reason there is we had a group home in Labrador that didn't open and we had budgeted for that and that remained closed, with the intent that we would open that over the coming year.

C. PARDY: Okay, good.

You had mentioned we know we're going to become the healthiest province, or our plan is to be one of the healthiest provinces by 2031. There seems to be a lot of credence or impetus put on the Physical Activity Tax Credit. We've doubled it. I'm assuming, because the results last year were so good in working towards our desired goal that we decided to double it. Can you share as to what the data revealed from the Physical Activity Tax Credit last year?

J. ABBOTT: No, I wouldn't have access to that information. I know that is being evaluated on a real-time basis, but I don't have that information.

C. PARDY: My question is that I know that it's your department that has that mandate in order for the healthy living and well-being.

J. ABBOTT: No, from that perspective, from a broader policy perspective we are working through our Social and Economic Well-Being Plan to identify what the measures are in place, what new ones can be put in place and that will be part of that design for that plan.

C. PARDY: Okay.

Forgive me now if I'm not moving on, but just my last one was that you seem to have tied your horse to this one here, to achieve that outcome.

J. ABBOTT: Which horse?

C. PARDY: As far as the Physical Activity Tax Credit.

J. ABBOTT: It's not my horse; it's our horse.

C. PARDY: Mine and yours? Yours and the ministers?

CHAIR: The Member's time has expired.

MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

I think, in our previous series of questions, we had talked about with social workers and working with the community to keep children in their community rather than putting them in foster care, and that's a positive thing to hear. So my question is this: Since the last amendment to the *Children, Youth and Families Act* a couple of years ago, what progress are you seeing in terms of the number of Indigenous children who are in care and the number of Indigenous children who are able to remain in their communities?

I'm assuming there are so many there who are in care, and maybe they're looking at getting the children back to their families and communities. I'm assuming also that there are probably a number of children who are heading towards some sort of foster care. I'm just looking at the progress here.

J. ABBOTT: As I mentioned, again, over the past two years or 2½ years, the number of children in care, Indigenous children in care in particular, has come down. The number that has been taken into care has dropped by 50 per cent over the past 2½ years. So we're definitely trending – if I can use that word in this case – in the direction we want to go. We are trying, where we can, making sure we have family reunification, that the supports are in place that we're working with the Indigenous leaders and their social workers and others

to make sure those children are supported where they should be.

So if you talk to either one of the Innu chiefs, I think they will speak quite positively about not only our legislation, that was one thing, but just the philosophy of the department, of our social workers, that they have fully, I think, accepted that we needed to do business differently and certainly within the context of reconciliation, we need to make sure that the Indigenous leaders are active in the management of our child protection services in those communities. Because, at the same time, they are looking to take over those services in the short- to medium-term and we're very supportive of that. There are a lot of issues they have to work out with the federal government more so than they will have to work out with us.

J. DINN: I would assume then that probably the relationship at one time which could have been very difficult is between the department and the communities, or strained, is probably healing a little bit now.

J. ABBOTT: Absolutely. So it was a we-them and now it is moving towards an us approach.

J. DINN: Good. As they look to take over those services are they looking at, in terms of a model, where they would train their own? I go back to that question.

J. ABBOTT: No.

J. DINN: Or would they be looking at working with the department in the long term, short term but they eventually, I would assume, they're looking at doing it themselves?

J. ABBOTT: I mean the early conversations we had around that, I think it is going to be – one, I think they are looking at coming up with a design and a model that will work for them and they have the legal and other supports in place to live around that and then making sure they recruit their own

staff, train in their model, as they go forward.

We're seeing now, with the Nunatsiavut Government, for instance, they're doing some services – they will recruit social workers. Often there are, I will call, former social workers that have moved into working with the NG, the same as with the Innu, which is good. So there is some consistency there in terms of approach within those communities.

J. DINN: Thank you.

That's it, Chair.

CHAIR: Okay.

C. PARDY: Forgive me if you've already answered this but I think not; are there children still being kept in hotel rooms?

J. ABBOTT: The answer is no. That is not to say that it might happen on a very short notice, if for instance there is a child who has to be removed, I'll call it, in an evening event, and just for temporary. But we have definitely moved away from that practice.

C. PARDY: Okay.

The number of families receiving services by region, would that be in the binder?

J. ABBOTT: No, but we can make that available.

C. PARDY: Okay.

Minister, we discussed the section on Allowances and Assistance. When we mentioned about \$73 million to \$91 million, I think you mentioned the number of youth in care. I think you're going to try some degree of grouping would be – so I am assuming that from \$73 million to \$91 million, that would have been the ILAs?

J. ABBOTT: Primarily, yes.

C. PARDY: That would have been a significant – okay.

So the ILAs now, instead of having one per, you'll see if you can have a couple of youth –

J. ABBOTT: Yes, that's the youth and how we look at the agencies that are providing that service, because the way we have done it, it's a contracted service, and we've done it one on one on one and one. We're saying well, if we went out with a proposal call to look, we have – I'm going to pick a number – 25 children in this area, not saying that by grouping 25 in one facility – how can you provide better supports in a more cost-effective way and help us deliver on that? Because right now we're just, as I say, contracting one by one by one. There's no – quote, unquote – (inaudible) scale from an administrative perspective, nothing else.

C. PARDY: No. Okay.

Can the minister provide an update on mandatory reporting? How it is working?

J. ABBOTT: It is working. Obviously, many of the new cases that come to our attention will come that way. Often it's usually another, I'll call it, family member who will say look I have a concern about my niece, my grandchild, what have you. We will then obviously open up a file and do the appropriate investigation to see where the child is and how to support that child. Again, trying to keep the child with the family for longer term success.

C. PARDY: Good.

How many child death reviews has the department been involved with in the past year?

J. ABBOTT: That would be a very small number. I don't have that with me, but, I mean, other than we would either be providing the information to the justice

authorities and/or through the advocate, we wouldn't be directly involved in the review.

C. PARDY: No. Are there any currently underway or is there one currently underway or ...?

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

C. PARDY: Okay.

Is it possible to provide some comments on what the Innu inquiry has heard? Have you been briefed on that to date?

J. ABBOTT: No, I have no comment.

C. PARDY: Okay.

J. ABBOTT: Other than we are obviously very supportive of the inquiry and obviously fully cooperating with it. We're obviously mandated and required to provide a lot of our files to the inquiry and we're doing that on an expedited basis.

C. PARDY: Good.

You had referenced earlier, I think, the children in care and I don't know if that was the Indigenous children in care. I think you had mentioned 331 to 305 was a marginal drop, roughly for the numbers.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

C. PARDY: So they are decreasing?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

C. PARDY: And I think that might have spanned from 2019 to 2022.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

C. PARDY: Are they back with their families or placed elsewhere in the community?

J. ABBOTT: It could vary. They could have, sort of, aged out of care would be one, back

in the community, back in the family, but no longer under a child protection order.

C. PARDY: Okay.

Canadian Tire Jumpstart foundation, are you familiar with that or has there been any thought related to that program?

J. ABBOTT: I am familiar with it but we're not involved with it.

C. PARDY: Okay. I just wondered as to whether you would see that as any impetus in achieving the 2031 goal of being one of the healthiest provinces, but there's no consideration on that.

J. ABBOTT: We're not involved in that.

C. PARDY: The recent Auditor General's report in February 2023 listed a couple of recommendations that were listed there and I think they may be in your department, that would be. One was to develop an action plan for healthy, active living to support the achievement of the government's target to improve health outcomes and bring health indicators more in line with the Canadian average.

J. ABBOTT: So we would be a party to that as with, certainly, the Department of Health and Community Services and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts and Recreation who hold the Healthy Living grants, for instance.

C. PARDY: Okay. All right.

So there are three others here but you're saying that's part of a group. It's not solely with your department.

J. ABBOTT: No.

C. PARDY: It's others who would be – okay.

I think you're probably involved with or included with the chronic absenteeism that would be in our system.

I know the Department of Education would certainly be, but I would think there would probably be some crossover with your department.

J. ABBOTT: Yes, so one of the things that we, the government, has put in place, in light of various sort of reports and findings in the past couple of years, even before I joined in this role, I was in my previous role, I was certainly familiar with it. So we now have put in place an integrated child health model to take all these issues that may be siloed in Education, in our department, in Health or elsewhere and now bring those issues together in a – quote, unquote – integrated fashion so that we can now break down those silos and deal with it. So that would be a very good example. Education would say all right, we have a chronic absenteeism, what role is it for our department to address that? What role is it for obviously the school district? What role is it for Health or for others if there are medical issues that might be at play?

So we will then start to look at both on an individual basis but a systemic basis of how we have to improve our programs and services to address those issues.

C. PARDY: Okay, good.

Are we still at 10 per cent as far as chronic absenteeism? I know that's Education, I know that, but I know that with the linkages with your department, I'm not sure if you would be aware of that number.

J. ABBOTT: I don't know the current number.

C. PARDY: Yeah.

Are we the only province that wouldn't have social workers that would be in the school system?

J. ABBOTT: I can answer that but that's again back to my sort of answer there a minute ago. The thing in this integrated

service model is to look at where do we deploy the resources to get the best result, if it's putting social workers, for instance, in schools is one thing, or bringing guidance counsellors into Health. Whatever we think makes sense, that's what we want to do because right now we're siloed program-wise and professional-wise.

But if you look at some of the areas where we've integrated services, then it's worked, whether it's in Health or elsewhere. So on the Housing side, just going back to that, we've integrated all our supportive housing services into one model and that's starting to improve how we respond, so we need to do the same when it comes to child health.

C. PARDY: Good.

Seven million dollars to support recreation and physical activity, athlete and sport development, is that new money or is that what we would have spent in previous years?

J. ABBOTT: That wouldn't be –

C. PARDY: That's not under the well-being of your –?

J. ABBOTT: No, it's not in my department anyway.

C. PARDY: Okay, all right.

That's good, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: No, I'm good.

CHAIR: You're good.

So I'm going to ask the Clerk to recall the subheading now.

CLERK: 2.1.01.

CHAIR: Shall 2.1.01 carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Carried.

On motion, subhead 2.1.01 carried.

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

CLERK: 3.1.01 to 3.1.03 inclusive.

CHAIR: 3.1.01 to 3.1.03 inclusive.

MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Just a couple of quick housekeeping items. Under Grants and Subsidies, are we able to get a list of the recipients?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Under the Adult Protection Act – and it was nice to see improvements made to that over the last couple of years, I have to be honest, and it was something that really needed to happen – how many referrals do we have in the last year?

J. ABBOTT: Now, I don't have that number, but we will get that.

J. DWYER: We can get it? Because I'd like to know how many referrals, how many complaints, how many investigations are currently under way.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, we can provide that. We have that, but I don't have it here tonight.

J. DWYER: No, but you'll provide it?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: Okay, thank you.

Do you believe the act is working well?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, and we have the training done. It's been well received by the Health Authority and the responsiveness has been good. What we're wanting to make sure that the community at large – and that's something we're working on – know their rights and, more importantly, their obligations to report.

Interestingly enough, in terms of my phone calls that I would get in terms of these particular services, I've gotten probably more on those issues and situations than anything else. People are reaching out; they are looking across the fence to see that there's something not right. They'll call in and say: Who do I call? I said: You've called the right place; we'll take care of it.

J. DWYER: Do you feel that with the act itself are we, as a department, putting that information into the hands of seniors to let them know their rights of the new act?

J. ABBOTT: Yes. We're working with the different seniors' organizations and the like to make sure that they're fully responsible – SeniorsNL and the like – so that they will promote that within their network. That we find is the best. We can do ads and those kinds of things, but we find that getting it out in those networks is much more effective.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Have you had any response to the latest report from the Seniors' Advocate?

J. ABBOTT: The one she just released?

J. DWYER: Yes.

J. ABBOTT: Nothing in any formal way. Obviously as a department and we've read through the report – as I've said in the House, we don't take issue with the findings. We're waiting to see what her recommendations might be. But the same when I'm dealing with in here and meet with

the Provincial Advisory Council, they're identifying many of those similar issues and so part of our budget obviously is to respond to those.

Could we do them all in one budget? No. So we said, look, within those, what are the priorities? So obviously increasing financial benefits where we can, housing for sure, and we will look and we'll acting on those other findings and looking at her recommendations, along with the work we're doing in house, because it all ties into our Social and Economic Well-Being Plan when it comes to looking at the needs of seniors.

J. DWYER: Okay.

In Question Period a couple of days ago, or yesterday actually, you said there was 90 per cent of recommendations that were already implemented? Is that correct?

J. ABBOTT: No, that's of the previous report, the 2019 report.

J. DWYER: Oh, okay.

That's what I thought you meant but the way it came off with your answer was that it was about this report and I'm like there's not enough turnaround time yet to get there but –

J. ABBOTT: We're good, but we're not that good.

J. DWYER: I appreciate your honesty, thank you.

You said there was a Committee formed on seniors in 2022. Who was comprised on that list?

J. ABBOTT: So that's the Provincial Advisory Council?

J. DWYER: Yes.

J. ABBOTT: So we'll provide that list.

J. DWYER: Okay.

J. ABBOTT: It's a new membership and they have been working very hard. Their focus, because like any Committee, which I appreciated, they did their strategic thinking and planning and identified age friendliness as a focus of their work. So they have been developing plans and then providing recommendations to the department on where we could and should focus.

J. DWYER: Okay.

When it comes to seniors presenting at a hospital in an emergency department, have you spoken with the Minister of Health to bring in some kind of either legislation or rule or regulation so that seniors don't have to wait in a waiting area around other probably sicker people that their immune system is low – and I think we discussed this last year, but I don't see it really happening here.

J. ABBOTT: So we have a Cabinet Committee on Seniors coming out of the Health Accord and I chair that Committee. We are going through the Health Accord recommendations, sort of recommendation by recommendation, having a good discussion, getting input from those who made those recommendations, how the department and the Health Authority can respond. That would be an issue, which I share, is why is a senior showing up in the first instance and then how are they received? How are they triaged and how are they treated? And that's definitely a priority of our work right now and we have given direction to the department to start getting their act together on this.

J. DWYER: I've heard from a lot of seniors that have told me that a lot of times they'll try and bypass having to go to the hospital because they know it's going to be an eight-hour wait. I tell you their biggest fear is they fall asleep in the waiting room and be taken advantage of. It's very unfortunate that would be a thing to come to my attention. I

think that what we need to do is streamline our seniors when they present and it doesn't matter from a headache to their hand chopped off type of thing. Do you know what I'm saying?

So I think that's where we need to look at under the senior or Adult Protections Act is that that's a big piece of it and in order for them to receive that emergent care, we have to want them to have the impetus to present.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: Just the last question – I notice in the budget that you did increase the seniors' allowance by 5 per cent, but the only disturbing thing for me on that is that inflationary pressures have been at 5.2 per cent. What made you decide to go with 5 per cent this time around?

J. ABBOTT: Well, that sort of was under the purview of the Minister of Finance in terms of that program because it's delivered through the tax system through the tax credit. As the minister explained in the House, one, it's built on last year's 10 per cent increase, along with the other benefits that we have provided to seniors and others on low income. We will continue to monitor that for its effectiveness and appropriateness and whether or not we can and should add more in the years to come.

J. DWYER: When we talk about the overarching number, it obviously looks like we are putting a lot into it but when we look at the age and demographic that we have, we're talking \$72 a year, \$6 a month, 19 cents a day, which seems to be a little bit short on help. To me, if we're looking at that overarching number – and I think we've discussed this at length before – is that maybe it's better to help people that don't have benefits that are purported into their retirement from their employment and in that way they can achieve the benefits for their eyes, their ears, their mouth. I think we said their feet and their stomach.

J. ABBOTT: That's part, I think, of looking at the seniors' care in a broad sense but if you look at the income that a senior would receive when you combine all the federal and provincial benefits, albeit I know the cost of living has increased, but you're talking in the range of between \$23,000 and \$24,000 for that individual. So ours is within that. The federal government obviously has been increasing their benefits as well, so for any individual over 65, at a minimum, that will be their income.

J. DWYER: Okay.

I notice in the federal budget there is an allotment there for dental care for seniors, which I applaud to be quite honest.

J. DINN: (Inaudible.)

J. DWYER: What's that? Well, you can prop them up all you want; I'm not doing that.

For that program, are we going to be reaching out to seniors to let them know what the threshold is and who is eligible for this program? Because I know, as a province, we have those issues but we don't have that program.

J. ABBOTT: Right. And I don't think the program design has been finalized yet with the federal government and each of the provinces to how that is going to be administered and delivered. It would fall under the Department of Health and Community Services.

I am glad to see that there is movement there. I would have also liked to see the work on the drug program, which they promised, and the disability benefit, which they promised. So we are having those conversations with the federal ministers.

J. DWYER: Okay, thank you.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

These first two questions are tied together and about aging in place and the larger population of seniors. What work has been done in the past year to create, expand and improve programs that help seniors age in place? What advances have been made in the past year in preparing for the anticipated demographic shift toward a larger population of seniors?

J. ABBOTT: For the areas that fall within my mandate, we are working with both the Advisory Council, for sure, and seniors' groups, providing grants and supports to them and working at the community level, because that is where it will work best and be sustainable for the long term. Again, within our housing program, obviously to make sure we have for those who are on low income who need support for doing repairs and modifications to stay in place.

A significant theme under the Health Accord was around that whole theme as well. So we're, both on a policy and program design, working diligently to enhance all our programs and services through that lens and then we will start to allocate appropriate dollars to support that activity. This, to me, is we're at a baseline here and we will just continue to grow out that type of support.

J. DINN: Not necessarily your department I guess, but home care in terms of supports for helping seniors. I look at this from the point of view, too, of a lot of couples who are also struggling with child care and are also probably at the stage where they're struggling with care for their parents. They're that sandwich generation. So they may not have any other family supports but they're stuck between two – I'm looking at in terms of when are we going to address the fact that seniors might very well need people to come in and whether there's anything from house cleaning to cooking meals to other more intensive supports, I'm just wondering how we're getting ready for that as we move forward.

J. ABBOTT: I think there's a strong recognition certainly by the Department of Health and Community Services in terms of looking at the Home Support Program, how that can be, I'll say, improved in terms of both training and program design to address those types of issues. The immediate challenge is making sure we can find the trained workers to stay in that field, and that's an ongoing challenge for them as well, but whether it's direct delivery or through the home care agencies.

J. DINN: An awful lot of talk, certainly with any seniors I speak to about isolation, social isolation, and we've heard here brought up more than once with regard to the lack of public transit. In many ways a lot of the decisions over the many years, we've made decisions that basically favour the use of automobiles and public transit has suffered.

I'm just wondering in terms of a province-wide approach, a strategy for transportation for seniors. In St. John's we have the GoBus and a variety of other ways seniors can get around for that matter, but in more remote or rural communities, are there any plans to enhance the public transit system so that they have that access?

J. ABBOTT: So I want to answer that two ways. One, is in terms of the department, we have our grant program and we'll be putting out a call for proposals again for this year, and it's been quite successful getting communities, often involving their municipality and volunteer groups within those communities, to provide bus transportation for seniors and others on a regular basis to get them to and from events.

The other part of this is that the municipalities themselves, big or small, they have to be prepared to step up as well. We right now, for instance, are providing significant amount of financial support to the City of St. John's for Metrobus and the GoBus. That's both in terms of their capital

equipment and some operating dollars through our department.

We need to expand that – to your point – right across the province and I've had a number of conversations with different community leaders around that, including the Opposition House Leaders. Where are our communities in advocating for more transportation for their citizens and then what role does the provincial government have to play in that? But in the absence of those types of that interest and commitment by the municipalities, we're going to be piecemealing this for quite a while.

J. DINN: Thank you.

Have there been any initiatives in the department recently to examine and address the specific concerns of 2SLGBTQ+ seniors as they age?

J. ABBOTT: We're sort of, again, having conversations with advocates in that community, but working with both Women and Gender Equality and with NL Housing and Health and Community Services definitely to be more responsive there.

J. DINN: But nothing specific at this point?

J. ABBOTT: No.

J. DINN: Okay.

If I may move on, Chair, to 3.1.02, Disability Policy Office. Since the passing of the *Accessibility Act* what work has the new Accessibility Standards Advisory Board accomplished?

J. ABBOTT: As I mentioned in my opening comments, they have developed their own sort of plan. I'm trying to – not trying, I am as minister staying out of their own deliberations, and I have asked them to their best of their ability to identify on a priority basis which standards they believe they should work on first and then recommend those to me as minister.

They've identified customer service and communications as the first two standards that they want to work on. There's work done in those areas in different places across the country, so we should be able to, I think, leverage the work done by those jurisdictions to bring them forward here as quickly as possible.

J. DINN: Any sense of the progress they've made?

J. ABBOTT: I'm sorry?

J. DINN: Any sense of the progress or where they're going with the customer service?

J. ABBOTT: Well, again, they just literally started that work and there are resources both locally and the Canadian Standards Association and others are prepared to assist them in their work.

J. DINN: With regard to the position of the disability advocate ...?

J. ABBOTT: I guess we got things on hold. We have done a fair bit of research in looking at what an office could or should look like. Now with the independent review of those offices, we've just held that until the consultant reports back to the government, I guess, on those offices.

J. DINN: Thank you.

In 3.1.03, what recommendations are still outstanding from the report, *A Long Wait for Change*?

J. ABBOTT: Again, most of those recommendations have been implemented. There are a few that we're still working with the Nunatsiavut Government in how best to implement those because we want to do that in tandem with them. But, as I said, the working relationship between the Nunatsiavut Government, their staff and ours when it comes to children in those

communities, there's definitely marked improvement.

Again, the challenge is making sure we have our human resources in place to work better. We were scattered over obviously large territory and we have children, whether it's Hopedale, Makkovik, Nain what have you, so it's just a matter of getting around to make sure we can do those visits and support those kids. And developing foster arrangements, we're working with and making sure the training is in place as well.

J. DINN: Is it possible to get an idea, not now, but an idea of the recommendations that remain outstanding if possible?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: What progress has been made with the Indigenous governments and organizations in setting up and training child welfare services of their own? I think we talked a little bit about that, but I don't know if you want to add anything to it.

J. ABBOTT: No, nothing to add.

J. DINN: Okay, thank you.

What work has been done on the action plan on prevention or early intervention for families?

J. ABBOTT: We're, again, I'll call that a work in progress. We're working obviously with the Foster Families Association and then we are providing additional training and supports to the association and foster parents across the province. That's an important aspect of our programming to make sure that children who do come in care do have a stable and reliable home to live in, but we want to make sure we support the foster parents when we could and should.

J. DINN: Thank you.

CHAIR: Okay.

The Member's time has expired.

MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: Thank you.

Just to go back to seniors for one last question. The Home Repair Program, I find it to be very beneficial to seniors. When we increased their benefit by 5 per cent, did we increase their threshold by 5 per cent?

J. ABBOTT: No, we did not.

J. DWYER: Are we going to do that?

J. ABBOTT: We are looking at all those thresholds through our review.

J. DWYER: Because usually that is where people fall short, we get these increases but we don't increase the threshold.

J. ABBOTT: Just as a sort of a factoid, the reality though, most of our funding for those ends up going to families who are much, much lower and the threshold would be less than \$20,000 even though our threshold might be \$32,500. So we can increase the threshold but unless we increase the budget, it is not going to have a material impact.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Just to segue into the Disability Policy Office. For a senior that has become an amputee in their retirement, are we making allowances for somebody if they were in our care, Newfoundland and Labrador Housing, are we giving them any kind of incentive program to build a ramp or anything like that? They need it before they leave the hospital but they only found out a week ago that they were going to lose it from the knee down.

J. ABBOTT: So we have two components of that program; one is the modification to address specifically that situation. With a

referral by a clinical staff from the Health Authority then we prioritize that individual.

J. DWYER: Right. But can the individual bring that to your attention? I mean if they walked into the hospital and they left in a wheelchair, it is pretty obvious that they need a ramp.

J. ABBOTT: We'll just – quote, unquote – political verification –

J. DWYER: Use common sense.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: Okay.

So moving into the Disability Policy Office, Transportation and Communications was \$45,000, it went to \$9,000 and now it's back to \$45,000. Can you explain the reason why the change?

J. ABBOTT: So from that perspective, with the new Accessibility Standards Advisory Board in place, which we didn't have, we had just started because we want to support them in doing their consultations and travel throughout the province, so that would be the bulk of the money.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Why does your department or your position need \$20,000 this year for Professional Services when it only used \$2,000 last year?

J. ABBOTT: In terms of Professional Services, the standards board will be provided some compensation. Again, they're just up and running and that will be the main reason for that.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Under Purchased Services, we went from \$63,000 to \$20,000 and now we're budgeting \$43,000. Can you explain?

J. ABBOTT: So, again, we had allocated, assuming the board was going to be up and running sooner – so we rent hotel rooms for their meetings and we have interpretation services and the like. We didn't need that to the degree we budgeted, but we expect that for the coming year they will be fully operational.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Why couldn't you spend the Grants and Subsidies the \$112,000 last year?

J. ABBOTT: I'm just going to –

J. DWYER: Grants and Subsidies.

J. ABBOTT: Okay, if you'll just bear with me.

J. DWYER: Yes.

J. ABBOTT: One of our programs, the Accessible Vehicle Program, didn't have the number of applications that we were anticipating. We've been promoting that program quite well, so we're going to be looking at that because we want to make sure we spend those dollars. I think we're going to have to look at some of our – for instance we had certain limits on the cost of a vehicle. If the number was \$25,000 we know now that an accessible vehicle is \$50,000, \$60,000, \$70,000, so we're going to have to modify those limits.

J. DWYER: And I think you knew this question was coming because I've been after it for about three years now. I thought it was very important to get the Child and Youth Advocate replaced and from retirement and also that we replace the Seniors' Advocate. I wouldn't like to go on before I say that I think Susan Walsh is doing a fantastic job in that department and her report, certainly, was able to draw on a lot of people to get their responses. I think she's doing a tremendous job. You have our full support on her position for sure.

J. ABBOTT: I'm sure she's listening tonight.

J. DWYER: Do you know what? I would imagine she is.

But, with that being said, you know what's coming next is the disability advocate that I've been pushing for, for about three years now. I think it's very important. But if we go down that path and we do get a disabilities advocate office, do you see it as being more like the Seniors' Advocate being a policy office, or do you see it more as being like the Child and Youth Advocate where the persons with disabilities would get assisted help?

J. ABBOTT: I think it's definitely the right question. In looking at other offices across the country and elsewhere, what is the best design, again, we've done some research around that. I can see the benefit of both, knowing the challenges that an individual person with a disability has and where is their advocate to help them navigate through the system.

So I think the jury is still open on that but, as I said earlier, we suspended any further work until the independent review is done and then we'll come back to that based on what may come out of that review.

J. DWYER: I did see that in the budget there are some teaching services that are being provided, like for teaching assistants and stuff like that. I think that's a very important move for the simple fact – and I've brought this up to you before – that there are some children that are kind of slipping through the cracks, I guess, kind of thing because we don't have enough and they can have only so many in a caseload.

Not only as the shadow Cabinet minister for CSSD, but also as a father of a son with autism, I know that that's happening. So what I would like to see is that I think having a disabilities advocate would certainly make sure that those things are implemented to give people a better understanding of being

able to go to school, or what's expected of them and what's expected of the student themselves. I would love to see the disability advocate be implemented as soon as possible.

With that being said, my colleague did ask you the question about the *Accessibility Act* and the advisory board, and that's in place now and it's full and active?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: Okay.

And the standards that are prioritized currently are customer service and communications. What do you see as the next standard to be implemented?

J. ABBOTT: As I think I mentioned, I have been staying sort of quiet or neutral on that, because I wanted the board to be truly independent, do their consultations and decide, with the community, what that next standard or series of standards should be. I have my own biases, but I've parked those.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Like I said, I'm willing to work with you at any time on the disability advocate, for sure.

Moving into 3.1.03, under Salaries, can you explain the request for additional salary?

J. ABBOTT: The additional salaries there, the increase is a result of new positions that we moved under that division from elsewhere, plus some salary increases for those in the original division itself.

J. DWYER: Under Purchased Services, why is the budget amount increase \$30,000 this year? Can you clarify?

J. ABBOTT: The increase is due to planned expenditure for mandatory training for our foster families. As mentioned earlier, that's something we're focused and we have some more staff in the department again to

look at parenting program training throughout the province – or social workers.

J. DWYER: Okay, and you feel that the foster families program is moving in the right direction?

J. ABBOTT: Oh, absolutely, they're stellar performers.

J. DWYER: Okay.

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

MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, could we have an update on the basic income program for youth receive receiving residential services?

J. ABBOTT: Again, we're, I'll call it, in the early stages. I don't know if Alan has any specific numbers. But there is an evaluation component built in to that program, then we will be reporting out on that. The deputy minister and I have had numerous conversations that we want to expand on that as quickly as possible.

We may use, from an evaluation point of view, have that as our control group, but because we've gotten a lot of interest in the program from other communities and other service agencies, whether or not they could look at getting into the program. We want to accelerate that because our whole focus of the department is early intervention and prevention. If we can, I'll use the word "redirect," say, one youth, from going down the dependency on income support road to being attached to income and work and education, that's where our focus has to be.

J. DINN: Thank you.

I think it was mentioned before that –

J. ABBOTT: Jim, if I may.

J. DINN: Oh, sorry, no problem, my apologies.

J. ABBOTT: We currently have 189 youth enrolled and so it's taking off quite well.

J. DINN: If you're looking at expanding this with other groups, I think you said you're planning to keep this as a control group?

J. ABBOTT: Yeah.

J. DINN: So, in other words, what you're going to do is – if I understand it correctly – this is a model you set up with Choices for Youth.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: If any other group wants to do it, they can design their own program?

J. ABBOTT: Yeah.

J. DINN: Okay.

J. ABBOTT: And we work with them.

J. DINN: Okay, so they may or may not follow the model set up by Choices for Youth?

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, because with the Choices for Youth and Stella's, they are signed on.

J. DINN: Right.

J. ABBOTT: But we feel confident based just on early indications, early success here that we don't want to necessarily wait to start to expand this. It will be on the same model but, at the same time, we're committed to evaluating this and that's why I call it the control group, so that we can refine that based on the evaluation over the three-year period then to make for the longer term. Then it will be – quote, unquote – a universal approach throughout the province.

J. DINN: So for the groups that want to sign on, here is the model and as you tweak the model, then there's going to be that same tweak –

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: Okay, fair enough. That makes sense. That's fair enough.

With regard to the Ernst Young report, the consultant's report, I think it was brought up earlier. What were the major findings or recommendations or are we still in the early stages?

J. ABBOTT: Well, the report sort of identified 10 major themes and recommendations. Many of which we started down the road, certainly through our discussions with NAPE, in providing supports, making sure we have program supports in place for folks, how we can use technology more effectively, how we can look at reallocating work and workload amongst the offices and social workers and social worker assistants. So it's all very, I'll call it, operational in focus. There was no particular challenge to our overall policy direction and how we're delivering the program, but it's how we support those social workers.

There are a couple of recommendations that we just have a little bit more in-house work to do before we proceed and we will be tabling and posting that report in short order once we've briefed all our staff on the findings and our approach to it.

J. DINN: Can I just go back to a comment you just made? With regard to the number of social workers, I think you said that there were 250, with 50 to 60 vacancies, and you mentioned then social worker support?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: I guess they'd be something like teaching assistants or student assistants, so

about how many would we be talking about then?

J. ABBOTT: I don't know. I'm going to ask Alan now if he knows the number there.

A. DOODY: The goal is to have a ratio for one social worker assistant for every six social workers.

J. DINN: So do we have that now? That's the goal; what do we have?

A. DOODY: That's in progress. We've just been actively hiring actually social worker assistants, so there are actually competitions currently ongoing.

J. DINN: So how far along are we with that? How many would we have hired so far?

A. DOODY: I'll have to get back to you with that exact number, for accuracy.

J. DINN: Okay, great, thank you.

That's it for me, Chair.

CHAIR: MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Just what I picked up on there, the \$3 million that was allocated was based on 300 youth and we have 189 enrolled. Does that mean that there's only \$1.9 million of the \$3 million being used?

J. ABBOTT: Now I don't know – your math may be right –

J. DWYER: Pretty good; don't ask me to write anything.

J. ABBOTT: So we have the money there and we've kept the money in the budget.

J. DWYER: Yes, that's what I'm saying but it will be utilized still within the department?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: I think we talked about it last year, is that the number is usually somewhere around 200 and we do the 300 based on the need, if it increases that the funding would be there.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DWYER: Okay, thank you.

Just especially to do with child welfare programs and the policies, you mentioned that you've approached the social work class that's going to be graduating here, convocating next month, from Memorial University; how many students have we heard back from or how many students are graduating from that class and what percentage do we think we're going to achieve?

J. ABBOTT: So the deputy minister was mentioning that, based on the conversations, we have 25 that said to us they're interested in coming to work with us.

J. DWYER: And how many are in the class?

J. ABBOTT: Graduating would be 50ish, I think.

J. DWYER: Okay, so we're getting close to 50 per cent.

J. ABBOTT: I'd say the balance will either be over in Health or in the community.

J. DWYER: Okay, perfect.

Can you update us on the shortage of foster families? What's the current need?

J. ABBOTT: Well, we can always use more. So we're in the 500 number right now, but we can always use more.

J. DWYER: It wouldn't be another 500?

J. ABBOTT: No. I think –

J. DWYER: Another 25 per cent maybe?

J. ABBOTT: I would say you're probably in the right. I was going to say 100 plus.

J. DWYER: And is there a backlog now in processing applications?

J. ABBOTT: Not of any degree because the foster families, we can process that pretty quickly. Getting through the PRIDE training, once they're through that and the family visits, but we process that very quickly.

J. DWYER: And you put me right into my next question. You know how important I think the PRIDE program is, especially in Indigenous communities. Is it a part of meeting the demand for the PRIDE program?

J. ABBOTT: We're pretty well close to that. I mean we'd like to be able to do it more expeditiously as somebody expresses or a group of people express an interest and then it's just making sure we get the trainers in place and supported by some online training as well.

J. DWYER: And it is prevalent in Indigenous communities?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, it's working but, as I said, we –

J. DWYER: Slow.

J. ABBOTT: To address the child protection needs and welfare needs in those communities, anywhere on the Island, as well having the training in place is critical. I meet with the Foster Families Association and a great working relationship but their only ask of the department, generally, is to make sure that there's training in place to expedite the families that want to support the program.

J. DWYER: How many children are currently placed in group homes such as Waypoints? Is this number trending up or down?

J. ABBOTT: I don't know if we have that number right here tonight but we can get that to answer your question on the trending on that.

J. DWYER: I appreciate that.

Are we promoting Indigenous adoptions among their communities? That's the reason why I brought up the PRIDE program a little bit earlier because there was a trend that they were coming out of their communities, but I think the impetus now under both governments – under the several governments, I guess – that we would try as hard as we could to keep them in their community.

J. ABBOTT: Yes, and the main focus here would be more kinship arrangements as opposed to a formal adoption that we would have, say, in a white community.

J. DWYER: Can that turn into a formal adoption?

J. ABBOTT: If that's their wish –

J. DWYER: Okay.

J. ABBOTT: – but, again, because of the cultural differences that arrangement tends to work best, not unlike – I'll be careful how I say this. In outport Newfoundland, it was very common for extended families to raise the child and everybody knew who the child's parents might be but they also knew who the effective parents actually were.

J. DWYER: My grandfather was named Jack Coady O'Keefe. He was Coady but he was raised by the O'Keefes and his parents died in a house fire. So I appreciate that.

Are we still removing Indigenous children from the community because there was a shortage of foster homes?

J. ABBOTT: No, that sounded too absolute. Not to say that that hasn't happened, but as I said if there's a child moving from the

community, it's not generally a shortage of resources but it's seen as the best interest of the child for the emotional supports, other supports. As I said, that number is coming down very quickly because we are able to support, with the Indigenous communities, making sure the supports now are in place in the community to keep the child in the family, if not certainly in the community.

J. DWYER: How long does it take for the department to act on a recommendation, like an immediate recommendation from either the Child and Youth Advocate or one of the front-line social workers?

J. ABBOTT: In what context?

J. DWYER: About foster families in what their needs would be, if they come across a unique case.

J. ABBOTT: Based upon my knowledge and past experience, it would be done in real time. As that need is identified the social worker – I mean they have the full responsibility and power and authority. The zone manager calls the shots. He or she decides, with the caseworker, what happens. We provide the policy direction but it all stops there. So it's very localized in the decision-making.

J. DWYER: Okay.

Thank you, Madam Chair. I feel like a teacher leaving all this time on the clock.

CHAIR: MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: Thank you.

That's good.

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

CLERK: 3.1.01 to 3.1.03 inclusive.

CHAIR: Shall 3.1.01 to 3.1.03 inclusive carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Carried.

On motion, subheads 3.1.01 through 3.1.03 carried.

CHAIR: We need to take a five-minute break now.

Recess

CHAIR: Okay, I ask the Clerk to call the next grouping.

CLERK: 4.1.01 to 4.1.03 inclusive.

CHAIR: 4.1.01 to 4.1.03 inclusive.

MHA Pardy.

C. PARDY: Thank you, Chair.

We're going to bring it home.

J. ABBOTT: The Easter Bunny waits.

C. PARDY: Yes.

4.1.01, Salaries: The department did not spend approximately \$1.38 million in salary.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

C. PARDY: Was it layoffs?

J. ABBOTT: No, because our caseload numbers were less than budgeted or anticipated. We didn't have the same level of staff that we would've anticipated, based on caseload.

C. PARDY: That would mean that the numbers were trending down?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

C. PARDY: Can you quantify that?

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, so we were budgeting on a caseload of 22,000 and we are on, over the past year, and that's stayed constant, at 20,500.

C. PARDY: Okay.

Purchased Services, 4.1.01: \$144,000 to \$50,000 back up to \$144,000.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, so again, because the caseload was down the number of staff associated with that were down, then the requirement for supplies and the like. Within this group, coming out of COVID, we had a number of people working at home and we're continuing to pilot that at this time to see if we can continue that for the long term. Consequently, their use of supplies and services is down as well.

C. PARDY: Your anticipated might be able to rise or you're just being precautionary in your anticipation?

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, it's precautionary.

C. PARDY: 4.1.02, Allowances and Assistance, a \$10-million drop.

J. ABBOTT: Yes, so again, because the caseload numbers from what we had anticipated were down.

C. PARDY: Okay.

Is it they're down because of the supports and interventions that you may have utilized?

J. ABBOTT: There are a number of factors. I want to be able to say that in the future for sure, based on the youth and employment pilot that we have in place, but I think the economic circumstances of the province are better. Minimum wage has increased. Those kinds of things are all playing into this.

If you look at our distribution of our caseload and it has changed dramatically from when

– even I think it has changed from when our Committee Chair was minister to where we are today; 75 per cent of our caseload are single adults. It used to be single mothers with children. That's a much smaller number now than in the past. So it's the single adult is our biggest –

C. PARDY: Without children?

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, I should say roughly 75 per cent of our caseload.

So a number of them have been on – and I don't have the numbers here in front of me, but how long a lot of those individuals have been on, there's a large percentage that have been on for an extended period. So what we have focused on is for youth who are approaching us, shall we say, into employment or education.

C. PARDY: Any notable trend in demographics of these? I know they are single males, when I say about the age-wise –

J. ABBOTT: Now we have that, but I don't have it here in front of me.

C. PARDY: Would you have a breakdown rural, urban?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

C. PARDY: You'd have that as well?

J. ABBOTT: I don't know if we have that here, but we can have that, yes.

C. PARDY: That would be nice.

J. ABBOTT: We have a lot of very good statistics on our client group.

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

It might seem like a difficult question; would you have a plan for the food bank usage

and the amount of food bank usage? That might seem like a strange question.

J. ABBOTT: No, fair enough.

C. PARDY: I know where we are with it.

J. ABBOTT: We've had a lot of conversations in the department around that because obviously food banks should be, I'll say, a provider of last resort. But we also recognize that the communities that are operating food banks are providing a very valuable service, so we have gone out over the past number of months to have conversations with the food banks to ask them what supports they need and how we can provide that support to them.

Interestingly enough, there weren't big asks. The trend within the food banks is the donations are down, their costs are up and the demand is up. So we'll work with them to make sure that they have the resources they need to operate. At the same time, which is what is driving that – and we recognize that people need more financial resources to buy the food they need. So we're obviously conscious of that through our income support and other supports to make sure we can do just that.

C. PARDY: I guess these would be from households with the most severe food insecurity?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

C. PARDY: That's the trend.

How many people in the department, of this percentage, or the number that you referenced, you would be securing or clawing back the COVID payments from?

I know there was quite a number in my district that they thought they were entitled to it. They took the payments, but now they're ...

J. ABBOTT: That would be a federal responsibility, not ours.

C. PARDY: Oh, I realize that but it was impacting our clientele which are our –

J. ABBOTT: We had a very small number of people that, shall we say, applied and received benefits for both. The number in the department was, at the time, just over 200 in total. So then we would work with them if they got – quote, unquote – overpaid for income support. If they are still on income support, then we would do a reduction of 5 per cent of their payment, at most.

C. PARDY: And only 200?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, just over 200, I think, in that category. It was a lot of talk but the actual numbers were very – and that speaks to the diligence of how we enroll people in the program. We make sure we do due diligence on their applications and things like that. So there is good information sharing between ourselves and the federal government on who is getting what benefits and to avoid that.

There is nothing worse than somebody who is on income support and there is a – quote, unquote – overpayment.

C. PARDY: Yeah.

J. ABBOTT: Because they need future payments to meet their daily needs but, at the same time, we have to be stewards of that program to make sure that if there were overpayments that we get that money back in a reasonable way and in a reasonable time period.

C. PARDY: You mentioned 5 per cent, was it?

J. ABBOTT: Yeah.

C. PARDY: Five per cent would be the max.

J. ABBOTT: And \$25 a month would be the max.

C. PARDY: Yes.

We had the Food First NL Community Food Helpline that shut down. Any comment on that?

J. ABBOTT: We have worked closely with Food First NL, in terms of the emergency services and what have you that sort of sprung up through COVID. They were obviously of great assistance to the community and to ourselves to make sure that people got food and what have you. But different programs and services have evolved, the 211 line for instance, so we're going to make sure we use that and that gets supported.

We're making sure the food banks are all tied in and everybody has the right information there and that the other community agencies that are involved, shelters and what have you, that they are fully resourced to make sure they had food in place to support their clients. We're not anticipating any disruption in that service.

C. PARDY: Okay, good.

CHAIR: The Member's time has expired.

MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: Thank you.

With regard to the caseloads, I think in the question regarding spending and salaries, you said 22,000 and now it's down to 20,500, and that refers to the number of recipients on income support?

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, that would be the client. If you look at then the family unit, that number then is 27,500, 28,000 people in total that would be reliant on income support.

J. DINN: So that's actually reduced then. That number there is down to 20,500, correct?

J. ABBOTT: Clients, yeah.

J. DINN: Clients, okay.

So has there been any determination as to why we reduced? Like, I'm assuming these clients are on a list and then they're no longer on a list. They're collecting income support; they're no longer collecting income support.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, so there's a certain percentage that rotate in and out of the program depending on economic circumstances for themselves and in the community. Because the employment prospects – if we look at the fishery over the last two fishing periods, I mean, there was a lot of need for workers in the communities. The demographics, in terms of the number of people coming into the program, is lower than in the past. The number of people exiting because of age would be higher than in the past, i.e., moving on to the Old Age Security, GIS system. So you are putting all those factors together, then that's where we are now in that. That's been consistent now over at least the past 12 months.

J. DINN: Okay.

I think a comment was made about the economy has improved, so here is my question then. Because by the sounds of it, there are some that are rotating in and out, probably to do with the economic factors. There are others who are aging out of the program. That has nothing necessarily to do with the economic program.

J. ABBOTT: No.

J. DINN: I'm just wondering, is there any data as to those leaving to assess why? Because it's one thing if it's an economy or if some are just moving out of the province, they've got a job opportunity and some are

pulling up stakes, if it is because they're aging out. Any sense of tracking that, finding out what's going on or are they availing of other programs? I think you mentioned, too, that the income support for children and for youth. I would assume some of those – would that have reduced the numbers as well?

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, again, they're all small increments, but the total says that the trend is sort of consistent there. But for those that are rotating in and out of the program it is the availability of jobs – it would be largely in the service sector – and the enticement to stay in and keeping benefits. For those who can keep their drug card and whatever for a year and that, along with the minimum wage jobs, as it were, that minimum wage has gone up, people then are more inclined then to stay with their employer.

J. DINN: I think you talked about the reduction in salaries was significantly under budget because of that. What happened to that staff? Were they reassigned, laid off?

J. ABBOTT: Some of them would've been temporary based on as the caseload fluctuates, but definitely there were no layoffs there or contemplated.

J. DINN: I look at this from a workload student-teacher ratio point of view and apply it to this. Was there any consideration given, okay, we've had a reduction in the number of cases, but rather than layoff the temporary workers, we can reassign them maybe towards addressing the other issues, maybe relieving the workloads of those there, rather than looking at it purely numerically?

J. ABBOTT: Well, again, most of those they would be in, I'll call it, an almost clerical role taking applications, processing those, and then forwarding them on to the social workers and the authorizing person in the department who would then would sign off on those.

We were able to use those clerical staff in other positions as required in the department. Part of it is people who did not come back through COVID, i.e., moved on and just didn't come back to the department because we didn't need them for this period.

J. DINN: Well, I certainly would appreciate that and I certainly would appreciate the breakdown not only of where they are but those who left, just to get an idea of the trend as to why they're out of the system, which is fine if it works out that they've moved on and gotten better lives.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah.

J. DINN: 4.1.02, Income Support Program and Policy: Has there been any progress on increasing the uptake for the Mother Baby Nutrition Supplement program?

J. ABBOTT: There's been an increase over the past year. We continue to promote that program to the front lines through Public Health and elsewhere. There are two parts of the program. One that we administer directly, which is for, I'll call it, pre-birth and then, after the birth, there is the credit that is administered through the Department of Finance. So identifying young mothers early is the challenge we have because we don't necessarily get to them until it's later on in the pregnancy, if at best.

J. DINN: Thank you.

I'm sorry, go on.

J. ABBOTT: I'm just saying we had a series of things that we have done, as I mentioned, to promote this program.

J. DINN: How much of that money that was allotted for the program supplement was actually spent?

J. ABBOTT: We're about 50 per cent of that program right now.

J. DINN: And is that where you expected to be?

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, well, that's where we are. Will we spend the full amount? I don't know, probably not, but we're aiming to do that.

J. DINN: Okay.

Would that be available to newcomers?

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: Okay, good. Thank you.

Has there been a review of the income and eligibility thresholds for the provincial drug card program under the Access Plan?

J. ABBOTT: No. Again, we, as multiple departments, Health, ourselves and a couple of others, are looking at all these programs to look at the financial thresholds, what makes sense in today's dollars and how we can improve access to those programs.

J. DINN: Okay, thank you.

How many hearings did the Income and Employment Support Appeal Board hear last year and what was the average time it took for a case to be processed in its entirety from internal review to hearing?

A. DOODY: So the appeal board heard 12 hearings in '22-'23. I don't have the duration for each appeal.

J. DINN: Thank you.

J. ABBOTT: It's generally a very short time because we try to process those as quickly as possible.

J. DINN: Thank you.

How many people availed of the bus pass program last year?

J. ABBOTT: The number is around 7,000, and we're continuing to promote that program. We're still having discussions with the city and Metrobus how we can expand other groups into the program.

J. DINN: Would that expansion include communities on the outside, like Portugal Cove-St. Philip's? The problem that came to us last year is that people from outside communities were using it. They were getting a drive into the city and then using the bus. It's basically paid for by the city but you had to be a resident of the city to access the GoBus.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, we're still having those conversations and how we can expand, I'll call it, our client group. But there is a larger discussion needs to be held. I think the Member for Conception Bay South has talked to it today, around how we look at a larger urban transportation system for, I'll call it, the Northeast Avalon. As I've said to him, I think my department would like to be able to see more of our client group get access and I think we are providing financial supports to the purchase of busses for the city. Now the question is then, how can we expand that to the Northeast Avalon? But it's going to be contingent on Metrobus coming forward with a proposal and a plan and then asking what is the financial support needed to make that work.

J. DINN: I would support that 110 per cent. No problem on that one.

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

MHA Pardy.

C. PARDY: Thank you, Chair.

Has the department done any analysis on the minimum basic income on the social determinants of health that he may not have shared with the All-Party Committee on Basic Income?

J. ABBOTT: You know what I know. Yes, I think is the simple answer. We looked at it in the context of the official poverty line and that would be seen certainly as a minimum.

C. PARDY: Yeah.

J. ABBOTT: What I've asked our folks to do is in looking at any of the cohorts that we support, so starting up with this youth pilot program, what is the level of income that youth would need to survive basically relative to the poverty line. So we did all our program design, the financial design in particular, based on that. So we looked at other cohorts, persons with disabilities, young mothers and what have you.

We are doing that type of analysis and then we wanted to look at what financial supports we would have to provide, what other benefits that the federal government is providing to allow that to happen. That will be some of the work we will bring to the All-Party Committee at the appropriate time.

C. PARDY: So you did the same thing for the income, for those on income support.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

C. PARDY: So I know we had an increase of 10 per cent last year, 5 per cent this year which is a total of 15 per cent. Would you have done the analysis to find out what the net loss would be? How much? That didn't cover it, but how much more would be needed to cover the cost of living –?

J. ABBOTT: Yes, so we would have that and we're waiting for the latest information that's develops that poverty line calculation for each of the jurisdictions and then we'll take that and then apply it back to each of our, I'll call it, cohorts for each group that we deal with.

C. PARDY: Then you'll adjust accordingly? You will make (inaudible) –

J. ABBOTT: Yes. To me, that's going to be a large part of the discussion we will have in our Committee is alright, what does this all mean? Are we focused on the right cohorts and the right numbers, shall we say? Then, who fills in that financial gap?

C. PARDY: Thank you, Minister.

Amendments were made to the *Children, Youth and Families Act* in '21.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

C. PARDY: Has the department done any analysis to see if they are meeting their intended objectives?

J. ABBOTT: So the main focus of those amendments was really around making sure that our programs and services, when it comes to children and interventions, were seen, i.e., from the best interest of the child, particularly for our Indigenous communities. As I said at the outset and in a couple of other questions earlier, we are seeing certainly improvements in the number of children coming into care. That number is coming down. The number of Indigenous children coming into care is coming down. So we're seeing that that's working, looking just at those numbers.

What's more important is that the supports for the social workers involved, that they are supported and they have the program supports in place to work with families. We are focused on making sure that that is working to the best of our abilities. The only real constraint we're having is around the number of social workers that we would like to have versus what we currently have, because that will help make sure we provide more timely supports to the families with the children in care.

C. PARDY: You have a committee or there's a committee ongoing between NAPE and CSSD in dealing with the social worker issues.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

C. PARDY: Can you update us on that or give us —?

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, it's going well. We're taking each of the issues and addressing those. Some of them are through workplace issues around location of services, where we have individual social workers, how we make sure they can work together or be brought together? Do they have technology supports? Those kinds of things. We're addressing each of those.

Again, we put in the retention and incentive bonuses. That is working well. Again, if we hire more social workers, that would take the load off the others. What we're trying to be cognizant of is that if there's workload stress then that's going to lead to burnout, burnout leads to exiting our system. We're very conscious of that and we're trying to minimize those negative aspects of the work that is so critical for our department.

C. PARDY: You had an announcement in St. John's Centre, I believe, at one point in time, that you had a pilot where, for those who could find or secure work, you would extend their benefits for a period of time.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah, so it's over time. So there's no definitive like 12 months, two years; it's based on how they earn income and then we have a formula that our income support will be reduced over that earning period, not a calendar time frame, shall we say.

C. PARDY: How many people were involved with this pilot?

J. ABBOTT: Initially now we're up to 189 youth that are involved in the program. Even though we're calling it a pilot, and I know we've used this term before, I want to as quickly as possible drop the word "pilot" and just amend that program based on the results we have.

Right now, we've already 10 individuals who've dropped out of the income support program because they have the supports that they need to stay in place.

C. PARDY: I missed the link. This is the youth income support and that has to do everything with that program, not the general population we'll say that would be getting income support. Just the youth program.

J. ABBOTT: Yes. As I said, we want to expand because that's where, i.e., new entrants coming into the program, we want to address whatever needs they have right upfront.

C. PARDY: Good.

Three quickies now in my time, so at least I don't have to come back. Under 4.1.03, Professional Services, I know it dropped \$25,000 under revised.

J. ABBOTT: So in this case the reduction and the savings was due to that we did not do the Purchased Services in terms of our planning activity that had budgeted. We're doing most of that now in-house, because we were looking that we might have to contract work outside but we've done that in-house.

C. PARDY: Okay, but at the same time now Purchased Services, there's an extra \$25,000.

J. ABBOTT: In terms of that, the overrun was the result of additional costs associated with public consultations that we did in developing the plan. So we're renting hotel space, conference rooms and the like and providing some support to participants that would be on low income to attend to those consultations.

C. PARDY: Okay, good.

And finally the Grants and Subsidies, you had an extra \$329,000 spent last year and I

know the amount increases to a whopping \$3.7million this year.

J. ABBOTT: So you may recall the Minister of Finance had allocated \$5 million to community agencies and then that money was allocated out to the departments in a prorated basis and then we allocated that to the community agencies.

C. PARDY: Okay.

My final time, and I'll end there, you had mentioned in your Estimates last year, you talked about a Social and Economic Well-Being Plan which is on the way, and I'm well aware of that. This will include leading practices in poverty reduction and focus on factors that impact social and economic well-being. The plan is going to fully align with the Health Accord. When would you expect that plan?

J. ABBOTT: Well, where we are now, I'm seeing probably in the fall because one of the things that's, I'll say, dragging the puck on this a bit longer than I had anticipated is that we are having a lot of conversations now with the Health Accord office and aligning what we're doing with their well-being theme and we don't want to have, i.e., two plans out there, so we need to align what we were doing, which was probably a little bit narrower than what the Health Accord was talking about.

We're having a lot of conversations and analysis done so that we can align those, working with Pat Parfrey and his office and ours and Health and Education and others to do that alignment, so that's taking a little bit more effort than we had thought.

C. PARDY: This side concludes.

CHAIR: Okay.

MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: Thank you.

With regard to the program for the youth in care, I understand it's not a pilot, so I'm assuming the department's intention is to keep this, this will grow and expand and be tweaked. So it's not a matter of looking at it ending at some point and doing an analysis, but the intention here is that as we move forward, we'll tweak it.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah.

J. DINN: Good, that's positive.

Is it possible to have an update on how the new Employment Support Stability Pilot Project is working?

J. ABBOTT: As I said, the early sort of success on that is that, as I mentioned, there were 10 individuals who were enrolled who have now been moved out of the income support program. We can provide some further details on that, though it is early, but just in conversation with the two agencies involved, Choices for Youth and Stella's, what they see is that through the benefit, they're able to provide some basic supports to the individuals enrolled, i.e., I need gas for the car to get to work; I need somebody to call me to get me up to go to work. What we call some very simple things that we need clothing or those kinds of things to attend an interview to go to work. So some very, what I would call, soft costs there.

Then there's counselling, as needed, to help the individual from, I'll call it – my word here, not theirs necessarily – a capacity that how to present themselves to an employer, how to continue to work in an employment situation that they've never had before. From accountability, you do need to show up at 8 or 9 and you do need have to stay until 4 or 5, those kinds of things. So the employer then also can work with those agencies to say, look, yes, there's a challenge here and let's work together to solve it for the interest for their new employee.

J. DINN: Is there any consideration of trying it with older age groups, adults?

J. ABBOTT: There have been different programs over time that have tried that. That's something I would like for us to move into, once we've got this particular component sorted out. Because that's going to be our only true success. Again when we talk about economic and social well-being that it is supporting individuals so they can maximize their financial return so they can meet their cost of daily living and private employment or employment is the key to that.

So, for example, as I mentioned, in our caseload numbers we have a number of people that rotate through. Obviously, we want to make sure that they will continue in the workforce for a full year, for two years. So that would be the next group that we could and should need to focus on.

J. DINN: Good idea, thank you.

4.1.03, Social and Economic Well-Being: Many of the recommendations that are coming out of the Health Accord have to do with the social determinants of health. In the short- to medium-term, are there any particular planks of the report that the department is looking to implement?

J. ABBOTT: I'll say yes, because again in the budget we've provided – the housing, for me, was certainly critical to that. Working with in terms of age-friendly communities, both the work our department is doing and working with the Department of Municipal and Provincial Affairs. So we want to work with the municipal sector on that. We're looking at from a training point of view, an education point of view, what we can do and the other aspect is around children.

The Health Accord talks about sort of integrated, comprehensive health and community services programming for children, so we now have an integrated child health model that we have now started

to put in place so that any agency that's dealing with children or any individual that's dealing with children and crosses multiple departments, there will be one agency that they will now deal with and support. So that's now a work in progress but the policy direction has been set.

J. DINN: Community centres provide – and I may have written you an email on that recently – a valuable service in addressing the social issues that would otherwise become problematic for government. I can tell you they probably do a lot of work to prevent issues that become problematic for schools. We can see the benefit there.

J. ABBOTT: Yeah.

J. DINN: However, they are woefully underfunded and their funding is not keeping up with inflation. Has there been any consideration given to increasing their core funding or tying it to inflation, and even the idea of, as benefits, like looking at least at exploring the idea of expanding whether it's the health plan that's with the public employees and the pension plan. There's an option here to expand it without costing the plan or making it stable.

J. ABBOTT: So a couple of things there, I just recently met with representatives of the community centres. We talked about many of the things that you just mentioned. I've asked them for a proposal, as I put it, for success. What resources and what approach do you need and what support do you need from the Housing Corporation or the department or government generally to be successful? So they're going to go away and look at that.

I've asked them: What are some opportunities in the City of St. John's, for example, that they could expand their services? So in your district, Jim, and in mine, there are two possible locations that we could look at. They're going to do that. I've had some earlier conversations around the issue and there has been some work

done by the Community Sector Council. What processes and opportunities are there for the community sector to be able to have broader benefits, such as you mentioned, such as group insurance and pensions, and what would that look like and what would be the mechanics to do that.

As part of that, I did have a conversation with Provident¹⁰, as an example, and nobody shut the door on that at this point, but it's going to take a while to get us there. I think there are some opportunities to do that.

J. DINN: Excellent.

The plan is fully funded (inaudible) and there's a co-pay piece.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: It shouldn't drain the plan.

I assume then – you had mentioned to me before, we had talked about satellite community centre. That's still very much in play.

J. ABBOTT: Yes.

J. DINN: Okay, thank you.

I just have two questions, Chair, and I hope you'll give me some leeway and then I'm done. Could we have an update on the work done by the Happy Valley-Goose Bay Action Team and are there any long-term strategies and solutions in the works for them?

J. ABBOTT: So the Action Team is still very, very, very active in Happy Valley-Goose Bay and there are 14, 15, 16 community agencies involved, including Indigenous government representatives. We are still with them working on how we address the immediate needs of individuals who are homeless. We are looking at both shelter supports, supportive housing supports, other community supports,

supports by the former health authority in terms of mental health and addiction support. We're talking to the Innu because they're interested in detox services, those kinds of things. So there are a lot of things in play, a lot of funding in place to deliver on that.

At the same time, as mentioned in the Housing presentation, we have, in this year's budget, put money aside to build a new integrated housing and homeless hub, building on the current model, but expanding that and bringing more community services under one umbrella to make sure we can provide more comprehensive services. I'll be careful because folks in Labrador may not see it the way I do here, but it's looking at the work that The Gathering Place has done, that type of approach, and modeling something similar for Happy Valley-Goose Bay.

So that's in play. We're working with the town to make sure that they see it the way that we do. Now, at the same time, there are going to be some immediate challenges for people who are homeless. Well, no, I'll step back. People who are coming in from other parts of Labrador who have a home but come into Happy Valley-Goose Bay for a certain part of the year to live but there are some social issues that obviously have arisen, so we're working with the community, we're working with the various governments, both federal and ourselves, the Nunatsiavut Government, the Innu governments and NunatuKavut to make sure we pull our resources together to support those individuals while they are – quote, unquote – in town.

That's why the hostel numbers have increased over that period, the reliance on the Labrador Inn increased in that period, more social issues arise in that period. But we're, as a government, very committed to supporting the community in addressing those issues. Money is not the issue; it's just making sure we have the right supports in place.

J. DINN: Thank you.

Now, I just have one question and I'm done. When evaluating the effectiveness of a particular initiative that is offered by the community sector and funded by the department, do you use a standard particular rubric or a process – I guess how do you evaluate whether it warrants the support?

J. ABBOTT: The way I've approached that – because obviously we get quite a degree of representation both from existing agencies and those that are in the formative stages. What we're focused on, obviously, is outcomes and how we improve the life, whether it's dealing with children, youth or adults. The focus now on a go-forward basis will be we have the Health Accord and it has a wide range of recommendations built on a fairly significant body of evidence and analysis.

What I'm saying to organizations now is if you can find your way into the Health Accord and have a solution to the many recommendations that they have made, then we have the basis of a conversation. Then we will develop different proposals together and an evaluation framework against that to deliver on what we've committed to.

Many of the agencies that we have currently in place are already there, but now we're just going to fine tune that alignment so that the government, as a whole, whether it's our department or others, can say look, yeah, we can support you because you are obviously trying to help the government deliver on one of its significant initiatives, which is the Health Accord.

J. DINN: Thank you, that's it.

CHAIR: Okay.

I'll ask the Chair to recall the grouping.

CLERK: 4.1.01 to 4.1.03 inclusive.

CHAIR: Shall 4.1.01 to 4.1.03 inclusive carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Carried.

On motion, subheads 4.1.01 through 4.1.03 carried.

CLERK: The total.

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

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Carried.

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

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

CHAIR: Minister, before we finish, do you have any closing remarks?

J. ABBOTT: I just want to thank everyone for their due diligence and holding us accountable. I appreciate the exercise, the questions and the support of the department and the Housing Corporation for my colleagues.

CHAIR: MHA Dwyer.

J. DWYER: I just want to say thank you to the minister and the Table staff for giving us this opportunity to look into this department. As we know, Children, Seniors and Social Development, Persons with Disabilities, Income Support and Newfoundland and Labrador Housing is obviously the most

vulnerable sector of our whole government. I think that you're very knowledgeable. Your ADM is fairly new; he has small but mighty shoes to fill.

But with that being said, I think the work of our Child and Youth Advocate and our Seniors' Advocate has been paramount to helping our province. I look forward to getting a disability advocate. Like I said, I just want to thank everybody for coming tonight, to make sure that we are looking out for the people who need us most here in this province.

Thank you.

J. ABBOTT: Thank you.

CHAIR: MHA Dinn.

J. DINN: Certainly, thank you, Minister, for your discussions. We will hold your feet to the fire for sure, but I do have to say from almost from the get-go, and as a former teacher, I will tell you that often the people who I know your department is dealing with, many are under severe stress and anxiety, whether it's financial and it's affecting other aspects. They're in crisis mode and we struggle at times to try to find solutions, but I do like the approach in terms of the pilot project – I'll call it youth pilot project, the youth in care. I think that's how you give people a hand up and certainly if that's something we can expand to more of the older adult population, that's fantastic.

I think also the more supports we provide for families, it's going to pay off in the school system and it's going to make for a healthier population. I still think, though – I'm going to put the plug in here for a guaranteed basic income – that that's where we need to head at some point to give that people stability.

Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you.

J. ABBOTT: Thank you.

CHAIR: The next meeting will be April 6 to consider the Estimates of the Department of Justice and Public Safety; it's at 9 a.m.

Can I ask for a mover for the motion to adjourn?

L. STOYLES: So moved.

CHAIR: MHA Stoyles.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Adjourned.

On motion, the Committee adjourned.