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(Hansard)**

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des débats
(Hansard)**

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**Standing Committee on
Finance and Economic Affairs**

Pre-budget consultations

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Tuesday 16 January 2024

**Comité permanent
des finances
et des affaires économiques**

Consultations prébudgétaires

1^{re} session
43^e législature

Mardi 16 janvier 2024

Chair: Ernie Hardeman
Clerk: Vanessa Kattar

Président : Ernie Hardeman
Greffière : Vanessa Kattar

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS**

**COMITÉ PERMANENT DES FINANCES
ET DES AFFAIRES ÉCONOMIQUES**

Tuesday 16 January 2024

Mardi 16 janvier 2024

The committee met at 1002 in the Retro Suites Hotel, Chatham.

PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS

The Clerk pro tem (Ms. Lesley Flores): Good morning, honourable members. In the absence of a Chair and Vice-Chair, it is my duty to call upon you to elect an Acting Chair. Are there any nominations? MPP Jones.

Mr. Trevor Jones: I'd like to nominate MPP Anand.

The Clerk pro tem (Ms. Lesley Flores): Does the member accept the nomination?

Mr. Deepak Anand: Absolutely.

The Clerk pro tem (Ms. Lesley Flores): Are there any further nominations? There being no further nominations, I declare the nominations closed and MPP Anand elected Acting Chair of the committee.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Good morning, everyone. Welcome to Chatham. I call this meeting of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs to order. We are meeting today to resume our public hearings on pre-budget consultations 2024, and I'd like to welcome everyone here. Thank you for taking the time out.

The Clerk of the Committee has distributed committee documents, including written submissions, via SharePoint.

As a reminder, each presenter will have seven minutes for their presentation. After we have heard from all presenters, the remaining 39 minutes of the time slot will be for questions from members of the committee. This time for questions will be divided into two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the government members, two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the official opposition members, and two rounds of four and a half minutes for the independent members as a group.

KARIS DISABILITY SERVICES

IRIS RESIDENTIAL INNS AND SERVICES

**CANADIAN UNION OF
PUBLIC EMPLOYEES**

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): At this time, I would like to call on the members from Karis Disability Services to please come forward.

Welcome. Please state your name for Hansard. You have seven minutes. I'll give you a heads-up about a

minute before your time finishes. You do not need to stop; it's just a heads-up so that you know that you only have a minute left.

Mr. David Petkau: Good morning, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. It's a privilege to be before you to advocate for a cause that transcends political affiliations and resonates with the fabric of our community, our province and our country; a cause that we have made bold steps to advance through a strategy articulated by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, under the courageous leadership of the Honourable Michael Parsa, that being the Journey to Belonging. This strategy is one that I and we collectively fully embrace, as it envisions a developmental services sector, supporting our communities most vulnerable, that:

- embraces family and community;
- promotes health, well-being and safety;
- desires to be responsive to changing needs;
- is person-directed and person-led; and
- most of all, is sustainable to provide for the needs of today and into tomorrow.

But this vision is one that is gravely at risk, not for the lack of vision, passion and expertise of a broad and diverse family of like-minded agencies, but rather through a slippery slope of a funding model that has not invested in existing supports so as to keep up with the pressures of an ever-shrinking dollar.

Perhaps it is no better illustrated than in the experiences of Ali—name changed, of course. Ali receives residential supports from Karis Disability Services here in Chatham, as well as other MCCSS-funded day supports. This contributed to a full and eventful life for Ali—a life that included being able to engage in activities out of home. It encouraged him to reach his personal and community goals and dreams. Sadly, this ended abruptly. Lack of funding caused these supports and opportunities to evaporate into the whirlwind of funding pressures.

What has this meant for Ali? It means the system has been unable to respond to him in a way that Journey to Belonging asks us to. Now Ali remains at home with limited staffing resources, unable to give back to his community, where once he was able to engage in his community in the way that he wanted to. You may think that some creative problem-solving can be engaged to find ways to accomplish these things for this one person, and you would not be wrong—if Ali was the only person this impacted.

In this community alone, this story is replicated in almost 50% of those whom Karis Disability Services provides residential supports to. In practical terms, this represents an unfunded pressure of some 18,000 annual hours of support. Even at a very conservative support ratio, this represents a funding pressure in the range of \$150,000 to \$200,000 for this need alone.

This is only one example of the community pressures that have been created through lack of adequate funding.

Karis Disability Services provides supports and services to some 1,800 of our fellow Ontario citizens, utilizing the talents and gifts of almost 3,800 direct support professionals, DSPs.

Dustin, who is here with me—give a wave back there—and who has graciously joined me here today from St. Thomas, is one of the 1,800 people who access Karis supports within the province.

We are grateful for the funding of the province. It has helped accomplish great things in people's lives. We appreciate Minister Parsa and his leadership and the staff in the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services as we struggle together to meet the needs of people, deal with pressures and often problem-solve around some very complex situations. We also recognize and are grateful that base funding over the last 15 years has increased some 19%. This is a meaningful investment that has helped provide direct support professionals with much-needed and deserved wage increases and that has attempted to meet the needs of rising program delivery costs. However, over that same time, the purchasing power of the dollar has shrunk some 35% to 40%. It is this gap, a \$26-million gap for Karis Disability Services alone, that brings us to this state of crisis.

1010

I can attest that our DSPs and leaders across the province have sought opportunities for efficiencies, employing new and assistive technologies, and developed service-partner relationships as much as possible to address this challenge. Our resources are now stretched beyond capacity to a crisis level.

We are committed to the Journey to Belonging. Unfortunately, reduction in services is real and threatens our ability to stay focused on the goal ahead. We fear that a lack of investment will force us into a custodial care model when citizenship, choice, self-direction and sustainability is our true goal.

To the committee: Please consider how a 5% investment into the developmental services sector will aid not just the sector but our society to live out the values outlined in the Journey to Belonging. Consider how it will help Ali and others like him to continue their journey to belonging.

A developmental services sector that is not in crisis has and will continue to invest back into the community and lead us towards a world defined by belonging and creative and meaningful partnerships. It will help create new opportunities for those waiting for services, of which there are some 16,000 individuals—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. David Petkau:—waiting for residential services. A sector not in crisis will be better positioned to welcome people back into the community who are inappropriately housed in homeless shelters, in hospitals and long-term-care homes, and to help people overcome critical housing challenges.

My name is David Petkau. I'm the executive director of Karis Disability Services, formerly known as Christian Horizons, for the south district, Oxford to Essex. I'm grateful for the opportunity you've given me to bring this before you and to reaffirm our commitment as a partner with you in the Journey to Belonging.

We understand the complexity of the challenge before you and appreciate your consideration of this 5% request to invest in the stability of a critical sector—a sector that, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, would be an expression of our “true measure.”

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you, David. That was perfectly on time.

Now I'd like to call on IRIS Residential Inns and Services—over to you. Please start with your name.

Ms. Anne Ryan: My name is Anne Ryan. I'm the executive director of IRIS. We operate IRIS House in Windsor. We house 66 residents with persistent serious mental illness, and they require supports to remain housed. Without this housing stability and ongoing system of supports, these individuals would be at risk of homelessness. By housing this vulnerable population, IRIS House is not only reducing human suffering, but avoiding expensive hospitalizations and accompanying policing, ambulance and justice costs.

We receive our funding with annual agreements with the city of Windsor through MMAH, under the Homelessness Prevention Program, and our current agreement expires March 31, 2024. There's no increase planned for the next two years. We need stable funding and an increase of 5% immediately and ongoing.

Our mission is to provide safe and supportive housing for persons with serious mental illness—schizophrenia is usually one, bipolar, schizoaffective disorder, manic depression, and psychosis. I've got a slide that has per diem comparisons. We've compared doggy daycare at \$40 a day for four hours and child daycare at \$70 a day. You have to pick up your child by 6 o'clock. If you're not on time, they fine you. At IRIS, we keep people longer, of course, and have to feed them supper and evening snack. We've also looked at Canadian prison average costs—\$340 a day—all the way up to long-term psychiatric hospitalization at the Toldo Neurobehavioural Institute locally. I've got figures that are two years old for \$1,190. We receive \$60, but we're currently spending \$69, and that leaves us to rely on donations each and every year that we may not receive or that are harder to receive.

What's so great about IRIS House is that we do medication assistance, so we foster that. We work very closely with psychiatrists. In the 20 years we've been open, there's a new thing called long-acting injections. What's so great about med compliance: Hospital admissions are down. We did a study where we had 10 years of our residents' hospi-

talizations. It was very intensive—10 years before they moved to IRIS House and 10 years post—and there was a huge reduction, like 16,645 days. In today's money, that's \$20 million, or two million bucks a year.

Our per diem history is abysmal, from \$34.50, but we're up to \$60 a day now, and there's a lot expected.

Our residents: Currently, the big winner of diagnoses is schizophrenia; then we have schizoaffective. A very small amount of residents have depression or bipolar, because the medications have grown leaps and bounds and they do really well.

We've helped 221 former residents. Again, the big diagnosis—140 had schizophrenia or schizoaffective. Back in the day, when there was affordable housing, a lot of our people moved to apartments, and then they would just need other programs for some monitoring—ACT; CMHA has a program. That hasn't happened in some time, but we've had 91 people go to apartments. These are our successes. Some return to family homes, lived with adult siblings, lived in dad's apartment in his garage or above his garage—those kinds of things. We were able to get them med compliant. Also, our pharmacy will deliver the meds weekly to anywhere our people go in the county.

We're here to plead for an end to our chronic underfunding. We need money immediately, and we've been proven successful.

I'd like to yield my time to Karen, the chair of the board, who is waiting patiently to tell us why she's our chair.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Go ahead. Please start with your name.

Ms. Karen Soulliere: I'm Karen Soulliere, chairperson of IRIS Residential Inns and Services. I experience pure joy working with this organization. I'm a family member of a person with a persistent serious mental illness. We've been looking for supports for this person for over 25 years. I've seen so many programs come and go, lots of money spent, and as a taxpayer and a person who directly and indirectly benefits from these dollars, it has made my heart very sad to see how much money is wasted. Since being at IRIS, this person has been out of hospital, doing extremely well. I'm the chairperson because I am so incredibly grateful, because our family has really transformed. All my energy and time was spent supporting this person up until he entered IRIS. Now I'm the second signer of every cheque that goes out of IRIS. I know where every dollar goes. Every dollar counts. I know how constrained the budget is. But I'll tell you, it has been absolute pure joy being a part of this program. We've had 21 years of success.

My only sadness comes from the fact that there's a year-long waiting list. There are so many people out there who approach me for their family member, wondering how they can get their person to do as well as my person. It's just very sad to let them know to get on the waiting list, but I don't really have any other answers.

Prior to a number of family members who got together to start and found IRIS, there was a lot of desperation in the community trying to support them in Windsor and get housing for them and keep them in housing and keep them from being addicted and on the street.

Anyway, I can't say enough about this organization.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Karen Soulliere: I'm directly impacted. I really hope that we can continue keeping our doors open into the future and that we will have an additional place, because there are so many people on the waiting list.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes the time for IRIS.

Now we will move to the presenter from the Canadian Union of Public Employees. Please start with your name for the Hansard.

1020

Mr. Fred Hahn: Thanks very much. My name is Fred Hahn. I'm the president of CUPE Ontario. Our union represents 290,000 workers who perform every public service imaginable in all parts of the province, including right here in Chatham. In this community, our members work in every school—public, Catholic, English and French. They work for the city—clearing the roads, ensuring safe drinking water—for public health, for the libraries, and for social service agencies. These are the same kind of jobs our members do in communities right across Ontario. It's why our members and our union is a great cross-section of the province.

CUPE members, like their neighbours, are dealing with the challenges of inflation: Thousands are struggling, and too many are worrying about the future of their jobs or perhaps losing their housing due to rising inflation; within the last six months, one in five has found a meal at a community organization like a food bank.

Like their neighbours, many CUPE members are left frustrated and angry over the lack of commitment to public services and the work they do. It's because, since the last Ontario budget, we've heard the following: The province's Financial Accountability Officer has reported underspending in the budgets for the services our members deliver in the billions. Your government has embarked on a plan to privatize hospital services, which study after study shows will poach staff from the public system and cost more. We're all living through the worst recruitment and retention crisis in public services in a generation, which, according to documents, you knew was self-inflicted and exacerbated by the illegal Bill 124. We're also living through growing intolerance and a rising tide of hate in our communities, resulting in increased instances of hate crimes being reported to police.

There are enough resources to invest in our communities and reverse these trends. In 2021, the budget forecast a \$20.2-billion deficit for 2023-24, yet the 2023 fall economic statement said the current forecast for the 2023-24 deficit is \$5.6 billion, a turnaround of a whopping \$14.6 billion. Either the government's estimates were way off or anticipated spending just never happened. Regardless, even the anticipated \$5.6-billion deficit is artificially inflated because the government set aside an extraordinarily high \$5.4-billion contingency fund, an unprecedented amount, completely out of step with the way we've traditionally done budgeting.

Ontario continues to spend the least for public services per capita when compared to all other provinces. If we spent just the average of what the rest of Canada spends per capita on public services, we'd have an additional \$57.1 billion in program spending for last year alone. Imagine what hospitals, child care centres, schools, developmental service agencies and mental health organizations could do with \$57 billion more in spending.

You might be thinking, "Where would that money come from?" Ontario also brings in the least amount of revenue per capita when compared with other provinces. If we simply aim to bring ourselves to the average of the rest of Canada, it would amount to an additional \$67.6 billion in revenue—\$10 billion more needed just to meet the average spending of other provinces.

Instead, your government is focused on cuts. Take, for example, communities around this area, in Chatham-Kent. According to our estimates, the province is planning program spending cuts of nearly \$150 million less annually in Chatham-Kent by 2025-26; that's tens of millions of dollars less for social services, education and health. It's clearly a problem when, according to CK News Today, Chatham-Kent needs an additional 33 family doctors just to properly serve the population, representing only part of a need in an already underfunded health care system. Add that to what we know is needed in long-term care for seniors, supports for kids in school and child care, and supports for the most vulnerable in our communities, and it's clear that this part of Ontario, like all others, can't afford more cuts. What we need is investment just to keep our heads above water.

The lack of funding is made worse by bad ideas. Take, for example, the creation of the Ontario Infrastructure Bank. The Ontario Infrastructure Bank was proposed in the 2023 fall economic statement, and it's a new name for an old idea: privatization. Ontario's first public-private partnership, or P3, happened in 2001 with two P3 hospitals, one in Brampton and one in Ottawa. Since that time, P3s have been roundly criticized by many—most notably, the Ontario Auditor General—who have all raised serious concerns about the risks associated with privatized infrastructure, the increased cost, and the lack of public transparency. Moreover, Brian Lewis, the former chief economist of the province, has basically said there's no need for this. An infrastructure bank has failed at the federal level. The current leader of the federal Conservative Party has promised to abolish the Canada Infrastructure Bank. It's surprising that the Ford Conservatives would attempt to emulate it here. You'll read more in our brief about why the idea of an Ontario Infrastructure Bank should be abandoned.

The lack of funding is leading to what so many are talking about these days: a staffing crisis in health care. A lack of funding is leading to a staffing crisis developing in municipalities, school boards, community centres, libraries, post-secondary institutions, and social service agencies. The problem is so acute that the Association of Municipalities of Ontario have developed an ongoing workforce development project aimed precisely at curbing staff

attrition in municipalities throughout the province. Fair pay that keeps pace with inflation is integral to fixing the many staffing challenges facing Ontario's public services. The province needs to increase funding specifically tied to wage increases to help stem the flow of talent and skill from the public sector.

Lastly, it's important to talk about the rising tide of hate in our communities and the significant number of hate crimes being reported to police. Public officials always express dismay and disappointment when these things are discussed, but words alone won't create safe and welcoming environments.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Fred Hahn: Communities need tangible things like funding for staff training, curriculum development and delivery, public advertising—all aimed at calming the temperature of rising hate, rather than fanning the flames.

Budgets are about choices—opportunities for the government to demonstrate that it understands the needs and demands of communities across the province. Our brief is filled with detailed recommendations, every one of which comes directly from consultations with our members on the ground in communities like this one. They're tangible ideas and choices that can be made so that this budget can improve the lives of regular working people in all parts of Ontario.

Thanks, and I look forward to your questions.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much.

At this time, we're going to start with the opposition members. You have seven and a half minutes. MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you to all our presenters who have come here today.

I'd like to start off with my questions for David and Karis Disability Services.

I want to thank you for mentioning how developmental services actually invest back into our community by having active, engaged and supported people within our community.

I want to also welcome Dustin to the room. Thank you very much for coming today, Dustin.

And I want to thank you, David, for sharing Ali's story. It puts into perspective what happens when the government does not fund these really vital, life-changing services properly.

My question for you, David: Can you outline for the committee what it would mean on the ground for families accessing these services if further cutbacks happen? What would that look like for a family?

Mr. David Petkau: What would it look like if further cutbacks happen? Well, I can tell you right now that in my umbrella area for Karis Disability Services, we're doing just that now—looking at current budgets, projecting 2024-25, and as I said in my presentation, the cuts are real. We are pulling back. We are cutting what families are expecting or have experienced and received in the past. These are reductions in opportunities for people to make choices in their life and access the community. It closes

the doors to new and creative solutions. Agencies like ours all over the province create unfunded spaces where they creatively open up the doors and say, “How can we help more people with what we have?”—thus, my point that a sector in crisis isn’t in a position to respond with that level of creativity.

A firm foundation would help those families experience, at the other end of their discussions with agencies, willing and capable people who do have their eye on the prize, on the goal, rather than being caught up in the challenges of the shrinking services and managing those expectations and trying to do with much less year over year.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: This committee has heard on a few occasions—and it’s something that we hear in MPP offices across the province—that the developmental services sector is requesting the 5% increase in funding; also, the base funding increase, but a 5% increase in Passport funding and Special Services at Home, and how this is really a system that is on the brink.

I want to thank you for your comments that a government, while sitting on a \$5.4-billion contingency fund—if they choose not to invest, they’re slamming the door shut on people.

So I want to thank you very much for coming today, David.

My next questions will be for Anne and Karen. It’s a difficult place to be in, with no funding commitment past March 1, 2024, especially when, as we’ve just said, this government has their \$5.4-billion slush fund.

1030

I also want to thank you for specifically mentioning the lack of commitment to affordable housing. We’ve seen a government that has chosen to leave that up to private industry, rather than taking an active role in creating those affordable solutions.

To Karen’s point: The 25-year wait for the DSO list is absolutely unconscionable. I think of family-directed alternative support services in my riding, seniors who are looking after adult children living with disabilities, and how unfair that is. Your per diem comparisons indicate what a cost-savings measure that is, and how much that is in comparison to so many other different ways. I think it’s very effective.

What is it like having to scramble every year for donations, when the government won’t contribute enough to look after individuals with mental health exceptionalities?

Ms. Anne Ryan: It’s difficult to maintain your momentum. We’ve become a training ground for staff to leave us to go to better jobs with pensions and things like that. There are no American chains in our sector, so we’re one of the two non-profits in our region, and the rest are for-profit.

To be honest, I have a master’s in economics and a do-gooder heart, but I don’t know how anybody makes a living as a business running the homes in our sector, so God bless them for trying. It’s really profound.

We had a position, when we opened, of a part-time activities person; we grew the role to full-time. Now that

job is eliminated, and we’ve shifted some of the outings. My day staff will take people on a day outing—or our night staff. We just received a grant for that, and it was very difficult to get—very tough competition—from our local community foundation, for admission and busing costs, so that we don’t have to start charging the clients or their families for outings.

We have this cute thing where we go to the movies once a month, and our bus driver is the same one—Fidel, for like 15 years. He took us to get vaccinated. He sits there, and if somebody gets triggered or is upset in a show, then he’ll be there. So we’re recruiting people who aren’t even our staff to act as such. We’ve got retired staff who volunteer to come to the movies, so I don’t have to pay somebody to go, if we want three attendants, but even the venues won’t give you free tickets for the staff who are there to help shepherd the people around. We’ve got hearing-impaired residents who need the device to go to the show and all those kinds of things, so we need the staff to accompany.

It’s tricky, and to keep your enthusiasm—I hope that you will remember me, the purple lady with the heart. It’s tough. To keep up that enthusiasm is really, really hard.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I just want to thank you for your good heart, and all of the folks who do wonderful work for the people in the community, although I don’t believe that it’s something the government should be—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: The government should not be relying on people to subsidize an underinvested segment.

I want to thank you very much for your comments today.

I’ll turn my last question to Fred. Fred, you mentioned that we are the richest province, yet we spend the least on people and on services. The government takes money from people, and yet it doesn’t come back. In fact, we’ve seen that the government is now investing in retrofitting ServiceOntario locations in Walmart as well as Staples, taking public money and putting it into private hands. I wonder if you could comment about that briefly.

Mr. Fred Hahn: This is a common thing that is now being discussed—that we’re retrofitting Staples stores and now, in fact, Walmart stores, profitable corporations, to deliver public services.

If you look at our brief, you’ll also see why an infrastructure bank would make no sense. They are calling on pension funds, for example, to invest workers’ money to build infrastructure, but those funds have to generate returns—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. We can have this beginning next round.

Now I would like to move over to MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you, guys, for coming in. In my next round, I’ll get to both of you, but I want to spend some time here with Fred.

Fred, you have the largest union in Canada with, I think, 290,000 members in Ontario. Congratulations on the job that you do for us, for your members every year.

I want you to take some time and talk to me about your organization pre-COVID, post-COVID, how Bill 124 has really crunched your resources, your retention of staffing, and how crucial it is for this government not to privatize health care.

Mr. Fred Hahn: Public sector workers have experienced about 15 years of various kinds of austerity, including various forms of legislation and other approaches that have kind of sat on public sector workers' wages.

Before the pandemic, there were already very stretched services. I'm a developmental service worker. I can attest to the fact that long before today, these services—social and community agencies—have been stretched very thin.

During the pandemic, our members went to work. A lot of them had no other option. Lots of folks called them heroes. In fact, many of them lost their lives due to poor planning and no personal protective equipment.

Quite frankly, the staffing crisis that was already evolving in places like long-term care and in health care—it's shocking to most people to recognize that we have nurses working in hospitals who don't have access to paid sick days. We have folks who give their lives helping community members adjust, whether they are living with a disability or whether they are dealing with mental health challenges, and yet they have no retirement income. These are shocking to people, but the crisis has actually gotten much worse.

On page 9 of our brief, you'll see a job vacancy chart that demonstrates that vacancies, particularly in places like hospitals and nursing homes, have continued to skyrocket. In fact, it's everywhere—in community agencies, in educational services. Before the pandemic, there were already shortages. The pandemic made things worse, and since then, the lack of funding and supports from government has only made matters worse. So there needs to be real investment.

Instead, the government's plan to have for-profit or private clinics performing health services; using a band-aid solution of paying agencies for private nurses instead of hiring and training nurses to work in the public system; talking about an infrastructure bank to build the kind of things that we need in our communities, like roads and bridges etc. but having to pay dividends of sometimes double and triple what they would have to pay if they had just borrowed the money—as a government, these are all bad ideas that actually make things worse.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Well, let's bring it home to the government. What do you really want to leave us with today?

Mr. Fred Hahn: There needs to be a really clear accounting. Putting a slush fund of \$5.4 billion aside as a contingency fund, unclear about how it will be used, is unacceptable when people are literally suffering in the province.

We need to raise revenue. If we just matched what the rest of the country did, we would have \$67 billion that we could invest. We could actually increase money for developmental services and fund mental health supports. We

could have EAs in every classroom. We could have municipalities have infrastructure. We could have our hospitals staffed. We could deal with care for seniors in long-term care. We could deliver affordable child care. All these things are possible. It takes political will and real choices of government to do the right thing to achieve them.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Moving on to the members of the government: MPP Dowie.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I want to thank all the presenters for being here.

I would like to start with Anne from IRIS House. Thank you so much for being here. I want to thank you for all the work that you are doing. It was such a privilege to visit you a few months ago and to see the great work that you are doing. If you weren't there in the community, I can't even imagine how the residents of IRIS House would be able to manage. Even if there was a home care type of scenario put forward, you provide a very efficient service in a building that has got quite a lot of history in our community. I think we all remember its past incarnations. There's a lot of history, a lot of attachment to what you do and the people who live there.

What an excellent presentation you've made, identifying the different types of services and the wages provided—sorry; not the wages, specifically, but the cost to deliver the service.

1040

I'm wondering if you could elaborate a bit on understanding that there have been some recent increases, but just not to where you need to be to break even, of sorts, to offer this kind of service. I'm wondering if you can give us a bit of history on this. Did you have years in the past when there was no increase, and how long did that funding stay dry when it happened?

Ms. Anne Ryan: It has only been the last—I think maybe 10 years ago, we were frozen for a few years, and then we started to get 2% increments, and inflation was maybe 3% or 4%. To be honest, if our per diem is 60 bucks, we expect to fundraise \$3 or \$4 a day, because we want to be the best home in the region and we want to treasure our residents. These last few years have been tough, and then we got this nice bump, and I thought: Great. And then I don't know what happened to the economy—inflation, inflation.

In January, we opened our invoices, and our cable TV people added a TV screen charge—because we have four TVs, so times \$8.99. We said, "What is this new charge?"

Our utilities won't come out and read, so the gas utility is charging us—they're guesstimating what we're going to use. We paid \$580 last month; they charged us \$1,124 for this month, as an estimate.

Our garbage company charged us a \$250 COVID fee during COVID. They took it off. But now they've crept back up. In 2019, our garbage monthly was \$250, and now it's \$500.

It's relentless. It's some sort of January gouge.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I want to get back into last year. I know the \$5 increase you received was a result of last year's budget. The city of Windsor and county of Essex

received an additional \$4.2 million to support the Homelessness Prevention Program, so the \$5 is from that. That was actually a direct result of the consultations that we had last year. I'm happy that this increase came about, because seeing the work that you're doing with the resources that you have is just incredible.

I'm wondering if you could elaborate for us how you receive your funding. Is it directly from the city of Windsor? How does the allocation get made?

Ms. Anne Ryan: Under our service agreement, we are compelled to collect the pension income of our people. Regardless of where they live, for all of our folks, of course, we're pre-screening, we're looking for acuity—we're looking to find our people, so to speak. They already usually have ODSP, and then they age out into Old Age Security, so we're compelled to collect that. So for the current \$60 we're getting, \$30 is from the folks. And then we invoice the city at the completion of the month.

Even though it's \$1.3 million our home is spending, our contract is only for \$700,000, because that's what we invoice the city for. I think the city pays \$24, and the county and Windsor split it; I think they're paying six bucks or something.

I've often thought, as soon as people move into our home, they're on the base ODSP—there is what's called a board-and-lodging rate, so it's \$846. If they lived in an apartment, they'd get, say, \$1,200; I'm not up on that. If that could be funded, but the city would just try to pay less—if you had some sort of legislation that said that they had to pass it on to us.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: How much time is left?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): About two minutes.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I'd like to continue.

In advance of this, you provided me with some of your figures. You mentioned the \$60 per diem, and you just mentioned the \$846 ODSP rent. And then you've got \$149 in the personal needs allowance?

Ms. Anne Ryan: Yes, and that's what the folks get to keep. So their cheques would be \$995. Some of them are able to do debit, and other ones—their families have to write cheques. We have about 20 who are with the Public Guardian and Trustee, so that's through the—I forget; the crown attorneys, I think, is where it comes from. We have a lot of people who are under that.

And the \$149—it's stuck. At our home, they're spoiled—or some might say. We try to make sure that they don't have any costs for all their outings. We have regular donors who donate pizza parties, things like that. I know our people can get by on the \$149; I don't know how anybody else does.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I know you're always endeavouring to fundraise in the community. At my former workplace, we had the weekly or monthly IRIS House lunch, which I remember I bought quite often.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I want to thank you for all your efforts.

I'll pass it off to MPP Byers to start.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): MPP Byers.

Mr. Rick Byers: Thank you, presenters, for being here this morning.

David, to you first: I hadn't heard about the great work you do in—and we can continue this in round 2. Describe a little bit more fully the work you do in the community and the kind of impacts you're having that are so important.

Mr. David Petkau: Certainly. It's a pleasure to do that.

Karis Disability Services rebranded last year from Christian Horizons, having about a 55-year history in the province, and now also serving in Saskatchewan. As mentioned, we support about 1,800 individuals; most of that is in community residences—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. You will have an opportunity in the second round.

Over to MPP Gretzky.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I want to thank you all for being here today.

The common theme I'm hearing from the presenters at the table currently—and I know this is a theme that has been coming up at all pre-budget consultation meetings—is the dire lack of funding, the shortfall of funding coming from the province.

I'm going to build on what my colleague MPP Kernaghan said. What we see is a government that is giving money to places like Walmart and Staples to retrofit for ServiceOntario locations. Some of those are small businesses, by the way, that have leases and contractual obligations that they're now going to have to cover because of this government's decision. They're investing in developers when it comes to the greenbelt, and yet here we have someone, Fred Hahn from CUPE, who has workers in many different sectors who are grossly underpaid because this government will not fund those sectors appropriately. We have, from Karis—again, grossly underfunded, when we're talking about a vulnerable population that should have adequate funding to be able to participate fully in our communities around the province, with the supports and services that they need in order to thrive. We have Anne from IRIS, who provides a health service, really—mental health services and supportive housing, two things where we are facing a crisis in this province. And this government is underfunding.

I want to thank you all for the work that you do advocating for the people you serve in all of the communities around the province. Oftentimes, those people do not have a voice, and you bring that voice to the table for them. I'm not sure if it's ever really listened to, but I appreciate that you keep trying.

Anne, I have a question for you. How many beds are like IRIS in our region, specifically?

Ms. Anne Ryan: When we opened in 2002, there were 455, and now there are not quite 300. Many of the small homes that have closed—there was sprinkler legislation that came through. There were liens put on the properties. You had to retrofit to do the sprinklers, but the home had to pay 25%. At IRIS, we qualified for something special: We were 100% covered.

So we've witnessed a lot of homes close, and at the same time, say we lost those 150 beds—I think those folks are out around downtown still, and now they're homeless. I don't really know what has happened, but it has been quite profound. I really think we should have been fostered—maybe we should have had 600 or 800 beds. Then maybe we wouldn't have so many homeless people on the street with MH and addictions and whatnot.

There are two really large operators that are for-profit, and they've had to double up all their rooms. We try to do single-room occupancy, but we've got 10 or 11 rooms right now doubled up. It's a financial thing. We have this wait-list. It's agonizing. Almost every week, we get a call, and, yes, it's tough.

1050

In this region, I think they have what's called homes for special care. So they've got kind of our funding, and they get to pad on some health money.

In Windsor, for whatever reason, our commissioner for social services at the time wanted to be more in charge of the housing in the region, so they went to this model that we are—it was dom hostels, then housing with supports, and now we're called residential services homes.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Can you give me the number again on the cost of a hospital stay per day?

Ms. Anne Ryan: If you're in acute care, which is PICU—so somebody is really psychotic—that's about \$1,400 a day. But the hospital didn't give me accurate figures. I had to google it—as to what you would charge someone out of province. So that's old; it's from 2021-22. It's very expensive.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: So keeping people in community in supportive housing is—\$60 a day is what you get funded for.

Ms. Anne Ryan: Yes, and the \$700,000—I'm asking for maybe an extra \$65,000 a year—will keep saving you \$2 million-plus. Even the ODSP rate is less. It's a bargain. If you're shopping for a bargain, we're it.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: You mentioned that a lot of your residents would be on ODSP. Everybody in this room knows, whether they want to admit it or not, that ODSP is well below the poverty level. We know that when agencies like yours have to rely on residents on ODSP, to be able to collect money from them to be able to stay there, you're constantly in a financial struggle.

It's interesting to me that my colleague from Windsor—Tecumseh was talking about \$149 a month left over. I would challenge anybody around this table to live on \$149 a month left over for spending. It's just not possible. You'd barely be able to drive here and back, from Windsor to here.

I'm going to pull two things together—David from Karis and Anne from IRIS. We talked about hospital stays and the PICU. There are people all around this province with developmental disabilities who do not have supportive housing—who are currently staying in hospital, in the PICU, which is not where they should be. The staff there are not qualified to be able to support somebody with a developmental disability. They're not trained to do it, nor

do they really want to do it. But it's not uncommon for people with developmental disabilities who aren't getting the community support they need—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: —to have hospital stays of 18 months, or two years or more, while they wait for a placement in community.

Do either of you know if the province tracks the number of people, whether it's with developmental or intellectual disabilities, or with mental health or mental illness issues—do they track the length of stay for those people in hospital, in PICU?

Ms. Anne Ryan: I think they do, but I don't know that I could get those figures for you. I think they actually try their best to not have long stays, so the fact that they're stuck with them—they think it reflects on them, but they just don't have a suitable placement. I know sometimes they'll perhaps discharge to a mediocre setting rather than—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes your time.

We're moving over to the independent. MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Anne, Karen and David, I've heard from many organizations like yourselves here over this past three weeks that we're in—with the funding crisis that you're in. Some organizations don't even know if they can make it through to 2024-25. There has got to be something wrong here, with so many organizations coming to this table and experiencing these same issues.

I want you to take a minute, or 30 seconds—I don't have a lot of time—and talk about, if you didn't get your 5% increase of the funding you're asking for, what are you left to do?

These are our vulnerable people you're looking after. The government needs to invest in our vulnerable people. They are part of the population.

Mr. David Petkau: People wouldn't have a choice in where they live. They wouldn't have a choice in who they live with. We would be forced to amalgamate services and, honestly, we'd probably head back to some kind of institutional mentality of services rather than a true community-based, belonging, inclusion type of mentality.

Just to be respectful of your time, that's a quick answer.

Ms. Anne Ryan: We'd have to look at paring down the services, reducing another staff person. We do have ratios that we have to honour. Even on the weekends now, we only have nine staff on over the course of a day. During the week, I have a bigger complement of staff. It's getting scary.

The other thing, maybe, would be to double up a few more rooms, but that would cause a lot of problems. We're sort of in a sweet spot with the few we've got doubled—we push the edge of what we could do.

Yes, it's tough.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Fred, I'm going to let you chime in here too. Let's say you walk away today and the pre-budget consultation is over and you didn't get the funding you're asking for. Where does that leave you?

Mr. Fred Hahn: I think it leaves our communities in a dire place. It means that people will have longer waits in

emergency rooms and hospitals. It means that kids in schools will not get the supports they need. It means that the vulnerable populations throughout our province will not get the kinds of supports they need. It means that there will be increasing pressure at post-secondary institutions.

None of this is necessary. There are resources available today, \$5.6 billion that could be spent, and there's money sitting on the table.

In our brief, we clearly articulate how corporate profits—corporations are doing really well, and good for them. That's part of what they're supposed to do—make profit. But they could share some of that profit to make sure that our communities are actually doing better, that our kids, our parents, our roads—that all the things we need and rely on, the things that we say we believe in as Canadians, are actually there for us.

And we need a government that will be strong enough to actually do what's needed.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I didn't hear from Karen. I want you to chime in on that question, as well.

Ms. Karen Soulliere: Part of our concerns is, the minimum wage has been increased. Because our staff are paid so low, when the minimum wage increases, we have to increase their wage as well. So that has also increased our costs. We've had another increase, I believe on October 1 as well, with minimum wage.

Like Anne mentioned before, we just train staff to go and work somewhere else. Our people are some of the most vulnerable, hard-to-serve clients in the area. It would be awesome to have some stability, where they have the same staff working with them most of the time.

I think that there was a good three-year stretch when we had no increases whatsoever, and then we had a bump. But we're still playing catch-up, so—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes the time.

Over to the members from the government: MPP Byers.

Mr. Rick Byers: David, back to you—just a little bit on the things you've done, as you were saying.

Mr. David Petkau: We have helped people back into the community from the deinstitutionalization over the years of our services. We have expanded our services to be in about 400 residential locations across Ontario, ranging from supported independent living to complex care in group living situations. We provide creative solutions through host family support services, accessing community through day supports, employment supports and a plethora of other things, all with the goal of helping people to be the citizen they deserve to be in our community.

Does that help you out?

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Mr. Rick Byers: That's terrific. Thanks for all that great work.

Your sources of funding: I think you mentioned MCCSS, but can you break down—do you do any fundraising yourself, or are other levels of government involved in funding your activities?

Mr. David Petkau: Developmental services and the services of Karis Disability Services are largely funded by

MCCSS. Yes, we do what we can in fundraising. Yes, we do have some partnerships with other sectors, like health—where mental health is a part of a person. Everything we do is centred around, “What does that person need, and what kind of community supports does that person require?” Our fundraising is wonderful, but it does not bring the level of stability that is needed in terms of our services to 1,800 people and the commitments that requires.

Mr. Rick Byers: That's excellent. Thank you so much for your work.

I'll pass the rest of the time over to my colleague MPP Leardi.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I have some questions that I would like to address to the representatives of IRIS House. I'm very appreciative that they're here today in Chatham.

I want to know about your source of funding—just confirming the source of funding. The funding comes from the city of Windsor, which receives their funding from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Is that correct?

Ms. Anne Ryan: Yes.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: So it flows from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to the city of Windsor, and then to your organization.

Ms. Anne Ryan: Yes.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: The previous budget for this particular area—I'm talking about Windsor and Essex county.

I should confirm that the service delivery body is the city of Windsor, for both Windsor and Essex county. Is that correct?

Ms. Anne Ryan: Correct. They're called the service manager for the program.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Okay. So we'll call them the service manager. That's the city of Windsor, which also serves my area—

Ms. Anne Ryan: They do also serve the county, and there's cost-sharing, so any per diem increase that's received also has to go to county council.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: My understanding is that before 2023, that package of funding that came from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing was approximately \$12.5 million. Is that correct?

Ms. Anne Ryan: Yes.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: And then in 2023, that package of funding was increased to \$16.7 million. Is that correct?

Ms. Anne Ryan: Yes.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Of course, you don't get the whole thing.

Ms. Anne Ryan: No. We're in competition, unfortunately, with the homelessness programs, and we have such a—when I participated in a PiT count, say, eight years ago, we found 200 people over two days; now there are maybe 600. So the city and the county are under pressure to pull funding from our programs to go to the street programs.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I understand that.

So in 2023, the package funding was increased by approximately 33%. That means it went from about \$12.5

million to \$16.7 million, and that was for all of Windsor and Essex county.

Ms. Anne Ryan: The whole region, yes, and then we received the \$5 per diem. What we're looking for is some sort of increment—not to be frozen again.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: But you don't determine what the per diem is?

Ms. Anne Ryan: No, sir.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: That's determined by the manager, which is the city of Windsor.

Ms. Anne Ryan: Yes.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Also, you spoke about many of your residents being recipients of ODSP, the Ontario Disability Support Program. And you don't have to collect that from them? That's an automatic payment directly to IRIS?

Ms. Anne Ryan: No, we have to collect it, and there's a burden on that. That's why many of them are with the public guardian—because we would not see it if they didn't collect it.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I agree.

Do they sign something with ODSP saying, "Yes, I consent to the payment being made directly to IRIS House"?

Ms. Anne Ryan: Yes, there's paperwork that a client and the home has to sign, on just a handful—but a lot of them, if they get their cheque independently, can sign it over to us. In other cases, the younger ones who are more savvy will pay with debit. We happen to have a debit machine for fundraising, to take credit cards over the phone. Now I use it to collect rent.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: That's very good.

The mechanism that you just have the residents sign to have the fee at your home be paid automatically out of ODSP—that's just a matter of signing a consent form, right?

Ms. Anne Ryan: Yes. It's like, even a fax cover sheet is sufficient—that they've moved to this new location and they're required to surrender their rent.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: When ODSP went up 5% and people consented to have that paid automatically, that extra 5% went automatically to your home?

Ms. Anne Ryan: Yes.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: It might have been just 5% on the housing portion, right?

Ms. Anne Ryan: Yes.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Not on the whole portion; just on the housing portion?

Ms. Anne Ryan: But then the city was able to pay us less, so that's why we argued for the per diem and why we got a big bump. So then, at the end of the month, when we rectified the billing, how many nights of care—then the city didn't have to pay.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Anne Ryan: They paid less. It was—I forget how much. They were \$747 before, and now they're \$846.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: That's the ODSP?

Ms. Anne Ryan: The ODSP piece, yes. It wasn't initially passed on to us.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: That was a decision of the manager?

Ms. Anne Ryan: Yes.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: There was another increase in ODSP, because ODSP is tacked to the rate of inflation. So my understanding is that that increase was 6.5% in 2023. Did that affect the housing portion that you receive?

Ms. Anne Ryan: It has been the same since, I think, July of last year, with the \$846. So there's no increase there.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: So, in total, the increase you received was 5% per day?

Ms. Anne Ryan: Yes.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Regardless of what other—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): This concludes the time.

I would like to say thank you to all the presenters for taking time and coming. This is the first time since 2000 we're doing it in Chatham—so, welcome to Chatham, I'm sure. It's all because of—I'm not going to go beyond that.

CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH
ASSOCIATION LAMBTON-KENT
ONTARIO STUDENT NUTRITION
PROGRAM—SOUTHWEST REGION
WINDSOR ESSEX COMMUNITY
HEALTH CENTRE

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Let's move on to the next presenters. Can I request the members of the Canadian Mental Health Association Lambton-Kent, VON Canada, and Windsor Essex Community Health Centre?

With that, we would like to start with the Canadian Mental Health Association Lambton-Kent. You have seven minutes, and I will give you a heads-up at one minute. Please continue; it's just a heads-up. Please start with your name for Hansard.

Ms. Rhonny Doxtator: My name is Rhonny Doxtator. I'm the acting CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association Lambton-Kent. On behalf of my colleagues across the province, thank you for allowing me to address the committee.

I would also like to thank the provincial government for showing its support for community mental health and addictions care last year by providing a 5% base increase to the sector. That increase was an infusion of infrastructure funding for our sector and helped to ensure we were keeping the lights on while continuing to provide the highest quality of care.

As the complexity of our clients and the demands for our services continues to grow, so does the wage gap between our sector and other areas of the health care system.

We urge the government to maintain momentum this year by providing another round of stabilization funding for our sector.

Like many of the municipalities across the province, our region is struggling with complex social issues. Mental health, homelessness and addiction has been cited by our

municipal leadership as one of the primary challenges facing our region. There are now more than 500 people experiencing homelessness in Lambton-Kent, and the number continues to grow. Close to 300 of these complex-to-serve individuals have been identified as chronically homeless, which means that they have been without safe, permanent, appropriate housing for more than six months.

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Our municipal partners have pledged to tackle these local issues. It's difficult for us to support them with new homelessness initiatives when we have limited resources and are struggling with a human resource crisis. The backbone of the community mental health and addictions sector is our dedicated and hard-working staff, yet when compared to others doing the same job in other health sectors, our staff are paid 20% to 30% less. These are nurses, social workers, psychotherapists and other allied professionals who help some of the most marginalized people in our community yet are not paid at an equitable rate.

While we appreciate the province's support of mental health initiatives in our community, often the funding for these programs neglects to consider the costs necessary to provide quality care. Consider our MCRT team, known locally as MHEART, which are mental health workers embedded with police to engage individuals in crisis, de-escalate situations, divert from hospital, and connect people with needed services. The current rate of diversion has gone beyond 80% for calls. We have received funding for one FTE. We chose to fund three additional FTEs from our base funding because this program is having profound positive outcomes for clients and police services, all the while reducing hospital visits. Hospital counterpart MCRT staff teams are paid at a much higher rate.

These challenges are echoed in a recent compensation survey released on behalf of CMHA and our partners, which found the community health sector is behind on wages by more than \$2 billion compared to staff doing similar work in other areas of health care. This means that we're continuing to lose people to hospitals, public health and other areas of health care that pay more and offer more resources.

At our branch, we manage a staff vacancy rate that flows between 8% and 13% during the year. Last year, 22 staff left our organization, and 86%—or 19 of those 22 people—cited money as the primary reason for their decision.

This needs to change if the province truly wishes to champion community mental health and addictions care, which brings me to our formal budget ask.

The community mental health and addictions sector needs a 7% increase in funding, equal to \$143 million annually, to address these challenges. The 5% stabilization funding increase would address a number of significant operational challenges such as recruitment and retention of quality staff, professional development and the ability to meet increasing complexity of client needs, all the while maintaining a safe and progressive environment. The remaining 2% of our ask, or \$33 million, comes in the

form of a new provincial three-year community supportive housing innovation fund. We appreciate that the government is focused on more affordable housing across the province, but this needs to include more supportive housing.

Supportive housing is a forgotten segment in the housing continuum. It helps to reduce homelessness and connects service users with wraparound mental health and substance use supports. Evidence shows that supportive housing models can help a person's journey to recovery from even a severe mental health issue. It's also a fraction of the cost compared to stays in hospital or in correctional institutions.

Consistent with the latest data across the province, the average wait time for supportive housing in our area is 300 days. The new community supportive housing innovation fund would provide capital and operating dollars for the development of innovative and evidence-based models of housing with supports. This fund would be available for initiatives led by the community mental health and addictions sector, who are experts in this space and have many collaborative partnerships in place with municipalities and many other community stakeholders. It would complement the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing's Homelessness Prevention Program, which our municipal partners have indicated is appreciated but not enough to support those in need. The community supportive housing innovation fund and the Homelessness Prevention Program would work in tandem to get these people housed and ensure that they have the mental health supports that they require.

Our sector is proud of the work we do to provide appropriate community care pathways for clients and to help reduce the strain on our colleagues in the emergency department. Investing in mental health and addictions care also serves to limit unnecessary hospital visits. Our work is in line with the last Auditor General's report, which is recommending strengthening the community care sector to support our hospital system.

Stabilization funding also allows us to strengthen evidence-based programs like crisis, early psychosis intervention, clinical case management and other step-down care which help to prevent clients from going to hospital for care.

With stabilization funding and more commitment to supportive housing, our sector can help improve outcomes for individuals in our community while also supporting the government in addressing key issues that are impacting our municipal partners.

In closing, I'd like to thank the committee for making time to hear from CMHA Lambton-Kent and other stakeholders in our community. I'd be happy to take your questions.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much.

Now we will move on to VON Canada. Please start with your name for Hansard.

Ms. Danielle Findlay: I'm Danielle Findlay, supervisor of community relations for the Ontario Student Nutrition Program southwest, or OSNP. I'm grateful to be

here with all of you this morning and to have the opportunity to speak to you about school food programs in Ontario. At OSNP, our primary role is to provide funding and support to student nutrition programs.

I'll take a minute here to provide a refresher for how our structure and funding works. OSNP southwest is housed within VON, one of 14 lead agencies in Ontario that administer provincial funding for student nutrition programs. MCCSS provides a portion of funding and establishes provincial policies, standards and guidelines to ensure that school menus prioritize children's health. The Ontario Student Nutrition Program also flows some third-party funds directly to schools, including those from established provincial partnerships. We also work with many generous local funders in each of our respective communities without which—especially in this current climate—these programs would not be possible.

In the region that I represent, the southwest, OSNP provides funding and support to 471 schools and over 119,000 students. Our southwest region is comprised of the communities of Windsor-Essex, Chatham-Kent, London-Middlesex, Sarnia-Lambton, Elgin, Oxford, Huron-Perth and Grey-Bruce.

There are currently close to 30 schools on our regional wait-list. Those 30 wait-listed schools have self-identified an immediate need for food support and have approached us requesting funds. Unfortunately, we are at capacity and are unable to accommodate these emergent needs.

As you are aware, student nutrition programs in Ontario operate on a cost-shared model under the direction of the ministry. Provincial investment in the program provides the foundation to enable communities to leverage additional donations from program partners and to maximize the proportion of funding allocated to nutritious food. Lead agencies like VON, local community partnership committees and schools are responsible for fundraising and developing partnerships with partners from the private and public sector to secure the remaining program costs. Closing the funding gap has become increasingly difficult as the space between the provincial investment and the program costs continue to widen. To put it clearly, the current provincial allocation provides schools in the southwest region with around 12 cents to 13 cents per snack, while Student Nutrition Ontario estimates a healthy snack costs \$1.50, on average. That's a funding gap of \$1.38 per each snack served, not accounting for meals which require an additional food group at a higher cost.

Schools in the southwest region alone are projected to serve just under 20 million snacks and meals during the 2023-24 school year.

The recent spike in inflation and added strain on family budgets has created increased demand for programs that were already struggling to meet the needs of students. We know that multiple factors can influence food prices, including climate change, energy costs and, certainly, the lingering effects of the pandemic. Right now, steep increases in food inflation are putting added pressure on already extremely tight budgets. Now more than ever, we are hearing from schools with concerns about how they'll

sustain their programs until the end of the year or keep up with demand week to week.

We need an increase in annual core funding. There has not been an increase in stabilized core funding for school food programs in over a decade in Ontario. We are grateful for, this past fall, the provincial government announcing an additional one-time investment of \$5 million for the Ontario Student Nutrition Program and First Nations Student Nutrition Program for the 2023-24 school year. In the southwest, our portion of those funds was about \$510,000, or about \$4.29 for each participating student for the entire school year. We acknowledge this commitment as a step in the right direction, and we're hopeful that it's only the first.

As of now, there are currently no funds provided to schools for the purchase of equipment. Infrastructure used by programs, such as fridges and freezers to store fresh, whole, nutritious foods, is in urgent need of repair or replacement.

There are currently also no funds provided for transportation and delivery costs. Funds for transportation would support centralized distribution and delivery processes that enable efficiencies. A more structured procurement and distribution system with preferential or velocity-based pricing would be a more equitable and cost-saving approach.

There are many positive outcomes associated with student nutrition programs that extend beyond simply filling hungry bellies. We are also working on a pilot to enhance cultural menu offerings so that students who are historically under-represented feel reflected in programming, regardless of faith or culture. We've developed resources for student engagement initiatives, encouraging students to become more actively involved in their programs, bringing them a stronger sense of connection to school, enhancing their leadership skills and promoting meaningful experiential learning opportunities.

OSNP's school food delivery program provides an option of centralized purchasing, and with the power of bulk orders, we are able to effectively pass cost reductions on to schools and provide portion sizes and offerings that promote waste reduction. We have a benchmark of procuring 20% local or Ontario-grown product, and we often exceed that target.

Student nutrition programs not only serve to assist with the affordability issues for families and children, but they're drivers of local economies and support for Ontario farmers and distributors. An increased annual investment would not only get more food to Ontario children and youth who need it, but it would allow service providers to maximize efficiencies by exploring food hubs and delivery programs where we can analyze cost savings and scale central procurement models. It would also offer opportunities to scale up existing new and innovative programs and invest in capacity-building projects that can be evaluated by costing and efficiency metrics and considered for scale. Funds for transportation and equipment could assist with large-scale partnerships for the processing and distribution of donated product that may instead go to waste. Most

importantly, it would mean that schools can have enough food on hand to meet the needs of hungry students.

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The Ontario chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food, in its pre-budget submission, is asking the government to double its current investment from \$32.3 million to \$64.4 million in 2024. OSNP southwest supports this ask.

Historically, funding increases have focused on program expansion versus sustainability of existing programs. However, there is an absolute need for both. School-age children spend more waking time in the classroom—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Danielle Findlay: —than any other environment.

We see in here every day the tremendous impact these programs have, in part because you have committed to taking a non-partisan approach to nourishing kids, and for that, we are grateful. Research shows that measures targeting school nutrition may lead to beneficial changes in dietary behaviours, health outcomes and academic performance. It is imperative that we ensure programs are properly equipped to provide enough food to students and to have it safely sourced, transported, stored and served. It is in all of our best interests to ensure our students are well nourished so that they have the fuel they need to succeed at school and beyond.

Thank you for your time and for making a positive impact for all Ontarians.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much.

Now we'll move over to Windsor Essex Community Health Centre. Please start with your name for Hansard.

Ms. Laura Strathdee: Good morning. Bonjour. My name is Laura Strathdee. I'm the director of clinical practice at the Windsor Essex Community Health Centre. I oversee our Leamington site and our greenhouse mobile team.

Members of this committee, thank you for having me present to you today. I personally want to thank Andrew, Anthony, Trevor and Lisa for their ongoing support at many of my events and during the COVID response; I saw all of your faces often and could rely on each of you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you, and merci.

What is Windsor Essex Community Health Centre? We are an agency of approximately 140 staff who provide excellent primary care, team-based-model support to around 10,000 clients in the Windsor-Essex area. We have an operating budget of approximately \$16 million. We see clients at our Sandwich site, which is the west end of Windsor; our diabetic wellness site, which is the east side of Windsor; our street health location, which is in the downtown core for our housing-vulnerable; and out in the county, we're at 33 Princess as well as on eight of our major greenhouse farms for primary care. Each of our locations targets a need within a high-priority community space.

A bit of background: Team-based primary care offers more resources at the same office. You would come in to see us for primary care, but we can also address your foot

bonions. You can see some foot care, you can see a social worker, you can see a dietitian, you can see our hepatitis C team, or you can see our respiratory therapist. You can see our health promotion team, which would help you get OW and ODSP, get your forms, get your ID, get your health card again if you've lost it, get your version code, get help with housing and with all of the stuff that makes our clients vulnerable. We have nursing, addiction support workers, therapists. We help with food security and housing. Many of our moms rely on us for formula and diapers. We've taken primary care out of scope, but the need is there, as we've heard from our other presenters.

WECHC spends between \$7,000 and \$8,000 a month on translation; 60% of my clients do not speak English. Imagine your health care encounter if you didn't have the language. So we now have a three-way encounter: There's a provider, there's a translator, and there's our patient, to ensure that information is flowing accurately and understood, to try to keep clients out of the ER and managing their care.

We have extended hours that meet our clients' needs. We're often in at 8, and we're done at 6 or 7 most evenings. We also have a Sunday walk-in clinic for many of our migrant workers. But our challenge is, we're full. That same Sunday clinic, which was a new investment from the government—we received \$160,000 to support primary care on our farms and in our region, but we're now at the place where the model is too successful and we're turning away 100 workers every Sunday. That's not good for our staff. So, again, our challenge is, we're full. If you call my office for primary care today, we would have to tell you to try another office. That means that each primary care clinician has rostered or attached the number of patients they can safely see.

In an average month, I lose about eight clients, whether they've moved, whether they've passed away, whether they've gone to school, but there are 28 to 30 newborns from Erie Shores coming every month. So I don't have any panel space—and that's just for unrostered, unattached infants, to make sure that they are receiving their vaccines. That doesn't account for the 6,000 residents of Leamington who are on Health Care Connect waiting for primary care. That doesn't account for all the people calling my clerks begging for primary care—or, "Can you take my schizophrenic brother?" Our office is really good; we do great things, but they're for our attached clients.

We are so thankful for the investment in primary care to our greenhouses. We met our annual metrics in our first quarter. We just don't have enough care to go around for the volumes.

So why am I here today? I want to highlight our great evidence-based programs and our very talented staff, but like our other presenters, we're losing those staff due to budget and strain. WECHC and our other alliance partners are still paying staff from the 2017 budget rates. Staff are leaving for better-paying roles. Our hospital partners got a well-deserved 11% raise. Other agencies got a 6% or an 8% raise. We aren't seeing any of that in primary care at this time.

We have staff who work with us full-time and we have to give them time off to go and access a food bank to make it to the end of the month. We have staff in tears because they are renewing their mortgage and they cannot afford the new interest rate. These are your nurses. These are your clinicians.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Laura Strathdee: Perfect.

As a site director, I have staff who need to handle some of the hardest or saddest cases in their career. The wait time across the region for imaging or for specialists is hard on the staff. They are there to help, and they want to make an impact. They don't want to turn 100 people away from a walk-in clinic on a Sunday when there is only one other walk-in clinic in our region and they are also full. There is no capacity, and that's why clients go to the ER. If you invest in primary care, we can keep them out of the ER.

So, my solution: Invest in human health resources for interprofessional primary care teams, with \$1.6 million over five years to reach the 2023 recommended salaries. Primary care staff have been paid at or under the 2017 rates.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes our time.

We have MPP Hazell for the first round of questions.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I'm going to start with Danielle. It's such an urgent program, and the services that you're doing for our children—they, too, can become very vulnerable. I've heard from organizations like your organization that are actually going through a funding crisis to continue to feed the children and that have schools on the wait-list.

What do you say to the 30 schools that are currently on your wait-list? Those are children who are waiting to be served. How are you going to get over that crisis or challenge?

Ms. Danielle Findlay: Thank you for your kind comments.

Unfortunately, there is not a lot that we can say, aside from the fact that we continue to advocate for funding. Also, our team will continue, in the community, to use our skills and resources to fundraise and apply for grants to try to bring in additional revenue to support programs.

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The issue is that we need to bring in those dollars to stabilize the current programs that, for the first time—I've been in this program for 13 years. Last year, we were hearing across the province that programs were closing after March break because they just simply did not have enough funds to sustain their programs. So before we can even entertain the thought of bringing on those wait-listed programs, we have to ensure that the ones that are currently in place have enough funds and resources to continue on.

We're doing what we can with our limited—and we, being a non-profit, have very limited resources ourselves, but our team is doing everything we can to bring in additional funds to support the programs.

MPP Andrea Hazell: How is that additional funding working for you—that fundraising section—for your revenue?

Ms. Danielle Findlay: It's a lot of work and effort and time and energy, as anyone, I'm sure, can attest to—bringing in additional funds. We're doing what we can, but we're not even close to what we need. So that funding gap that's over a dollar for each snack—it's in the millions of dollars. We just, unfortunately, are not meeting those targets because our team is not—we're at capacity, so we're unable to do that.

Those 30 wait-listed schools that have self-identified—that's them approaching us, not even us putting a call out to the community to say—there's still a significant number of schools in addition to those 30 that could use some funds and just have not had the opportunity to come on.

We're seeing that populations are changing rapidly. There has been a really large increase in immigration in some communities. We're seeing a real change in what some of those pockets look like. In the London-Middlesex community specifically, there has been a large increase in immigration. Portables at schools are busting at the seams, so they're calling us and saying, "We applied for funding for 500 students, but we now have 625," and we're saying, "We have no funds to give you, unfortunately."

MPP Andrea Hazell: It's good that you're mentioning that situation, because it is a situation all over Ontario. The population is increasing, and we're not taking those funding measurements into consideration.

The services you're offering right now are to 471 schools.

Ms. Danielle Findlay: Correct—in the southwest region, yes.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Is there enough funding—if you didn't receive funding here—to take you through at least 2024-25?

Ms. Danielle Findlay: No. The provincial government provided an added \$5 million for the school year, of which we received \$510,000, but it is not enough to get us through to this school year. And it's a one-time investment. So next school year, if there's no added investment, we're back at the same situation that we were previously. Although we appreciate that \$5 million this year and the \$510,000 that came to us, it's not enough to sustain the programs.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you for elaborating on that.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Now we will be moving over to the government side. MPP Jones.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Thank you, Chair, and through you: Thank you for taking time to come to my beautiful riding of Chatham-Kent-Leamington. As the Chair said, the last time we had pre-budget consultations was back in 2000, so I'm trying to remember where I was in 2000 when that happened. I remember now. Thank you for the thoughtful and detail-oriented presentations.

My first question is to Laura. Having worked with you directly and indirectly over my experience here, representing our riding, I would like you to draw from your experience and share what specific investments our gov-

ernment has made that have, in your experience, had the greatest direct impact on the communities?

Ms. Laura Strathdee: Wow. That's a loaded question, Trevor. Thank you.

The most impact? The high-priority community initiative came out during COVID as a response to assessing the needs of the community in crisis at the time. That bucket of funding delivered really well. I think the OHTs are a good investment in bringing the talents of many into the same team.

But at the end of the day, primary care investments are our mind—so the migrant worker funding that was received this year was phenomenal. And it's just proof of concept—that we can now do more if there's more funding available.

Mr. Trevor Jones: I do have a supplementary. Sorry about the first loaded question. Now I'll give you a chance to kind of think back—if you had a choice, what areas could we target in future investment that could have, again, the greatest impact and the greatest measured results?

Ms. Laura Strathdee: Great question.

We submitted an expression of interest for our region. Ours was specifically to bring on, I think, eight net new clinicians, as well as support staff and therapists around them. That would make a significant impact and would roster almost 6,000 new clients into team-based care. I think that would be a great first step.

Mr. Trevor Jones: I really appreciate your sincere responses.

Now I'll turn it, through the Chair, to my colleague MPP Bailey.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Thank you again to all the presenters for being here today.

I'll go to Ms. Doxtator, who I've met in the past. Welcome. One thing I wanted to highlight was that this government was the first government in Ontario's history to create a portfolio especially to deal with mental health and addictions. I've had the Honourable Michael Tibollo down to Sarnia–Lambton and worked with him and with the Ministry of Health to create programs down there. Do you think that that organization and that ministry being created has helped with mental health and addictions and to focus on those issues?

Ms. Rhonny Doxtator: When I look back on some of the implications and some of the recent funding that came out during and previous to COVID, I think, certainly, that has had an impact. An example of that is, we received funding for two mobile health clinics that cover both Lambton county and Kent county. We are operating those three days a week. We didn't receive operating dollars for those, so we're pulling from the base some of the funds with respect to insurance and gas and driving and such. We're really having an impact with that opportunity to reach out into the county, reach out into the rural communities. We're seeing people who haven't had health care in eight-plus years. So we're getting to the right people with mental health and addictions—and I think that was certainly impacted from that.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Thank you for bringing that up.

I'd like to highlight, too, the funding that we received for the withdrawal management centre that we're presently in the planning stages of at Bluewater Health. I know that will be something you will be very involved with.

One of the other projects that we have made investments in is the Roadmap to Wellness. That was an almost \$4-billion investment over 10 years to rebuild and modernize Ontario's mental health care. Could you comment on that, before my time runs out?

Ms. Rhonny Doxtator: Sorry; I missed a little bit of that, Bob.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Could you comment on the Roadmap to Wellness and the investment over 10 years in mental health and addictions care?

Ms. Rhonny Doxtator: Looking at some of the impacts of that work that was under way for quite a long time now has resulted in opportunities for us to continue to look at being innovative.

Currently, the restraints that we're under have been a challenge. Where we've always been able to find creative solutions to work with our partners—that's becoming a bit more of a struggle now. The 5% to base that occurred in the last year certainly goes a ways in terms of getting us closer to where we need to go, but we are falling short a little bit in terms of being able to—we're at the tipping point, if you will. With the HHR crisis that we're having, with the homelessness crisis, the inflation crisis, it's becoming difficult to move forward with clients to meet their needs, for sure.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Before I run out of time, I'll go to Ms. Findlay.

The government's plan to build, with \$48 billion, I think, committed over the next 10 years in infrastructure and \$32 billion in hospital and capital grants—some 50 projects for hospitals are going to be built. How would you see that investment impacting the work that you and your organization do every day?

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Ms. Danielle Findlay: Investment in hospitals?

Mr. Robert Bailey: Yes, hospitals and capital projects. I think it's 3,000 new beds over 10 years.

Ms. Danielle Findlay: My program is specific to school food programs, so I don't believe that we'd be able to, unfortunately, access any of those funds. Perhaps the nursing program—but I wouldn't be the appropriate person to speak to that, unfortunately. I don't believe that—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes the time for the government.

We are moving over to MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you to our presenters who have come here on an extremely cold day to present to the committee. I'd like to start my comments about just that. We have an extreme cold weather warning, with wind chills in the minus 20s.

My first questions will be for Rhonny. I think about the 500 people you've mentioned—or the 300 people—who are chronically unhoused. The government right now, with the \$5.4-billion contingency fund, has the resources; they

have the power and they have the authority to address this. I just hope they will listen today and find the political will to actually respond to the crisis that we have.

We often hear the government use words like “wrap-around supports in supportive housing,” but I’m not quite sure that they fully understand them. I wonder if you could briefly summarize them so that they understand what you’re talking about.

Ms. Rhonny Doxtator: Wraparound supports with respect to supportive housing: We have, for example, right now around 350 individuals we’re providing this kind of care for within Lambton county and Kent county. That includes regular contact with a case manager. It includes things like injection clinics for psychotropic medication. It includes access to food security; certainly, working to ensure that these folks have primary care; helping them manage any crisis within their residence and navigate any challenges with landlords. These are folks who can access our team for any kind of crisis that may be evolving. It could be anything from “I need ID for something” versus it could be “I just need to work on some social connectedness and community”—so providing any of those wrap-around care options, helping people with vocational options, social inclusiveness, that kind of thing.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I also want to thank you for your comments about the necessity for there to be wage parity across sectors. It is something that this committee has heard for, I would suggest, a number of years, because we know this problem has been ongoing between the different health care sectors.

I think in your presentation you mentioned that mental health workers earn 20% to 30% less and that 86% of people who did leave cited money as the primary reason. It’s a huge concern because I think there are also mental health workers who are sometimes using food banks. This government should really consider that they can address this and they should address this and they must address this.

Last year, you asked for a 7% increase; I know the government would like to congratulate themselves for under-delivering, with 5%.

I also want to thank you for your community supportive housing innovation fund; I see that you’ve added operating dollars, specifically.

Can you explain for the committee how difficult it is for your sector and for non-profits in general to fund their basic operations?

Ms. Rhonny Doxtator: The biggest challenges that we know our people experience are poverty and, by extension, homelessness. The folks we’re supporting are often living in poverty and have more challenging health concerns and that sort of thing.

We work closely with municipalities here both in Chatham-Kent and in Lambton and have programs with them. We’re partnered with anyone who will work with us, because we know that the best outcomes happen when you work together collectively. Anyone we can partner with, we do, to manage the cost of this work.

There just isn’t enough infrastructure in terms of housing builds that are occurring, and the challenge of that means we have people we would be able to house, possibly—despite the fact that the vacancy rate is near zero, we still are connected with landlords across our communities, and we would be able to house people if the funding was available for us to do that. It’s disheartening to see people living on the street, and we know that the mortality rate for these folks is very high. There are grave concerns about it. As you said, it’s a cold day today, so we certainly have concerns around that.

The innovation fund opportunity would allow us to work with civic-minded individuals we have in both of our communities to help come up with some kind of creative solution—so looking at whatever creative solutions we can come up with. An example of that is looking at tiny homes in this community—it just went to council this week, and we were asked to do the wraparound support piece to that.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It’s a brilliant idea, and I want to thank you for that.

Let’s hope that we can also get the government to resume their historic responsibility for the provision of truly affordable, supportive housing.

My next questions will be for Danielle.

Danielle, as a former educator, I’m a huge fan of the Ontario Student Nutrition Program and the work that you do.

Can you share for the committee what happens when kids aren’t able to access nutrition, when they don’t have meals and snacks? And what does that do to their educational prospects and their success in the future?

Ms. Danielle Findlay: Thank you for bringing that question forward.

Research shows that students who have access to student nutrition programs—they have direct implications on student success. Students accessing these programs have decreased behaviours at school, increased attendance, increased academic performance. There are also studies out of Sweden that suggest that it contributes to an increase in lifelong earnings, and these habits that are developed through student nutrition programs in the school setting move on into adulthood. So what we’re really doing here is setting up kids for success—not only academic success, but social and health implications as well.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Danielle Findlay: We know that there has been a 60% increase in type 2 diabetes for children in the last 10 years, which is significant. These are diseases that we would typically see in adults only. Childhood obesity rates have tripled over the last 30 years, as well.

We’re wanting to get kids back to eating whole, healthy foods; understanding where their food comes from; and ensuring that they’re well-nourished and ready to learn at school, because it really does impact their focus and concentration throughout the day.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I also wanted to thank you because it seems as though you’ve come up with a number

of ways that the program can be more cost-effective, whether that's through bulk purchasing, better distribution, but you just need the start-up money in order to get that going.

Would you say that with the initiative, the program that you suggested, we would get more value for each dollar?

Ms. Danielle Findlay: With bulk purchasing and social procurement, absolutely. We see that we've got two streams, two different programs that schools can select from: traditional or bulk purchasing—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes the time.

We will move over to the independent. MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: My question is for Rhonny. Thank you for the wraparound services that you provide for our vulnerable people.

I want to take you to the first page in your presentation whereby you thank the provincial government for showing its support for community mental health and addictions care last year.

I think you received a 5% increase. Can you tell me how those funds were used, and then what brought you back here at the table, asking for more funds?

Ms. Rhonny Doxtator: Really looking at what we were spending the money on, we have a number of positions across our organization that we're investing in. Certainly, we have integrated leadership across hospital and community, which really gives us an advantage in terms of looking at transitions of care in the whole system. So part of that was around quality investment, where quality is in the fabric of the organization, and we've continued to have to cut the opportunity to have a quality lead. We are now sharing a quality lead with our local CHC partner in Lambton, and that gives us a little bit more opportunity to utilize that opportunity.

Obviously, we will be investing in wages when that's the next step, because of the wage disparity issues. We are operating programs that we're not funded for.

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Our MCRRT program—we have four individuals under CMHA that are embedded in police MCRRT teams, and we're only funded for one of those. We know that the outcomes that we're having for police services, for our hospital and emergency departments and for our clients and the care that they're receiving has had a significant impact. That's certainly something we want to continue to invest in.

Our mobile care program that we're providing that is getting out and reaching folks across the counties is new and innovative. We work with all our Indigenous partners. We have long-standing relationships with our five Indigenous communities and our catchment, and this mobile program goes to four of those. So that ability just to pay the operating costs to continue to be able to reach some of these folks who are in dire need of assistance—mental health and addictions issues, our crisis in our First Nations communities. We're reaching the farm communities in our catchment as well. It's really removing barriers to care—how do we get people to have access to care right away?

MPP Andrea Hazell: I like all the services that you're doing. We really need that.

I'm going to move to your vacancy rate—I am so sorry to hear that you're managing floating between 8% and 13% during the year. And then 22 staff left your organization. How are you managing that? Isn't that impacting your employee morale and services?

Ms. Rhonny Doxtator: It absolutely impacts employee morale. We remained open during COVID the entire time—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Rhonny Doxtator: We were front-facing people from the beginning and on through the system with very complex case loads in the community, yet our staff were paid a much lower rate. Our staff have part-time jobs—they're professional people—to be able to just sustain for themselves. And it does impact morale.

We need to provide care to the people who are most vulnerable, and we also need to care for the staff who are taking care of those people.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): It's time for the government members. MPP Dowie.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I want to thank all the presenters for being here.

I'd like to start with VON Canada. I had the sincere privilege of joining Michelle Bonadonna and Robin Tetreault on a visit to St. Teresa of Calcutta school in my riding to see the great work that they're doing with the Ontario Student Nutrition Program. Really, there are certain communities that have—we need that nutritional aspect. Dollarama doesn't cut it for some kinds of foods. So having that support is vitally important.

That's why the government put \$5 million, just last October, into the Student Nutrition Program. I'm hoping that either Danielle or Amy could share with the committee the impact that the \$5 million has had on the delivery of the program that you offer.

Ms. Danielle Findlay: We're very grateful for that investment. As I mentioned, it breaks down to \$510,000 for our southwest region. Divided amongst the 14 lead agencies in the province, the allocation decreases, obviously. It equates to about \$4.29 per student for the entire school year, so it's roughly two meals, a handful of snacks, for each student. While it is very much appreciated, it's not enough to sustain the programs, and it is a one-time investment.

So what we're asking for and wanting to ensure that we acknowledge is the ask from the Ontario chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food to increase the core funding annually, which has not had an increase since 2014.

I just want to say, MPP Dowie, thank you so much for your support and for coming out to the program. We appreciate that.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you for sharing that with us. I understand the increasing demand that's out there.

I believe that our total budget for student nutrition is \$38 million, inclusive of the \$5 million. But you said—that was of \$5 million. So your expectation is that it will drop back to \$33 million next year?

Ms. Danielle Findlay: Correct.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: And you've received no indication? I guess that is still a ways away; the announcement was just made a few weeks ago. But you don't expect that to be sustained in the future, based on what you've heard so far?

Ms. Danielle Findlay: Correct.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I have to give you full kudos, knowing how much food you are able to provide with the funds available. It's just tremendous. You do great work at being efficient and ensuring that that nutrition is available, and I want to certainly give you full marks for that. You do an incredible job.

Ms. Danielle Findlay: I appreciate that. Thank you. I think those kudos should be extended to the school staff and volunteers, because they're remarkable as well.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I'd like to next move to the Windsor Essex Community Health Centre.

Laura, thank you for being here. I know you operate all throughout Windsor-Essex, at a number of different sites across many of our provincial ridings, and I'm certainly happy that one of your locations is just down the street from my office.

I had the privilege of meeting with Rita, the CEO, a few weeks ago, and she shared with me that workforce difficulty that I know you had relayed. An earlier presentation referenced the Eckler report about that compensation piece.

I want to explore what you've raised about the hospitals really taking the workers, or the hospitals compensating more than primary care nurses. We have received delegations who have said nurses in hospitals are being lost to other sectors. If you're losing the nurses to the hospitals and the hospitals are losing nurses to somewhere else—do you have an idea of where that somewhere else would be?

Ms. Laura Strathdee: I think hospitals are losing it to contract nursing, if I understand that pathway. You can imagine being in the community, doing the same work—it's hard to see your colleagues making \$20,000 or \$30,000 more a year for the same work. We certainly lose to the hospital, or folks are leaving nursing entirely. Burnout and the strain after COVID are real.

Does that answer your question?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I believe so. Actually, I'd like to explore that a little bit.

If there were no agency nurses, which serve predominantly rural and northern communities—really, sometimes you can't sell the lifestyle in some of those communities, and you have to go the extra mile. If that tool from the tool box were removed, would we still not have a problem with recruiting to those parts of the province that just don't provide the lifestyle that a nurse would look for for their family?

Ms. Laura Strathdee: I'm certainly not against contract nursing. If you wanted me to go live in the remote north, I'd want to be well compensated for that time.

I think what the government is doing with the talent pool of our international grads is commendable, and we'll see that impact—but in the next few years; it's not helping

us retain staff today. But you know that. All of the work on our new grads and university connections—but we have to make nursing and health care attractive again.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I was hoping to explore a little bit the mental health service delivery that WECHC provides. I was informed that the 5% increase given to the Canadian Mental Health Association last year was not extended to providers like yours, and I'm wondering if I could explore that.

What would differ between the services you would offer and the services CMHA would offer that would make them warrant the funding and then yours maybe not be included, as I'm hearing?

Ms. Laura Strathdee: What a great question.

I don't think the services per se—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Laura Strathdee: —are different. The credentialing is the same. The staff are interoperable, pretty well. We are just a primary care bucket of funding, I believe, so we can't piecemeal it—like our nurses get 5%, but our clerks don't get anything; we are kind of, "Everybody gets a raise or nobody gets a raise." But I'm not sure that between the programs there would be a lot of difference—very vulnerable clients, a lot of similar work, the same kind of stress in caseloads, so ultimately it's the same thing. The funding just didn't flow our way.

1200

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That concludes the time.

We'll move over to MPP Gretzky.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I want to thank all the presenters who are here today.

I'll summarize that what we've heard from the three presenters before you, and what we've heard all across the province, is basically the same issue: the lack of investment from the government—the inadequate investment, in some cases—and the staffing crisis that those service providers are facing.

I'm going to go to Laura first. My colleague from Windsor-Tecumseh asked about nurses and losing nurses to go to hospitals. You mentioned agency nurses. We, as New Democrats, have said that there needs to be a cap on the number of agency nurses used and the instances of those nurses being used. I know many nurses who work in community settings, whether that's long-term care or with other health care professionals, who will tell you the same thing—I've heard the same thing from them: They make a lot less than those working in hospitals, and they make a heck of a lot less than those working for agencies. The government is funnelling money into the profits of private corporations that are running these nursing agencies.

I'm wondering if you could tell me a little more about what it would mean for the government to put a cap on agency nursing and to be putting that funding into primary care or other community organizations where you would find nurses employed.

Ms. Laura Strathdee: Great question.

I'm not well versed on the cap or the numbers, but I can say that any talented, qualified staff in the region—we

would take them. So if a cap is a way to give us staff in the primary care setting, I'm all for it.

We also compete with the Detroit tunnel and border and the salaries that they pay. When I graduated from the University of Windsor, I was over at Children's—as a new grad, as well. So I understand the pull and the income.

If you can get us a more fulsome body of workers—whether it's a cap or whether it's bonuses or all of your collective brilliance—it would mean your mom or your grandma or your niece or your nephew gets better care from us. You would see the same nurse. You would have consistent care. You would have care where you need it, and they wouldn't be in agencies with the revolving door.

Did that answer your question?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Yes, I think so. If we had a cap on agency nurses and the number of those nurses available, we would see fewer RNs leaving other sectors to go into the agency work or into these private clinics that the government is now setting up.

Danielle, I just want to be clear on the number—you said that there are 30 schools on a wait-list to get support?

Ms. Danielle Findlay: Correct. In our southwest region.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: For the nutrition program.

Ms. Danielle Findlay: We're one of 14 lead agencies, and we have 30 schools on our wait-list.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: We've heard about the Student Nutrition Program—not just in our area; I believe in Niagara they had the nutrition program there talk about their need. We've heard from other mental health providers. We've heard from primary care. We heard from IRIS House, right before you. We've heard from developmental services that the need is growing. We are seeing an increase in mental illness. We're seeing an increase in people experiencing homelessness. We have seen an explosion of people accessing food banks.

Laura just talked about how they have staff. We have nurses. We have people in mental health and addiction supports. We have people who are providing food to hungry kids—which has exploded in years. I remember, when my kids were younger, it was an exception for a child to go to school and need food support. It is now so commonplace that we're sitting here talking today as if it's just another normal day, that there are 30 schools waiting for kids to get nutrition at school, to be fed, because their parents can't afford—it's normal. It has become normalized for this government that we have seen an explosion in people accessing food banks.

So I have to say that I'm astonished, frankly, that my colleague from Chatham-Kent–Leamington—that the direction he chose to go with Laura, when talking about all the supports and services our primary care providers and others within the community are providing, was, “Tell us what we're doing well. Tell us what we're doing right. Give us a pat on the back.” I am completely astonished. It's heartbreaking. I represent the west end of Windsor. I represent downtown. I live downtown. I'm in the community. I see unhoused people. I see people struggling with mental illness and addiction. We have an opioid epidemic

in our area. I see the hungry children. I represent most of the schools where they struggle the most with food insecurity. Instead of talking about that and asking, “What can we do better? What can we do to actually address the root problems that we are seeing in communities”—not just mine, but all over this province—the questions are: “Tell us what we're doing good. How are we doing well?”

I guess that was more of a statement than a question to any one of you.

I think your presentations—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky:—were really well done. Unfortunately, I feel that with the current government, those calls for help are going to go largely unanswered.

I feel terrible for everyone who works within your sectors and the others who have presented here today across the province who are begging for help.

I feel terrible for the people in this province, some of the most vulnerable people who are being left behind because this government is sitting on a \$5.4-billion slush fund rather than acknowledging that when you invest—if you just want to talk finances, when you invest in people on the front end, there is a huge savings on the back end; a savings to our health care sector, a savings to our education sector, a savings to our justice system.

Until you all understand that and decide that investing in people—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much.

Thank you to all the presenters for coming and taking time to present.

At this time, I would like to thank all the committee members. We are going to recess until 1 p.m.

The committee recessed from 1208 to 1300.

ONTARIO MEDICAL ASSOCIATION
GRAIN FARMERS OF ONTARIO
CITY OF KITCHENER

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Team members, welcome back. It's 1 o'clock, and it's time to resume consideration of public hearings on pre-budget consultations 2024.

As a reminder—and to the new presenters especially—each presenter will have seven minutes for their presentation. After we have heard from all the presenters, the remaining 39 minutes of the time slot will be for the questions from the members of the committee. This time for questions will be divided into two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the government members, two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the official opposition members, and two rounds of four and a half minutes for the independent members as a group.

At this time, I would like to call on the Ontario Medical Association. I understand the representatives of the Ontario Medical Association are via Zoom. You have seven minutes. I will be giving you a heads-up at one

minute. Please do not stop. Please continue, because that's just a heads-up.

Please state your name for Hansard. Over to you.

Dr. Andrew Park: My name is Dr. Andrew Park. I'm the president of the Ontario Medical Association. On behalf of Ontario's 43,000 doctors, thank you for the opportunity to appear here today. The OMA is proud to play a pivotal role along with you, our government partners, in creating sustainable improvements to the province's health care system for the well-being of all Ontarians.

As an emergency physician, I see the effects of a broken system every single day. Those 20-hour ER waits that you have been reading about—each of the priorities that I will tell you about shortly addresses the root causes.

Before I elaborate on our priorities, allow me to tell you a couple of stories about the patients who are in each of your communities every single day.

The first is a patient who presents to the emergency department complaining of general weakness and some back pain. The doctors see the patient and run some tests, only to reveal that that patient has a newly diagnosed metastatic cancer; that is, a cancer that has spread—but not just any type of cancer; it's a type that could have been caught earlier and treated. We are seeing more and more cases of advanced disease that could have been detected and managed earlier if the patient had a family doctor. The pain of diagnosis is matched by our knowledge that something could have and should have been done to save these patients' lives.

The second story is of an elderly patient who has lived at home their entire life. They've recently lost their spouse and are now living alone, and they've had a couple of falls. The ability to provide physiotherapy, nursing and PSW support would keep them home where they want to be, but there is no access to these services. So, instead, this capable and fully competent adult will languish in a hospital bed, at great cost to taxpayers. All of this, when a few supports at home would have been the more effective and dignified choice for this patient.

These patients are our family members, our friends, our neighbours. A lot of what we are seeing is due to people not having access to the medical system in a timely fashion.

I can go on and on with various stories, and that's the problem. We have far too many stories like this because of the foundational cracks in our system. These heartbreaking stories are occurring all over the province, and what we are offering are comprehensive solutions to these very complex problems. As you consider budgetary inclusions, we ask that you consider these investments in your communities.

In October, following extensive consultation with physicians, system partners and the public, we released our latest advocacy document, which contains pragmatic solutions to address our three urgent health care priorities.

The first of these priorities is to make sure that every Ontarian has a family doctor—full stop. Currently, 2.3 million Ontarians are without a family doctor. This number is staggering and is expected to rise.

The second priority is to commit to reducing the mountain of unnecessary administration. Family doctors report they are spending, on average, 19.1 hours per week on administrative tasks. This is an incredible figure that is the equivalent of 20.6 million patient visits per year.

Our third priority is to increase access to home and palliative care, which will address hospital overcrowding. Far too many Ontarians occupy hospital beds when they can be better cared for at home, where they want to be.

At this time, I would like to turn your attention to our CEO, Kimberly Moran, who will discuss our solutions to these three key priorities in further detail.

Kimberly?

Ms. Kimberly Moran: Thank you, Dr. Park, and thank you to the committee for your time today.

As Dr. Park has quite rightly shown, the strains on the health care system have ballooned over decades, but urgent action is required today. The media headlines and these terrible stories that Dr. Park has shared demonstrate the need for urgent action. A key priority is ensuring every Ontarian has a family doctor; as Dr. Park said, 2.3 million Ontarians don't now, and without urgent action, we estimate there will be more than four million without a doctor by 2026.

We've articulated a few solutions to make this a reality. Team-based care is the most important solution to this problem. By funding an expansion of team-based care, we can see the reality of every Ontarian having a family doctor. Team-based care allows patients to be connected with the most appropriate provider for the care they need, all while allowing physicians to focus on patients with the most complex issues. Primary care teams also lead to the reduction of system costs by diverting patients from costly emergency department visits, reducing time spent in hospitals, and identifying issues earlier—only to support the story that Dr. Park shared about early identification of cancer. Currently, only 25% of Ontarians have access to government-funded teams, meaning that 10.5 million Ontarians are not part of a team. We strongly recommend that government move quickly to ensure that at least 50% of Ontarians have access to team-based care by March 31, 2026.

Another solution is to license more foreign-trained physicians. The OMA welcomes the government's announcement of the practice ready Ontario assessment program, which aims to add at least 50 new internationally educated family physicians into the system by 2024. We call on the province to triple that number by 2026.

The next solution is to reduce the burden of unnecessary administration so doctors can focus on patient care. A centralized intake and referral system is under way, but it must be completed quickly. Patients will no longer have to endure long wait times for surgery, diagnostic tests, specialist consults, and many other barriers to accessing care.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Kimberly Moran: The government has an opportunity now to scale this system. We need to demonstrate results by 2026.

Emergency wait times and hospital overcrowding are key issues. Ensuring everyone has a family doctor will help, but there are more solutions that will also help. With regard to improving community capacity, no single solution will alleviate hospital overcrowding, but we convened experts and we believe that the most important solutions are: To better support home care, we must begin by appropriately funding home care providers to reduce the wage differential between home care and other sectors. We also recommend the expansion of hospital-level care in patients' homes. To enhance long-term care, we ask that the government provide more of these homes with equipment to prevent unnecessary transfers, such as mobile diagnostic imaging clinics for in-home X-rays and ultrasounds.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes the time for the presentation.

At this time, we can move over to Grain Farmers of Ontario. Please start with your name for Hansard.

Mr. Brendan Byrne: I'm Brendan Byrne from the Grain Farmers of Ontario. I'm the chair of the organization. Thank you so much for allowing me to come here and speak to you on behalf of our 28,000 grain farmers across the province. We grow corn, soybeans, wheat, barley and oats. I'm here to talk to you about a couple of our priorities, the risk management program being one and the carbon tax being a second one.

Just as a little bit of a background, we had MNP do a new study that we did present to the Premier as well as others at our reception. The grain-farming industry represents 91,000 jobs in Ontario, \$27 billion in economic activity, as well as \$2.3 billion in government revenue. These are current, up-to-date numbers, which showed a 60% increase from the last time we had done the numbers in 2010. So in the last decade, we've shown a 60% increase.

We're looking to try to find ways to grow our sector even further. We're growing more crop on the same amount of land, or even on less land, than we ever have before, and we want to provide a safe, viable food source for not only Ontario but also to be exported across Canada and other areas in the world that do need our help at this time. With increasing conflicts—I have been able to travel some in this last year and a half—I'm finding areas where they are looking to Ontario to be part of the solution for some of the hunger needs where they're at.

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The economics generated by the grain business is a direct contribution to Ontario's GDP, but more than that, grain farmers act as though they're economic engines in rural communities. We've seen it time and again where funds come into the farm and they're reinvested in the operation, they're reinvested in local communities. I would challenge people to go to an arena across the province and find one that doesn't have a farmer who has sponsored a hockey team, or a farmer who has put money into their local associations.

As per the reports that we have shown, in terms of Farm Credit Canada, they were saying that 2023 was the most expensive year we've ever had to try to attempt to grow a

viable crop. That's due to higher interest rates, increased input costs and lower commodity prices. This last year, for example, in the soybean market, we've seen a \$4 to \$5 drop per bushel. So the RMP program becomes something that is very important, not only to the farmers who are farming today, but also their legacies and the farmers they're bringing up who want to stay on the farm. We've talked to a lot of them across the province who say that the Risk Management Program really helps being able to be a young farmer and try to get involved in the family farm.

We have been asking for a top-up in the RMP for a number of years. The provincial government did come forward with a \$50-million investment that we're certainly thankful for. The ask at the time, which was a number of years ago, was \$150 million. We haven't changed the ask despite the inflationary buildup, despite the other costs that have been off-loaded on the backs of farmers. We're looking for an additional \$100 million to be added to the fund to have the backs of farmers across the province. There have been positive changes in the program, where money was able to roll over, but on the grain farming side, that's going to be wiped out entirely after this last year. We've been working with the non-supply-managed sector, which would also be our partners in beef, veal, sheep, pork, and fruit and vegetable groups, to continue to ask for that funding. It's a cost-share between all farmers. So if I'm here asking for the \$100 million, it is not solely a grain farming ask; it is a collective ask of ourselves, along with our partners, to try to—if we've got some uncertainty, we are covered off; if others in those areas have uncertainty, they're covered off.

Another point: For every \$1 that's invested in RMP, per the study we did, it's showing a \$2.25 return to positive economic activity in the province. So this isn't something where it's solely the government putting their money in. It's a partnership between farmers putting in their premium money and being topped up with government. It's an important tool for farmers, especially in times of market volatility. We look at raising that \$100 million. As an ask, that will not only encourage more than two times the payback in new economic activity, but it will also help our farmers manage on-farm risk and allow Ontario's grain sector, specifically, to continue to be a world-class grain sector.

I've had the opportunity to travel with the Minister of Agriculture on trade missions where everyone, when we get there, looks at us and says, "We want more of what Ontario does." And if a farmer has more costs off-loaded on their backs, the only option we have as price takers is to put less fertilizer, to put less seed and, in turn, grow less crop. We don't want to be in a situation like that for our farmer members. So that's our ask on that part—to keep us competitive across the board; as well, against our US counterparts, who have an incredible amount of money that goes into their sector.

Additionally, the second item is the carbon price. The carbon price—or as we call it, the carbon tax—in Ontario is just simply borne on the backs of our farmers. We're seeing more and more other provincial governments

stepping forward to push back against some of these carbon initiatives that the federal government is having put on us. In the grain sector, the grain-drying aspect of carbon tax—there are no viable options for us to change into something else. Regardless of what somebody may have told you, biomass or wood pellets, things like that, are quite simply not even remotely viable on a farm—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Brendan Byrne:—and they're not at a level where you could easily switch something over. There isn't an industry behind it that would be able to service it, be able to install, be able to help you. And a lot of the prices, when they're looking at it, they're talking about once the pellet is already there—and all the background trucking and whatnot to get that. So we just look at some help. At times, it feels like, especially in these last couple of years—being chair, I've met with a lot of MPs, a lot of senators on Bill C-234. We appreciate the support that has been vocalized across Ontario, but we do feel that we could use some more help and some more pushback on that.

Thank you so much for having us and for listening to myself here today.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Perfect. That's bang on.

Now we can move to the city of Kitchener, through Zoom.

Mr. Berry Vrbancic: I'm Berry Vrbancic, mayor of the city of Kitchener. On behalf of more than 270,000 residents in the city of Kitchener, let me begin by thanking each of you for your service to the people and businesses of Ontario and for the opportunity today to share Kitchener's priorities with the committee in advance of the 2024 Ontario budget.

Cities and communities throughout Ontario, like the city of Kitchener, are on the front lines of Ontario's most pressing challenges and opportunities. As the largest municipality within our region, Kitchener has long prided itself on its reputation as not only a leader but as a trusted partner with the government of Ontario. We share the same goals as the provincial government not only for housing but also in affordability, livability, customer service and economic development.

Today my remarks will focus primarily on housing and infrastructure, transportation and the innovation economy.

Kitchener remains laser-focused on implementing new, ambitious plans to build more homes now. Since Kitchener city council unanimously endorsed its housing pledge of 35,000 units last March, the city has approved over 30% of its target to date and leads the way provincially in meeting all legislated timelines for development. To continue this critical work, targeted and dedicated funding through the Building Faster Fund is essential. Unfortunately, criteria evaluated on housing starts limits the eligibility of many Ontario municipalities, including the city of Kitchener. Cities can fast-track approvals, but we do not build homes. Due to global economic challenges beyond our control, including the high interest rates, mounting material costs and labour shortages, developers

have been forced to stall the pulling of many of these approved permits, and housing starts have slowed.

While I'm encouraged by Minister Calandra's remarks and Ontario's Big City Mayors' that any unallocated BFF funds will be distributed to municipalities in other ways in the future, I do want to emphasize some urgency around this. For this reason, I continue to urge the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to work with municipalities to ensure fair access to the Building Faster Fund as soon as possible in support of more homes built now and the key infrastructure needed in neighbourhoods where those homes will be located.

While Kitchener remains laser-focused on building more homes, more housing cannot be built without supporting community infrastructure. I applaud the recently announced provincial investments in this regard, including the Housing-Enabling Water Systems Fund and removing PST from purpose-built rentals. In this regard, I encourage the province to continue to advance discussions with the government of Canada to secure a new round of flexible federal-provincial infrastructure funding by the end of 2024.

Rest assured that Kitchener is also calling on the federal government to deliver the next generation of infrastructure funding desperately needed to meet local, provincial and national housing targets and other needs.

Chair, Kitchener is doing everything within our control to build more homes faster. However, the current fiscal framework between cities and communities like Kitchener and upper orders of government like Ontario undermines the ability of municipalities to invest in a central community infrastructure to effectively respond to the housing crisis.

A new provincial-municipal fiscal arrangement is needed now. To this end, I call on the province of Ontario to work with the Ontario's Big City Mayors caucus and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario to determine the tools and funding needed to meet the growing demands of our communities long-term.

Kitchener is also incredibly thankful for the province's ongoing commitment to expanding transportation options throughout our region. Through provincial investment, significant progress towards transforming the Kitchener line into a two-way, all-day rapid transit line has been made. Once complete, the Kitchener line will provide increased service between Kitchener GO station to Union station, enabling residents to travel more efficiently across the province for educational and job opportunities. I would be remiss if I did not emphasize the importance of this work advancing in a timely manner.

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Additionally, completion of the Highway 7 expansion remains a key strategic priority for Kitchener. The Kitchener-Guelph corridor represents a significant growth opportunity for the province. The unrestricted movement of products throughout this regional corridor is vital for our region's economic advancement, particularly across the provincial manufacturing sector. Despite construction and other related delays, Kitchener remains optimistic that visible progress will be made in the medium term, and we're committed to the success of the expansion. Indeed,

recent updates on the Frederick Street underpass replacement and the detailed designs of the new Grand River bridges are encouraging advancements. Highway 7 is a highway that people and businesses want and Ontario needs. So I urge the province of Ontario to continue funding and advancing construction of the Highway 7 expansion and regularly report on its progress publicly.

Finally, Communtech and other regional innovation centres contribute to Ontario's economic development by supporting critical businesses and promoting the province globally. For example, Waterloo region jumped six spots to number 18 on the commercial real estate services 2023 ranking of the top 50 North American tech markets.

The city sincerely thanks the provincial government for its \$7.5-million investment in the new University of Waterloo Innovation Arena located in downtown Kitchener. The project remains on track for its 2024 completion and move-in date.

However, despite being a key part of Ontario's successful innovation economy, funding agreements for regional innovation centres have been frozen for the past 13 years. To fully leverage investments in EV—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Berry Vrbanovic:—battery markets and advanced manufacturing, comparable investment to that of innovation hubs within the US is needed to accelerate and retain local investment and attract foreign direct investment.

To ensure that regional innovation centres continue to maintain Ontario's competitive advantage and fully leverage recent provincial investments in advanced manufacturing, I call on the province of Ontario to increase annual funding for regional innovation centres like Communtech in downtown Kitchener.

In closing, I appreciate the continuous support of the province of Ontario in supporting Kitchener's efforts to deliver vital local services to our community.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share Kitchener's key priorities with this committee in advance of the 2024 Ontario budget. I look forward to the city's ongoing partnership with the province of Ontario to maintain a strong Kitchener for a stronger Ontario.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes the time for the presentation.

It is time for the round of questions, starting with the government. MPP Byers.

Mr. Rick Byers: Thank you to all the presenters for your contributions today.

I want to start with representatives of the OMA. I have a couple of questions for you both. Thank you for the presentation.

Looking first at family doctors and your proposal on team-based care: I was on the board of a community health centre for three years before being elected, and I was very intrigued by that model having, exactly as you talked about, other disciplines there and working with nurse practitioners and doctors. Is it that type of model you're looking to work with—or perhaps if you'd be good enough to outline a little bit more fully what the team-based care

model, in your view, would mean for the government to consider.

Dr. Andrew Park: Thank you for your question.

It's very similar to that model. That model is designed for the communities they serve, and what we're proposing is that this isn't a one-size-fits-all. There's some flexibility to it because physicians in their communities know what their community needs are, so it allows them to build out their teams with the fellow health care members of a team, such as social work, pharmacy, nursing, nurse practitioners, dietitians, physiotherapists etc.—that they know their community needs. It really is about supporting the physician but also increasing the capacity of the physician roster to be able to provide that care.

Mr. Rick Byers: You're absolutely right; each community is going to be different.

Would it be bottom up or top down, if you know what I mean? Is this something that local family health teams or local medical teams would bring to the Ministry of Health to consider, or Ontario Health, as opposed to going the other way?

Ms. Kimberly Moran: Yes, actually. Interestingly enough, the Ministry of Health did have an announcement on expanding team-based care earlier this year. In order to execute or implement that, they asked for submissions and expressions of interest. They got hundreds of responses from all over Ontario with great, innovative ideas to meet local communities' needs.

So, absolutely, it would be a grassroots endeavour, making sure that local physicians and other health care team members are building the models that are appropriate for their communities.

Mr. Rick Byers: Next, I want to ask about the administrative burden that you mentioned, and I've heard this, certainly, before. The Ministry of Health wants to make sure that there is evidence that service was delivered, so we have it on a fee-for-service model, out of some requirement for that.

My question to you is, does that supportive and administrative work need to be done by doctors? Can that be leveraged a little to more medical administrative staff, if you will, as opposed to physicians themselves doing that and taking away from the capacity, as you've mentioned?

Dr. Andrew Park: I don't know anybody who went to medical school to fill out forms, and I think that is highlighting that we need doctors being doctors, and what we do is—we want to be in front of our patients, not in front of screens or with a pen and paper writing out forms. So, absolutely, you're on the right track there, sir.

Mr. Rick Byers: A last quick one on the compensation model, and this is not an easy one: Is it worth thinking more of a salary-based approach and getting away from—I don't know; that's a big subject. I don't know whether there are any thoughts the OMA has on that or whether that's an entirely different topic.

Ms. Kimberly Moran: Definitely, we have thoughts on that. I would say that there are a variety of different models right now here in Ontario, and we have learnings from all of them. We have some that are models based on

the number of patients who are served. We have some that are the fee-for-service model on the specific work that's done. We have some that are based more like salary models, as you suggested. I would say that on a go-forward basis, we have to keep learning about what works best for patients, what delivers the kind of results we need, and what works best for doctors.

Mr. Rick Byers: Thank you very much to you both. I'll pass my time over to MPP Jones.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Chair, can you tell me how much time we have remaining?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): You have 2.26 minutes.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Thank you.

My question is to Mr. Byrne from Grain Farmers of Ontario. Mr. Byrne, thank you for your presentation.

Business risks, management models are not lost on this government. We understand that investment is critical.

Can you please share how our shift in focus to prioritize innovation, like changing the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario Act, listening to our stakeholders to develop best business practices and these things, can help your members ensure the sustainability of Ontario's farms for the future?

Mr. Brendan Byrne: Thank you for the question.

A lot of times, we think some of these risk management programs and money invested in innovation go hand in hand, because a lot of innovation that happens on-farm can't happen without you knowing that you have a backstop that's going to catch you if something fails.

So a lot of our farmers—if you were to go out to a grain farm today, we have the highest technology available on-farm to make sure that everything is exactly where it should be. I think, in terms of pushing that innovation piece, farmers do that every day, but having additional funding go into the university or the college to be able to say, "Let's push this a little further. Let's couple our farmers on-farm with practical people who are in the know, working in universities and finding out where we actually need the innovation"—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Brendan Byrne: A lot of times, we find that innovation comes at us from somebody else telling us, "This is going to change your world," but we look at that and say, "That's not the world we wanted changing. We wanted something else."

So I think that there is an opportunity to backstop the industry in RMP but also to continue that investment in the innovation.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): You have 30 more seconds. MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I guess what I'll do is, I'll introduce the issue of the federal carbon tax and ask Mr. Byrne to think about that, and then the next time we come around, I'll ask my questions, because it's going to take some time.

Mr. Brendan Byrne: Sounds good.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That concludes the time.

Over to MPP Kernaghan.

1330

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you to our presenters here today. It's great to see you all, both those in person and those virtually.

My first questions will be for the Ontario Medical Association. It's great to see you again, Dr. Park.

You mentioned the broken system of health care here in Ontario, and it's something that is a deep concern for everyone, especially those who are trying to access care.

I want to thank you for pointing out to this government that 2.3 million people are without the front line of health care, which is having that primary care physician.

It has also just recently been announced, because of provincial disinvestment and underinvestment, that Ontario has issued waivers allowing Ontario's 140 hospitals to carry a debt, meaning that some are actually taking out high-interest loans. It's especially disturbing for rural and remote hospitals.

Dr. Park, you've mentioned quite a bit about home care, and we couldn't agree more that it's part of a functioning health care system to make sure people have care when and where they need it—ideally, within their home, where they are most comfortable and where they should be, quite frankly, most times.

We heard from other presenters about the issue of wage parity and how people who are working in home and community care are paid dramatically less than those in other fields of health care.

Would the OMA advocate for greater wage parity so that people can have access to good nursing care within the community?

Dr. Andrew Park: It's a great question, MPP Kernaghan. It's nice to see you too.

I think it's really important that health care workers across the spectrum are paid fairly and adequately, to the extent of their expertise.

As you mentioned home care and particularly primary care, I'll jump on that thread. What we're really trying to do is to look at the system and the cracks where we have the system and put in our solutions as upstream as possible, but ensure that they get to the front-line workers. We need access, and part of having access is a stable workforce that is well remunerated to do the jobs that they are expertly, world-class trained to do across the province.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: We see the plight in hospitals of this overreliance on agency nurses, which is really destroying the workforce and the morale in a lot of these sectors. It's deeply concerning.

I want to thank you, as well, for advocating for greater access to team-based care. We've heard about different models. I think it's something that the government really ought to invest in—taking care of, really, the more comprehensive, whole person, rather than being issue-based or visiting for a single reason with your primary care physician.

I did also want to touch on your request—because I know the government has patted themselves on the back quite a bit for the OMA's recommendation to reduce the administrative backlog, something that we've heard about

for the last number of years. Congratulations to you and kudos to you for continuing to advocate for Ontario's doctors.

I want to next turn my questions to Brendan with the grain farmers. Brendan, it's great to see you again.

You've made the numbers very clear: A \$1 investment will yield \$2.24 in economic activity. It makes good fiscal sense. On the side of the official opposition, we strongly believe in supporting Ontario's farmers and agriculture industry. We think the government should also have your back and engage in this investment. It's much-needed, it's long overdue, and it's something that I thank you for continuing to advocate for.

You spoke about how the Risk Management Program is so well respected in other jurisdictions. I wonder if you could speak a little bit further about why it is so well respected by others and why they want to implement one.

Mr. Brendan Byrne: I appreciate the kind comments. The fact that we're trying to make sure that our farm members are heard at these is very important to us.

A lot of times, people look at the supply-managed sector as a shining example, federally, of protection of farmers. We look at the RMP program as the non-supply-managed sector group that can have that same effect within the province. I think with adequate funding, which has been the stopping point there, it is a program that—across Ontario, when you talk to farmers, it works. That's not always the case with government programs; there are usually a lot of farmers who say, "It worked for a little bit, but it doesn't work for this side." But across the province, the feedback I get is, "It works. Now we're able to carry over some funds for when it really is a tough time on the farm." It's creating that backstop. So I think it's kind of polishing up that program that's really well respected by farmers.

Prior to the last election, we did a podcast with all the parties, including their leadership and ag critic, and everyone spoke positively on this investment. It's just a matter of getting it over the hump, I guess, and making sure that case is well-known amongst government and they see the value in putting those dollars forward.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I wonder if you could provide a specific example of how that investment might be used by someone within the agriculture industry.

Mr. Brendan Byrne: I was up in the east and did three meetings last week where yields were fantastic. Sometimes that cost of production isn't as hard to handle when you've had a good yield, but in areas—I farm in Essex, and we had either some really strong areas with rain, or some that got mist or tornado damage. In the event that the weather doesn't co-operate, which is wildly out of our hands and hard to predict, it allows a backstop against that cost of production—but it's also the farmer putting in their money along with the government as kind of a partnership, if you will, to make sure that there is some form of backstop and some form of future success.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Also, you mentioned the carbon tax. We agree that it's unfortunate that the Con-

servative government got rid of the cap-and-trade system and chose the carbon tax.

My next questions will be for Mayor Vrbanovic. Thank you very much for appearing today, Mayor Vrbanovic.

Is the city of Kitchener sitting on a large surplus right now?

Mr. Berry Vrbanovic: Of funding? No, we're not. Obviously, as a city, we do have some reserves for various operational areas, but as with every municipality, we balance our budget on an annual basis.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I believe it was the Premier who said that all municipalities were sitting on—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes the time.

Over to the independent: MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you to everyone for coming in and doing your presentation today.

My question is going to go to the Grain Farmers of Ontario. Brendan, thank you for taking care of, I think you said, 28,000 grain farmers. Kudos, and thank you. God knows we need that food on our table.

There is data out there from the 2021 Census of Agriculture that shows Ontario is losing 319 acres of farmland daily, equal to the loss of one average family farm—forgive me if you mentioned this in your presentation and I did not hear. I think that is very concerning. We know it's sprawl that is happening, that is affecting this. Can you elaborate on the risk this has on the grain farmers to continue to produce grains to feed Ontarians?

Mr. Brendan Byrne: Thank you very much for the question.

Farmers go into the spring with a lot of hope. We plant a seed and say, "Six months from now, we're going to have a bountiful harvest." We're used to a certain amount of risk.

On the losing acreage side, I look at it as—Ontario is somewhere I am super proud to live, and I think others are looking at Ontario and saying they want to live here as well. So I think there is a give-and-take that does happen. Do we want to see prime farmland taken out of production? Absolutely not, but there probably are some marginal lands or things like that that could be used for housing, because it's obviously an issue. But those are our consumers as well. We're growing crops, and we're working with our partners in the other sectors to make sure and feed everybody in Ontario.

More people in Ontario is a good thing for us, as farmers, because we have more people who want and demand our product locally and a little closer to home.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I have a follow-up question. There's a great risk if the province keeps losing farmland to urban sprawl. What do you see in the future? Can we be losing this increase of revenue for our own economy and our own farmers, because now we have to bring in food from outside?

1340

Mr. Brendan Byrne: It's always a risk. I think that's when we're looking at the investment dollars on the innovation side and the risk management side, because if

you look at the yields that we would have had even 20 years ago, we're far surpassing those today. So we are able to grow more on less land, but we certainly don't want to get into a situation where we're losing an overabundance of land and losing farmers. We've got some farmers with smaller plots of land in really good areas that are really good-growing, but they're also right up against the city limits, and we don't want to lose that.

I think there needs to be an open dialogue and conversation amongst the farm community and the groups that advocate for them, as well as the government, on how to build up, maybe, versus not so wide, or some of those pieces. To house people on a little less land, we may need to go a little higher and find some things there. That stuff is out of my wheelhouse. I just know that we want to make sure we have a vibrant farming community that I can pass to my children and their children's children—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Brendan Byrne: —if they're so interested in continuing to do it.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you for putting that on the record.

I have no more questions.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): At this time, we are going to go to the government side. MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Mr. Byrne, back to my original line of questioning, which was related to the federal carbon tax: There are a lot of people in the province of Ontario who are under the mistaken impression that farmers don't pay any of the carbon tax. I would like you to take this opportunity to describe how farmers do, in fact, pay the carbon tax, and give us an idea of the numbers involved with regard to various processes in farming and how much money that involves—paying just the carbon tax.

Mr. Brendan Byrne: There is kind of a misnomer that farmers can pass things along to other people. We're price-takers on the grain side, so on the grain-drying part, we pay carbon tax on our propane or natural gas to dry crops.

In some cases, in Essex county, we've taken off corn where we didn't need to dry it. In other cases, we've taken off corn at 30-something per cent and had to dry it down to 16%; it took a lot of drying costs to get down, so that money is tacked on to that.

I've talked to farmers across the province, and I've heard from farmers who are paying \$50,000 in carbon tax.

There was a federal rebate that we worked hard to try to get done, but that rebate—for every dollar in carbon tax a farmer pays, they're receiving about 13 cents back from the federal government. They're trying to say that it's offset, but it really isn't, and there isn't an alternative to what we can do.

We're only in the mid-stages of the 2030 escalation, so we're nowhere close to the amount we're going to pay. That's money out of operations that could go back into a business that could stay in Ontario.

That's the main thing for me, as a grain farmer in Ontario—\$40,000 to \$50,000 going to the federal govern-

ment doesn't do me any good; \$40,000 to \$50,000 staying in my local community can do a tremendous amount of good.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I'm from Essex county. I understand what you mean when you talk about drying grain and the necessity of drying grain, so I want you to elaborate on that for those people who are not from agricultural areas. Can't you just go into a field and pick the grain with a machine and then ship it off to your purchaser? Why does it have to be dried? And you mentioned using propane and natural gas to dry grain. Why can't you dry it with something else? I think that people in non-agricultural areas would really like an explanation with regard to those matters.

Mr. Brendan Byrne: On the first point: Going into a harvest season, we really don't know what we're going to be taking out of the field until we get going. We have an idea based on the weather pattern. We have an idea based on hand-picking some stuff to check. Essentially, all you're doing is taking the moisture out of, say, a wheat crop, or out of a corn crop, especially, so that you can store it and make sure that it's usable for the ethanol industry, for feed, for all those different areas that corn is used in. If you were to take it off at 30% and ship it, and somebody stored it at 30%, it's just going to rot and be no good to anybody. So it's just putting it at a level where you can now store it for a longer period of time if you needed to, until you are turning it into something viable for Ontario.

The other options people have discussed—there are a lot of different things where I guess ideologies do change, but natural gas was a safe fuel for a long time. It was something that we wanted to keep using, and then all of a sudden it became vilified by the federal government.

If we bring in wet corn, we need something reliable—push a button and the drying can start. It's intermittent. If we have one day of good drying and the next day it snows, we don't dry for another two weeks until we can get back in the field. So it's not a continuous, year-long process as some would think. But there really are not any viable options worldwide. We are putting some research dollars into it with government to try to see what they think we're missing, but we have yet to find a viable alternative that could be a reliable source for Ontario or anywhere else in Canada.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Following up on what you mentioned about the federal carbon tax escalation: My understanding is that by 2035 it is the intention of the federal government to triple the carbon tax. If, in fact, the carbon tax is tripled by the federal government, what effect will that have on grain farming operations? I ask you to please be specific; don't speak in generalities. What will happen to a grain farmer like you if the federal government does, in fact, triple the carbon tax by 2035?

Mr. Brendan Byrne: If that triples—like the previous question, in terms of the worry of losing farmers—that's where you're going to lose them. You're going to lose farmers when it's not viable to actually grow a crop, and the industries that rely on us as well, or the feed needs, are then going to have to be outsourced to areas.

I look at it competitively, as well. I'm in Essex, and I'm paying carbon tax on grain drying on corn. My farms are close to the 401, and I'm watching US corn come in every single day that is not paying a carbon tax and has not had the same restrictions as us. So we're putting ourselves on an uneven playing field for no real reason beyond an ideology. You will start to have farmers who are at their wits' end, saying, "I can't afford this anymore." The margins are not huge. You don't have \$500,000 sitting there—and you say, "Oh, I'll just pay my carbon tax, and I move over to this; I pay this." It's taking the livelihood out of some of the farmers' pockets, especially in lean years.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): You have 1.34 minutes.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: One more time, referring specifically to Essex county, because that's where I'm from: With regard to the grains from Essex county and in competition with imported—I won't say imported; I'll just say grain being shipped from the United States into Ontario—my understanding is that much of the corn, especially, is used in the production of ethanol. Could you please speak to the committee with regard to why corn is being used in ethanol? And what does ethanol do?

Mr. Brendan Byrne: Years ago, government as well as farmers looked at the potential of building a new industry in Ontario. That's when the ethanol discussions started to happen. The ethanol industry is thriving in Ontario. It's going to be a very tough go-ahead with the electric vehicle pushes and whatnot.

Taking something from corn, still being able to feed the by-product to animals, but then turning it into an additional product in ethanol is everything we're looking for in Ontario. You're looking at what you can take that you're producing today and spit it into two or three offshoots so that if one slows down you can still have a viable operation, or a viable area, to send it to. It's the same way that we send it to Wiser's and that for whisky production. Some of the best whisky in the world comes out of Ontario. Yes, the ethanol into our vehicles is a safe fuel that we see at the pump, on the sticker.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That concludes the time for the government side.

It's time to move on to MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I'd like to continue my questions with Mayor Vrbanovic.

Mayor, you indicated that municipalities are required to balance budgets in most cases. It's something that we've heard at this committee from many non-profits and other organizations that cannot carry a surplus—that they have to balance their budgets—many of whom rely upon grant writing year over year. They're not provided the operational funds—also, fundraising, simply to keep the lights on. I want to ask, does this make sense—the way that municipalities are treated by the province, when the province is sitting on \$5.4 billion in a contingency fund?

1350

Mr. Berry Vrbanovic: Thank you for your question.

It's not my role to speculate on the financial pressures that the province is dealing with.

What I can tell you is that municipalities like Kitchener and municipalities across the province and across the country are dealing with a fiscal framework that's based on a 19th-century framework and legislation while we deal with 21st-century problems. That's why all municipalities across the country and across Ontario are saying it's time for provincial, territorial and federal governments to work with municipalities to come up with a new fiscal framework that allows us to deal with the kinds of challenges that we're dealing with today: issues of affordability, housing, homelessness, addictions and so on that all of our communities are facing. It's something that, certainly in the province of Ontario, both Ontario's Big City Mayors and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario are calling for.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: There has been much discussion with AMO about the impacts of Bill 23 and how money was basically shifted into developers' hands, and not having to pay those development charges. Given the response from AMO and the upset from a lot of mayors across the province of Ontario, there have been some sort of loose, verbal-only promises that had been made to municipalities, that they would be made whole.

I want to ask: Has the city of Kitchener been made whole by the province?

Mr. Berry Vrbanovic: Certainly, like any piece of legislation, there are things that are helpful and some that remain to be challenges. We continue to be in dialogue with the provincial government on that.

From a financial point of view, the answer around remaining whole is still to be finalized. Certainly, the BFF fund was a step in that direction, but because of the way it's being measured, that continues to provide a challenge, and that's why we've asked the minister to relook at that. Up to this point, he has indicated that he's keeping the original criteria in place but he may look at some other mechanisms of how to distribute that funding for municipalities that perhaps aren't meeting the criteria—which, incidentally, is the majority of municipalities in the province.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: How much time do I have, Chair?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): You have 3.45 minutes.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I'd like to return to Dr. Park and Kimberly Moran.

Dr. Park, could you elaborate on the importance of a northern and rural physician workforce strategy?

Dr. Andrew Park: Thank you for the question. I'll start, and I'll let Kimberly expand on this.

The northern workforce strategy is very critical because of the incredible land mass and the population and the population density—we're talking about the size of, essentially, Germany with a population of less than 250,000 people, so that creates some immense challenges that we just don't face in the southwestern or other parts of the province. Having a real workforce strategy that

understands those challenges and is able to respond and provide coverage is something that's extremely important to ensuring those citizens of Ontario get the care that they need.

Kimberly, do you want to expand on that?

Ms. Kimberly Moran: I think some of the stories that really are evocative for me is that physicians there—family physicians, often—are the ones who are maintaining emergency rooms there, in many cases. What they find is that there's such a shortage of doctors there, a shortage of staff, that they have to prioritize keeping the emergency rooms open, and they close their primary care clinics, which is such a huge loss for the community. We hear media headlines about different hospitals closing their emergency rooms, and that's a terrible thing. But they keep the northern emergency rooms open because it's hundreds and hundreds of miles that a patient would have to go to another hospital; in that case, that patient could die.

The fact that we don't see headlines about emergency rooms closing in the north is really a misnomer. It hides the real issue of an extreme HHR shortage.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I think, most popularly, what was recognized was the closure of the Minden ER and how the government chose to do nothing in order to buttress that ER. It's deeply concerning.

Just to return to what was discussed earlier about that: The government is now allowing hospitals to operate with a deficit, to take out high-interest loans, because of their disinvestment and their lack of investment.

I want to ask about the value of having embedded care coordinators within home care as well as primary care in Ontario health teams. What would that do for them?

Ms. Kimberly Moran: Well, I think that we want to have care as close to home as possible. Primary care physicians, family medicine specialists are those who are at the front line of care with patients and with family. If you could have care coordinators who are located within those clinics and within those practices, what you're going to do is get much more seamless care for patients and for Ontarians, more generally.

Andrew?

Dr. Andrew Park: I think that we really need to look at them as part of the team for the continuum of patients' lives. If we can go from the clinic, basically, to home care supports, then we avoid a hospital system that's very costly, that patients don't want to go to anyway. So this is part of an extension of the team models that we've been talking about.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That concludes the time for the official opposition.

It's time to go to the independent. MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: My question is for Andrew and Kimberly from the Ontario Medical Association.

We've also heard from many medical associations and agencies that came in and presented to us on similar gaps—so staffing shortages, revenue crunch, staff being burnt-out, a shortage of family doctors, wait times have increased ridiculously, and the closing of many ER rooms.

I want to bring my questions to a specific group of vulnerable patients that you spoke about, and these are the palliative care patients and the patients who want to have care in their homes. I believe you're asking for more funding to make this happen. Where this is really tugging on my heartstrings is that these people paid their taxes, and I think they deserve to live in their home and have that care. I also believe that the palliative care patients should be able to live out their lives and pass this earth with dignity. So it's very sad for me to know when these vulnerable people are not being taken care of. Can you elaborate on the impact that this is having on these vulnerable patients in your care?

Dr. Andrew Park: Less than 20% of our population gets palliative care in the fashion that they want or plan out for the end of their life to include.

And you're absolutely right; there's a dignity to dying that is extremely important.

We know that putting in palliative care, in the home sense, makes much more sense because it prevents hospital transfers. Patients who are identified early and start working with palliative care coordinators and palliative care professionals use hospital resources less. Their satisfaction is higher. The wraparound care that is provided for them and the supports in the community are extremely valuable. I say this as someone who has lost a parent having had that palliative resource around them—and I think that's something every Ontarian should have access to and have availability of.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I want to follow up on the investments in our community that you are asking for. You mentioned that there's a timeline for investments that you're asking for by March 2026, and I think I missed that, so can you elaborate on that or restate the reason for your statement?

1400

Ms. Kimberly Moran: It's really about urgency. We really see the urgency to getting investments in team-based care so that at least 50% of Ontarians can have access to teams by March 31, 2026. That's really just to put some kind of goalpost, to make sure that this happens.

We know that, as we said, 2.3 million Ontarians now don't have a family doctor.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Kimberly Moran: Without this type of action, with speed and with urgency, we will see more than four million Ontarians without a family doctor by 2026. So it really is about urgency.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you very much, for the record.

No further questions.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That concludes the presentation from this panel.

Again, I want to say thank you for your time and coming here.

Thank you to the farmers—farmers feed cities—and thank you for feeding all Ontarians, including city boys like us.

FEDERATION OF CANADIAN
SECONDARY STUDENTS
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' COUNCIL AT
WESTERN UNIVERSITY
KEEP THE GREENBELT
PROMISE CAMPAIGN

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Our next panel is waiting for us, virtually.

I would like to remind the presenters that you will have seven minutes for your presentation. After we have heard from the presenters, the remaining 39 minutes for the time slot will be the questions from the members of the committee.

I will be giving you a heads-up one minute before your time concludes. Please carry on; it's just a heads-up at that time.

At this time, I will request the member from the Federation of Canadian Secondary Students. Please introduce yourself for the Hansard. You have seven minutes. Over to you.

Mr. Frank Li: My name is Frank Li. I represent the Federation of Canadian Secondary Students, a registered Canadian charity founded in 2012 that advocates for the interests of Canadian secondary students nationwide. I am currently a high school student in Ontario's publicly funded education system. I'm grateful for the opportunity to testify before the committee today on priorities for the 2024 Ontario budget.

I would like to preface my comments by noting that Ontario students have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, not just with respect to learning loss, as we hear often in media, but also with regard to social and emotional development. Over the past four years, students have lost out on so many developmental milestones: outings with friends, graduations, proms and dances. All of that is part of growing up, and this will have profound impacts down the road. We are already seeing the effects in classrooms. Teachers say that students have no respect for deadlines or ignore classroom rules.

That is why it is imperative, now more than ever, that the government commit to make historic investments in public education to ensure that the future generation is prepared and ready to take on responsibilities of tomorrow.

My comments today will focus on two items that we believe deserve special attention for funding in the education sector: access to technology and access to extracurricular activities.

First, on access to technology: The shift in recent years to online learning materials and platforms has left many students behind. Students in low-income neighbourhoods have been disproportionately impacted, and the importance of having access to technology as a student of today has never been more clear. At a time when 91% of secondary school teachers in Ontario use online classrooms to communicate to students, these students simply have no means to adapt.

While the government has made investments in technology, this has not met the levels of funding needed, and as a result, many schools have started to fundraise for technology out of necessity. A survey conducted by People for Education determined that 22% of secondary schools reported fundraising for the express purpose of acquiring technology for their own students. Aside from 22% not being a very encouraging number, there is also a second problem: How is it that schools in low-income communities, which are already under great stress, can expect to meaningfully fundraise?

The same issue, we think, flags the bring-your-own-device, or BYOD, initiative that many schools have taken on. In order to participate, a student must have access to technology at home in the first place. The federation would therefore encourage the government to consider further investments in education technology to ensure that all students, particularly those in rural areas, also have ready access to both devices for educational use and access to high-speed Internet.

Second, on access to extracurricular activities: Extracurricular activities have seen a strong rebound since pandemic-era closures, and we are excited to see a return to normal. Now, especially, clubs and sports, concerts and plays serve as key outlets to build character, creativity, collaboration and critical thinking. And to a high school student, these involvements are essential to balance out the stress of coursework and assessments.

There is a caveat, however: This recovery has, again, not been proportional. The amount of opportunities secondary students have access to is far too dependent on neighbourhood income. In a report released just last month by People for Education, this divide is made clear. While 47% of schools in high-income neighbourhoods offer additional academic competitions to its students, this is only 16% of schools in low-income neighbourhoods. It's no different for the arts, as well—80% of high schools in high-earning neighbourhoods have arts clubs compared to just 66%. And in general fundraising for extracurriculars, the difference is threefold—roughly \$10,000, on average, to \$3,500 per school.

The federation believes that where students are situated should not hinder their ability to access opportunities outside of school. Understanding that structural barriers such as transportation often complicate the situation further, we would encourage the government to invest in a grant for extracurricular activities, distribute it on a per student basis and adjust it for both income and rural-urban disparities.

Lack of technology and access to extracurriculars are what we believe to be two of the most pressing issues facing secondary students today. To encounter challenges learning with others digitally and to encounter barriers from participating in activities students cherish is not something I would characterize as a positive high school experience.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present on behalf of the Federation of Canadian Secondary Students. I would welcome any questions or comments.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): At this time, we would like to go to the University Students' Council at Western University. You have seven minutes. Please start with your name for Hansard.

Ms. Emily Poirier: My name is Emily Poirier. I'm the vice-president, external affairs, of the University Students' Council at Western University. I'm here today representing over 35,000 students at Western University. I represent their concerns and issues that we'd like to see reflected in the 2024 budget.

I'll start by saying that the USC is a member of the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, which presented to the committee last week. The USC echoes these recommendations, including on increasing operational grants to universities, while also wishing to add additional comments on areas that are of particular concern to our students.

My constituents have outlined three key areas of concern:

- improving affordability in supporting new graduates through improving interest on the Ontario Student Assistance Program;

- improving housing affordability for students and communities through the investment in and incentivization of rapid construction of purpose-built housing; and

- addressing and preventing gender-based and sexual violence through the allocation of funding to survey student experiences and perceptions of violence, as well as consistent funding to support gender-based violence prevention offices on-campus.

For OSAP: According to data from the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, one in four students in Ontario expect to graduate with more than \$20,000 in debt. From the same survey, 29% of Ontario students expect to graduate debt-free, which is lower than the national percentage, which is 36%, and this number has continued to decrease year over year. With the continuing affordability crisis, students are very concerned about their future job prospects and ability to pay back those student loans that they take out in order to attend university.

The Ontario Real Estate Association also put out a report in September 2023 describing how graduates with debt greater than \$5,000 agree that their debt had made it harder for them to save up for a home, and 42% of graduates would consider leaving the province for a lower cost of living and more attainable housing. With this in mind, this is a significant barrier to students being able to establish themselves in their careers and within their communities post-graduation.

1410

OSAP interest increases the loan amount as the interest accrues, and it will take longer for graduates to repay larger sums, as it will be a larger sum as well. With the removal of the federal portion of interest on student loans, the average borrower has saved \$410 per year in interest, which has significantly reduced the burden on young graduates.

Additionally, students with a high debt burden have reduced purchasing power and lower overall economic mobility due to the financial risk and uncertainty associated with that. It also prevents them from engaging in

innovation and entrepreneurship due to concerns around being able to repay their student loans.

By removing interest on student loans, students would be able to participate much more fully within the Ontario economy, as well as to establish themselves within the confines of the current affordability crisis.

Continuing on within affordability: Housing has continued to be an issue for all Ontarians; students are no exception. Affordable and safe housing in university towns is declining at a rapid pace. As such, the USC recommends that the provincial government respond appropriately and invest in constructing purpose-built rental housing near post-secondary institutions.

A report conducted by Rentals.ca found that London, Hamilton and Toronto have experienced significant annual increases in average rent, with 18.3%, 15.9% and 14.3%, respectively, in increase per year.

The rising cost of housing has been a huge challenge for students, who are already rapidly accumulating debt in order to finance their studies. Increasing costs leave students with limited choice as to finding housing that fits their needs appropriately and supports their safety and well-being, often choosing between having affordable housing and housing that is safe. This also can lead to students living farther away from campus, which makes them less likely to access resources like mental health support and academic advising, due to the distance required to access these support services. The knock-on effect also affects the rest of the community, where housing prices in university towns increase with the arrival of students. Rent prices tend to increase in the fall in university towns, with the arrival of students, which has a negative effect on the community as a whole.

By investing in the rapid construction of housing, including purpose-built rental student housing, as well as incentivizing the construction of on-campus housing by universities, the increased supply of housing that is specifically targeted to students' needs will relieve the pressure on the rental market in university towns, allowing for more affordable housing for students and for non-students alike within these regions.

Finally, gender-based and sexual violence continues to be a huge issue to students, and particularly at Western. There has been a lot of good work that has been done over the last several years in terms of improving regulation and improving safety in this area, but there remains much more to be done. One of the large issues within this area is that there is often insufficient data as to how the trends have changed year over year. The last province-wide data collection on sexual violence was in 2018, and in the survey, 32.4% of Western students reported non-consensual sexual contact during their time in university, which is the highest in the province. Five years and a pandemic later, we don't really have any more up-to-date information on a provincial scale that is not specifically from the GBSV office, which would require disclosure, to give us an idea of what that currently looks like.

The landscape has changed enormously since the pandemic in terms of students changing how they relate to

each other, in terms of the types of gender-based violence that is faced. We see this anecdotally, but we really don't have any kind of province-wide data to be able to see the real effects of this as of right now. This is key in order to offer protections. If we don't know the scale of the problem, we really can't work to address it.

So the USC is looking for the Minister of Colleges and Universities to reimplement the Student Voices on Sexual Violence Survey. This survey has previously been used successfully to highlight areas of concern. An example of this has been that in the previous survey, only 22.4% of respondents indicated they knew where to access support on their post-secondary campus, so this allowed for universities to understand that in order for students to be able to access these services, they need to—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Emily Poirier: Post-secondary institutions cannot act without predictable funding as well. By ensuring that gender-based violence offices are properly funded, it ensures that survivors and students as a whole are able to better access supports and access education on gender-based violence. With both the access to resources as well as the access to data, the universities and the ministry would be able to much more easily address the issue.

The USC urges the provincial government to take these recommendations into consideration while drafting the 2024 budget.

I'm happy to take any questions.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much.

We have the next presenter, also virtually: Keep the Greenbelt Promise campaign. Over to you, sir.

Mr. Mike Marcolongo: For Hansard purposes: I am Mike Marcolongo. I am the campaign director with the Small Change Fund.

Before I start my remarks, I just want to say that I was hoping to be there in person, but unfortunately, because of the inclement weather, I opted not to. The Retro Suites, as I'm sure you'll agree with me, is one of the neatest hotels in the province. It's very creative, and it reflects the creativity and ingenuity of rural Ontario. But thanks for the opportunity for the virtual option, given the weather.

Thank you for the opportunity, Chair and committee members. I am the campaign director with the Small Change Fund, and I'll tell you quickly about myself. I started the Keep the Greenbelt Promise campaign just over a year ago, after the Ontario government announced the greenbelt carve-outs.

I left the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, OMAFRA, after almost 20 years as a policy adviser because the speed and locations chosen for the greenbelt carve-outs didn't make sense to me. While some of my colleagues couldn't believe that I would leave a stable, pensionable job in order to challenge the greenbelt decision, I was vindicated when the Auditor General and the Integrity Commissioner arrived at the findings vis-à-vis the greenbelt decision-making.

But let's go back to the task at hand. Provincial budgets are important planning documents used by businesses,

governments and organizations not only for financial management but also to outline the Ontario government priorities. In 2024, I'm asking you to send Ontarians a message that you are committed to protecting Ontario's greenbelt and Ontario's natural infrastructure. And 2024 will be an important year for the Ontario government, as we are at a crossroads. Ontarians are asking, "Will this government enhance ecological functions of the greenbelt or work to undermine them?"

I'm going to start by stating that the climate crisis is here and it's costing Ontario's businesses, municipalities and residents hundreds of thousands of dollars—and into millions, as well.

On January 8, 2024, the Insurance Bureau of Canada, IBC, announced that for the second year in a row Canada exceeded \$3 billion in insured damage from natural catastrophes and severe weather events. According to the Insurance Bureau of Canada, "2023 is now the fourth-worst year for insured losses in Canada. This grim statistic highlights the financial costs of a changing climate to insurers, governments and taxpayers."

The bottom line is, Canada and Ontario are becoming a more expensive place to do business and to live because of climate change. It's exacerbating the frequency and severity of natural disasters. The cost of doing nothing is very high.

This government's own Advisory Panel on Climate Change, in a 2021 report to former Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks David Piccini, arrived at the same conclusion: "The risks are clear. And the time for protective action is now."

As you may know, natural ecosystems such as waterways, wetlands, woodlands, grasslands and wild lands contribute to climate resiliency by providing the following ecological goods and services: water and carbon retention, heat events mitigation, water and air quality improvements, biological diversity and wildlife habitat conservation, and opportunities for recreation for people.

The greenbelt and Ontario's natural infrastructure play an important role in Ontario's response to the climate crisis. The greenbelt is not only Ontario's safeguard from unfettered suburban sprawl; it also represents the largest privately held protected natural infrastructure.

For the 2024 provincial budget, I ask you to invest in measures that enhance, not undermine, the greenbelt and Ontario's natural infrastructure.

Number one, allocate funding for the acquisition and restoration of natural infrastructure in Ontario's greenbelt. This measure will support farmers, residents and conservation authorities interested in restoring wetlands, forests and grasslands critical to species at risk while allowing your government to invest directly in environmental stewardship.

The November 2021 Auditor General of Ontario report Protecting and Recovering Species at Risk sets out in excruciating detail the government of Ontario's failure to exercise its duty to protect the province's most vulnerable plants and animals.

Now is the time to enhance the species at risk stewardship program. This program encourages organizations to get involved in protecting and recovering species at risk and their habitat through stewardship activities. Currently, Ontario only invests up to \$4.5 million per year as part of this program. I'm asking you to triple the species at risk stewardship program funding to \$13.5 million and dedicate a stream to greenbelt-eligible areas to restore natural infrastructure in those near-urban areas.

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Number two: Fund the revalidation of near-urban farming in the greenbelt, especially in the specialty-crop areas of the greenbelt.

This comes directly from OMAFRA's website. The following crops are predominantly grown in specialty-crop areas: tender fruits; grapes; other fruit crops such as apples, pears and berries; vegetable crops; greenhouse crops and crops from agriculturally developed organic soils such as carrots and onions. Provincial policy gives specialty-crop areas the highest priority for protection, because "they are scarce and unique; if lost, they cannot be re-created. They are important economically and represent some of Ontario's highest-earning agricultural lands" and "provide many value-added and agri-tourism opportunities."

Unfortunately, many specialty-crop areas are vulnerable to urban expansion and fragmentation, especially in the Niagara region.

For budget 2024, I encourage this government to budget for a new program that will provide opportunities for land-owners in underutilized specialty-crop areas to strengthen and pursue value-added production and agritourism.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Mike Marcolongo: The third one is to rescind the funding allocated for the preliminary work associated with your government's greenbelt highways—estimated cost between \$10 billion and \$13 billion: the 413 and the Bradford Bypass. Instead, examine alternatives such as toll subsidies for the underutilized 407. Currently, most truckers use the 401 because the 407 tolls are prohibitive. A clear alternative is for more trucks to use the 407 because it's uncongested and it's parallel to the proposed 413 highway. Transport Action Ontario calculates that a full toll subsidy for that many trucks over a 30-year period would add up to about \$4 billion in today's dollars. This is in contrast to the cost of Highway 413, which independent analysts have pegged will cost between \$8 billion and \$10 billion in the near term.

In 2024, send Ontarians the message that you're committed to protecting Ontario's natural infrastructure, and in particular, Ontario's greenbelt.

Thank you for the opportunity.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much.

At this time, we would like to start with the members of the opposition. MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you to all our presenters today.

I would like to start with the Federation of Canadian Secondary Students.

First, I just want to congratulate you for putting your name forward and for presenting so well to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs. I'm sure you have a bright future ahead. Well done.

I think it's deeply concerning—you mentioned some very key, critical points—that there are schools which are haves and those which are have-nots. As a former educator, I've had the opportunity to work in both of those different types of schools and see exactly on the ground what happens when the province doesn't invest enough in education. In fact, we know that funding is down \$1,200 per student since this government took power in 2018. So thank you very much for your comments.

I would like to turn my questions to the University Students' Council and Emily Poirier. Hello, Emily.

First, as we discuss education, we're talking about the future, we're talking about prosperity, but we're also talking about the opportunity to live a full life that is rewarding both intrinsically and extrinsically.

Recently, the government's own blue-ribbon panel recommended that the government immediately increase by 10% their government grants to colleges as well as universities.

In your studies, have you come across where Ontario ranks in terms of its expenditures on post-secondary education as opposed to the other provinces and territories within Canada?

Ms. Emily Poirier: Thank you for the question.

I don't have the number directly in front of me, but based on memory, Ontario does rank relatively low. In terms of the per student funding, I do believe we are the lowest, but I will confirm that and be able to send that your way.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I apologize for the question—it was not necessarily included within your brief. But you're absolutely right; Ontario is a laggard. They are the last. They are the lowest. In fact, I believe the number is that they would have to increase their expenditures by 43%—that's not even to be first; that's simply to be second last.

I want to ask you, Emily, if you could tell the committee, most of whom probably have not had to pay a student loan in quite some time, what is the provincial interest rate on student loans?

Ms. Emily Poirier: I actually am not sure, off the top of my head. I haven't started paying back my student loan yet. I will say, though, my \$21,000 of student debt—are eager to be paid back. It is lower than the market rate. However, it is still relatively high.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: In my recent studies, I think it's 8%, which I think the government should agree is awfully high and punishing for somebody who is just looking to start their life.

In terms of stories you hear from the folks you represent, how do high housing costs impact students when it comes to them choosing the institution where they want to pursue their studies?

Ms. Emily Poirier: That is a huge factor for most students when it comes to choosing where they will attend. Speaking from my own experience and even for my parents', the decision was that I could either choose to live at home and they would pay for all of my expenses, or I could live outside of the province—and even five years ago, that was a very different decision than it is now.

A lot of what I hear from students who are engaged with students who are touring, who are looking for their post-secondary education where they want to attend—one of the most common questions that are asked by parents and by students is, “What do housing costs look like in London?” And, unfortunately, it's not great. It has been a huge question that is asked both of student leaders and of administrators when students are looking for where they're going to live.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: When you're graduating with over \$20,000 in debt, you want to make sure you're saving as much money as you possibly can, and it's no wonder people have to make these decisions. It's unfortunate that they're placed in that situation.

I'd like to move over to Mike.

Mike, I just want to congratulate you on a huge win in terms of getting the greenbelt back—making this government fall back on their heels and reverse their policy decision.

I want to also speak about a recent editorial from the Toronto Star. When they were speaking about Premier Doug Ford, they said, “His only apparent defence against allegations of corruption on recent land use decisions is to claim profound ignorance of key decisions on his government's number one priority, decisions that attracted publicity, debate and significant opposition.”

My question for you is, do you think the government chose to pretend that this issue was about housing when it actually had nothing to do with the creation of truly affordable housing?

Mr. Mike Marcolongo: Thank you for your question.

Unfortunately, as we all know—I would get my answers from the Auditor General and the Integrity Commissioner's report. They made it quite clear that, unfortunately, it wasn't about housing. So I think that at that point the decision became indefensible, and a short time later, the government did reverse its decision.

However, it still stands that we are dealing with Bill 23. A lot of the measures there are also about affordability and housing. Unfortunately, there are also significant challenges for municipalities related to Bill 23, especially around the definition of affordability. As you know, the definition of affordability changed from an income definition to a market definition and it has made a lot more housing exempt from DCs, or development charges, and that has put a lot of pressure on municipalities. This government has said they intend to make municipalities whole. We haven't seen that yet.

We certainly need interventions at this point for more affordability—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Mike Marcolongo:—and for more affordable housing. But a lot of the measures that we saw from last fall—whether it's the greenbelt; whether it's Bill 23; whether it's the reversal of the official plan and the forced urban boundary expansions around the official plans, under the guise of more housing—haven't quite panned out.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you very much for your comments, Mike.

I guess, when it comes to the really loose promise about making municipalities whole, this government will claim that the cheque is in the mail, but it seems to be taking quite some time.

Again, I want to congratulate you on a huge win. Well done. Keep up the very good work. I very much appreciate everything that you do for our province.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): We would like to move over to the independent members. MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thanks, everyone, for coming in and presenting to us.

I am going to put forward my questions to Emily and Frank.

We've heard from universities and student bodies at this committee that underinvestment in post-secondary education is a major concern. Unfortunately, in your presentations to us today, we've heard the cries of underfunding and the challenges that it's causing to secondary students and university students. We continue to hear about university students leaving university in debt, and then they're met with the affordability crisis, of course; we know it's impacting the university students. Housing is a major concern for university students, especially the international students. We heard that COVID-19 pandemic challenges are still current.

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My question for both of you: You've given us a lot of information for digest, but can you summarize your top priorities for the record—your major concerns, for your university students and your secondary students, in your presentation? What are your top priorities, and what do you want to leave us with today?

And thank you for being so brave with your presentations.

Ms. Emily Poirier: Based on our presentation, I believe that our housing recommendation in terms of incentivizing housing would be our top ask at the moment, partially because of the impact that it has not just on students but on the larger community—that this is really having ripple effects on how students are able to afford housing, not just now but down the road, in terms of increasing supply of housing. Additionally, in terms of removing interest on student loans, that is the other key concern here. As I mentioned in my remarks, student debt has a huge impact on ability to afford housing, as well. So I believe that those two recommendations really go hand in hand.

Gender-based violence continues to be a concern, but I believe that the OSAP interest removal as well as incen-

tivizing construction of housing is really what will impact students in the most immediate future.

Mr. Frank Li: With the two issues that we brought to you today, the access to technology and extracurriculars, I think the common theme here is students having access to the resources they need to succeed in post-secondary education—I think, more specifically, it's more that there is unequal access here. It's often an issue about where you live or the income of your household. We think these factors should not affect a student's ability to succeed. So, yes, that's where the problem comes in.

MPP Andrea Hazell: No further questions.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That concludes the time for the independent members.

Now we will be moving over to the government members. MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I'd like to ask a question of Frank, the young person who made the presentation on behalf of the secondary students.

Thank you for being here, Frank. I think you gave a very professional presentation, and I want to congratulate you for that.

What grade are you in, Frank?

Mr. Frank Li: I'm in grade 11.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Do you want to tell us what school you go to or do you want to not tell us?

Mr. Frank Li: I go to school in Aurora. It's called the Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I'm sure the people at your high school are going to be very proud that you did this today, and they should be proud, because you did a good job.

I want to ask you a couple of questions, and you can answer them any way you want to answer them, Frank.

I had a discussion very recently with a gentleman from the Canadian tool manufacturers' association, so he was a gentleman who represents tool manufacturers. He was telling me that he's very, very happy with the government's program in supporting the career-ready initiative in high schools. Let me tell you what that is. It helps train high school students in skilled trades like electricity, plumbing, drywalling etc.

Do you have anything like that in your high school?

Mr. Frank Li: Yes, for sure—at least, I know across the York Region District School Board, there is a program called SHSM, Specialist High Skills Major. You can specialize in the trades, such as construction, transportation. Those are the ones I know of. So, yes, I do believe opportunities exist, at least in my area.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: At your school, do you know if there are any students participating in that career-ready training?

Mr. Frank Li: Yes, there are.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Do you know how many?

Mr. Frank Li: I'm not sure. I don't have the exact numbers in front of me.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Okay. Well, I think you've done a great job representing your school and high school students across the province of Ontario, Frank. Thank you very much for your participation today.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to now ask some questions of Emily, who was representing the university students, the post-secondary students.

Emily, thank you for being here today.

I'm the father of university-aged young people. Many parents like me—when we send our kids away to school, we want to make sure that our kids are safe. You touched on the issue of on-campus sexual misconduct; I'll just lump it all together and call it sexual misconduct. Parents like me are concerned about that. We want to make sure our kids are safe from sexual misconduct. We don't want that to happen.

In my previous experience of many, many years on university campuses—some people might say too many years—it was my experience, now looking back as a parent, that some of these activities that occurred on-campus which led to this misconduct were actually sponsored by student organizations.

I don't want to paint all the student organizations with the same brush. Some are very responsible. Others are sponsoring activities which lead to sexual misconduct.

Are you aware of any programs at your campus or sponsored by your federation which would discourage such activities—even if it's an educational program or something like that? Can you outline those for us?

Ms. Emily Poirier: Our orientation week, which is a very large program, includes a lot of discussion of sexual violence prevention. Alongside the existing training that students receive as first-years when they move—they receive that previous to receiving their student card, as well as upon move-in, in terms of sexual violence prevention, education, consent, understanding of consent. Alongside that, there are continued discussions of consent, sexual violence—sorry; not sexual violence, but more discussions of consent and healthy relationships and all those things during our orientation week, to prevent some of those things that you are describing, which have had a history on university campuses, and that we really try to prevent.

I will add that, specific to orientation week, our sophs, who are our orientation leaders, are specifically trained in supporting students in preventing gender-based violence and understanding some of the signs, as well as helping to—for instance, if there are any incidents that occur, they are trained in accepting disclosures to help ensure that students who are survivors of violence or have any kind of triggering events are able to get that kind of support.

As well, we have been in collaboration with the university in various capacities.

During our orientation week, we receive funding to have care tents, which help allow for places for students even just to have a little break during what can be a very overwhelming event.

We do generally try to participate in other kinds of training, discussions of sexuality. We also have a health promotion service under the USC where we do talk about issues of sexual health in general and consent—all those other areas—to really ensure that our students do have a

stronger understanding of that, both inside and outside of the fence.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Wow. That is absolutely fantastic. Is that based strictly at the University of Western Ontario—I know it's called Western now. Is that based exclusively at Western—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: —or is that sponsored through the federation?

Ms. Emily Poirier: It's a mix of both. Sometimes we do receive funding through Western, partially through things like the women's safety grants, which do help with some of that funding; for example, for those care tents during OWeek. It will depend on the initiative, but the USC does sponsor some of those events as well. The training that is offered is offered through the university specifically, and that is something that has been developed by a local violence-against-women shelter named Anova, which the USC has collaborated with both in developing and generally working on making sure that it is addressing student need.

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Mr. Anthony Leardi: That's super. I noticed that you concentrated on orientation week. Was there a reason for that?

Ms. Emily Poirier: Yes, partially because orientation week is part of the red zone. Those are the first six weeks of classes, which is when gender-based violence is most likely to take place, partially because [*inaudible*] new to the environment, so there are a lot of new things going on, where especially first-year students—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes the time for the government side.

Over to MPP Gretzky.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I just have one question, and then I'll pass it off to my colleague from London.

My question is back to Emily, to build on the last question. Before I build on that, though, I just want to point out to my colleague from Essex that to label it all as “sexual misconduct” is a grave disservice to women and gender-diverse people in this province. “Sexual assault” is what it is. Let's label it what it is. I don't think it was the intention of my colleague from Essex to make it sound as though there was some victim-blaming or shaming going on, so I just want to be clear that how things are phrased does make a huge difference. It makes a big difference in whether or not survivors of sexual assault come forward and seek justice and counselling and other supports that they might need.

Emily, it sounds like there's a lot going on at Western, but it also sounds like there's a lot more support that could be in place, both at the school but also, I would suggest, in community, as far as supporting survivors of sexual assault, gender-based violence, intimate partner violence. Could you give some insight on what students at Western need, whether that is delivered at the university level or at the community service level? What improvements could be made?

Ms. Emily Poirier: We want to see additional support in terms of caseworkers, in terms of being able to have access to someone who has experience in supporting survivors of gender-based violence. Western, as you touched on—we are lucky that we have a lot of services, but there continues to be an issue in terms of students being able to have the support that really reflects their experiences, that they feel safe coming to, which is so important for survivors.

I will also say that education continues to be something that we continue to work on and that we have done a lot of work on, but rape culture is not easily dismantled with a couple of courses. We want to continue to work on that. Part of what's necessary with that is having additional funding to gender-based violence offices so that they can continue the work outside of the first-years, outside of other specific contexts where they're able to reach students whom we might not be able to reach in specific contexts—able to continue to provide support.

So I would say it's a combination of response as well as consent education in advance.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I'm going to turn the time over to my colleague from London now.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Over to you, MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Emily, how much do the University Students' Council and OUSA—how much do you think that students should pay in comparison to the total of the university's budget?

Ms. Emily Poirier: The OUSA's policy stance is 30% of the operating budget. The USC doesn't have an official stance on that. We are currently developing our official stance, especially in response to the blue-ribbon panel, in terms of what Western students specifically would be looking at as a reasonable contribution to university budgets. But the OUSA stance is that 30% of university budgets, at a maximum, should come from tuition.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: When we look back to the government's own blue-ribbon panel, which has recommended the 10% increase, that would be an additional \$450 million to \$500 million, but it would still, interestingly, be 12% lower than it was when the Ford government took office. So they're really only just making up lost time. It's deeply concerning.

Across the sector, we've seen that many institutions have a dramatic overreliance on international students as a revenue stream. I wonder if you want to speak to that.

Ms. Emily Poirier: Western is kind of middle of the pack in terms of international students, but especially speaking to my colleagues from other schools within the province, that has definitely become a huge funding source.

I'll add that the specific subset of Western that I attend, Huron, has about 25% to 30% international students and has been increasing and really was a huge factor in Huron being able to continue to operate as an affiliated college. So that has become a huge point in terms of recruitment.

Unfortunately, universities are relying on international students to be able to make up that shortfall, which isn't fair to international students, to be frank, because inter-

national student tuition is currently unregulated. That shortfall is being filled by students who are coming over and who often do not have the means to support themselves or who are struggling to support themselves. Universities should be offering more support to international students, and oftentimes they aren't able to because international students are really the revenue stream that they're using in order to keep the lights on.

Western is definitely not in the worst-managed position out of a lot of the universities in Ontario. There are some that are in much worse positions.

Unfortunately, if something like a global pandemic were to happen that would affect international student recruitment—a lot of universities really did suffer during the pandemic and saw some significant drops in enrolment.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It's deeply concerning when any institution is reliant on human beings as a revenue stream. It's concerning, it's dehumanizing, but it's a position which they've found themselves in as a result of disinvestment.

Ontario's universities charge international undergraduate students \$46,443 per year; it's the highest in the country, which is compared to the \$8,190 for domestic students.

Emily, does it come to you as any surprise that institutions have to charge international students more, given how Ontario spends the least amount on post-secondary education?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Emily Poirier: That's not surprising to me at all. The money has to come from somewhere.

I'll add that a lot of schools in Ontario have increasingly been charging additionally for domestic students who are from out of province. So it's not just affecting international students—although it is still much more exorbitant. Western is one of those schools that has started to charge \$1,000 to a few hundred dollars more for out-of-province domestic students. So it's affecting students across the country, as well.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Should educational institutions focus on their core mandate, or should they be forced to operate like a business?

Ms. Emily Poirier: I believe they should be able to operate for their mandate, which is to educate students and to not have to worry about enrolment, necessarily, to keep the lights on.

The Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That concludes the time for the opposition.

Now we're going to be moving over to the independents. MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: My question is for Mike. Mike, thank you for your presentation. It was very well-received.

Before I ask you the question, I want to acknowledge that we know this government made the decision to return the lands back to the greenbelt because of backlash from the public and the Auditor General's report.

I know your organization is all about keeping the greenbelt promise. So how do you plan on protecting the

greenbelt, which is under threat due to development interests?

Mr. Mike Marcolongo: Thank you for the question. I think your question is, moving forward, how do we protect the greenbelt, given the pressure?

We're at a crossroads here. When this government opened up the greenbelt, it resulted in a lot more speculation on the greenbelt. It meant that in the last eight months we saw a lot more purchasing by the development community, in terms of speculating that more land would be coming out of the greenbelt. At this point in time, I think Ontarians have noticed those movements. They've noticed that the speculation has been rampant. It's not just about saying, "We're returning those parcels." How do we enhance the agricultural communities and the natural infrastructure that is present in the greenbelt? So I'm here delegating today saying that it's not enough to return those lands and those parcels. As government, the decision was a watershed moment in Ontario. So how do you return confidence to the farming community in the greenbelt, to rural residents, as well as developers, in terms of, "It's hands off the greenbelt"?

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By supporting agriculture, by supporting the restoration of habitat in the greenbelt, I think it would send a strong message by this government that they are serious about protecting the greenbelt for future generations.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I want you to be a little bit more specific on your investment needs in your presentation today. Can you elaborate on that for the record, please?

Mr. Mike Marcolongo: I did highlight the species at risk stewardship program. Right now, it's only \$4.5 million per year across the entire province. I'm saying to triple that funding to \$13.5 million and dedicate a stream for greenbelt-eligible areas.

The other thing that this government has done is introduce a pay-to-slay provision in this legislation. If you're a developer and you've got a species at risk—the Blanding's turtle, as an example—you're able to remove that species or the habitat for that species, and there's a financial penalty that goes into a special fund to re-create that habitat somewhere else in the province. This isn't a budget item, but that provision should not be as part of the greenbelt. The greenbelt already has significant pressure from urbanization, from roads, from all kinds of activities—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Mike Marcolongo: —and so on.

My second one: I spoke to specialty-crop areas. I'll give you an example. In 2017, there was just over a half-a-million-dollar provincial investment between the Ontario Tender Fruit Growers, in partnership with the Greenbelt Foundation, to provide a cost-share around planting fruit trees. It resulted in 135,000 trees being planted and newer varieties being accessed by farmers.

So there are ways to incentivize stronger farming in the greenbelt, and I'm here delegating for that measure as well.

MPP Andrea Hazell: No further questions.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Now we will be going to the government side, starting with MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I want to return to Emily, who is representing the post-secondary students, the university students—well, I'll just say, to lump it all in, “post-secondary students,” because that's more than just university students.

Emily, you and I have something in common. You are a student at Western, and I am an alumnus of Western. I graduated from Western law school.

One of the things I've learned is that there are lots of lawyers in the province of Ontario; there's probably no need to provide any incentives to train more lawyers, because the number that we're training seems to be sufficient. That might be true of various other programs, as well.

One of the initiatives that has been undertaken by the government of Ontario is to offer free tuition for people entering nursing programs.

With regard to free tuition being offered to specific programs such as nursing, would you agree with me if I said that offering free tuition is definitely an incentive to get people into such programs?

Ms. Emily Poirier: I would say that that would definitely be an incentive for certain students to enter those programs.

One of the members of our executive team is a nursing student; I don't think she was able to take advantage of those free nursing programs.

Overall, having access to education more readily for fields that are underserved or that are not having their labour demands met, I do believe, would be an incentive for students to enter those fields.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: That leads me to my next question.

I think the government reports that we've trained approximately 17,000 new nurses. Not all of them got free tuition, but some of them are going to get free tuition going forward.

I would agree with you that it's important—that if we want to fill labour gaps, one of the possible tools we could use is free tuition.

Emily, if you were forced to pick one other field where you think free tuition or reduced tuition should be offered, in your mind, what field would that be? You only get to pick one.

Ms. Emily Poirier: You took the easy one with the nursing one, so it's a little hard, off the top of my head. I would say nursing is definitely a key one.

I would argue, in a similar vein—would be medicine, as well, especially with the lack of primary care providers in Ontario. That would be a huge asset, I believe, especially with the cost of medical school and the competitive aspect of entering medical school in Ontario. Having that medical school debt, if not completely removed, at least partially removed for students, I do believe would allow a lot more students to enter med school.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I don't presume that you are necessarily familiar with your medical school on campus, but there is one; correct?

Ms. Emily Poirier: Yes.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: What can you tell me about that medical school? I don't presume you know a lot about it—you might not be in that program. But what can you tell me about it?

Ms. Emily Poirier: I'm not super well-versed on it, as you alluded to. I know that Western did receive some new seats in the last year or so, in terms of opening more seats at Schulich for more medical students. I also know that Western's medical school does tend to take sometimes a little bit more of a holistic approach in terms of medicine. But, again, I'm not super familiar with the specialties that a lot of the medical schools have. I do know that a lot of the Ontario medical schools are very selective, just because of the sheer amount of people who want to attend medical school, and there are not enough seats. That would be my general understanding of at least the admissions process or some of those aspects in that.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I'm glad you just mentioned the additional seats that had been added to Western's medical school. You are, of course, 100% correct. The provincial government did, in fact, add additional seats, and I thank you for touching on that.

I want to move now to a different topic, one that you had mentioned, which was the cost of housing, because that's something that's very important to people in your age group. People want to leave their training, get a job, and they want to be able to afford a new house or even a resale. They want to get into the housing market. I was at St. Clair College recently, and I was speaking to a group of approximately 100 students, and I can tell you that that is the topic that dominated the discussion.

With regard to, let's say, your say your circle of friends or associates at Western University, what can you say about that topic? Is it one that dominates discussion? Is it something that's very far from people's mind? What is the state of discussion?

Ms. Emily Poirier: Housing is definitely something that students talk about a lot, whether it's in terms of the quality of their housing as it is, as well as their ability to afford a house upon graduation. It's very much a big topic, especially in terms of the affordability of housing. I touched a little bit in my presentation on this as well, that the increase in housing—that costs have gone up significantly, especially in London, along with several other municipalities, which has left students paying more and more for housing and being able to have less and less income available to them for things like food.

We have had a huge increase in usage of our food bank and huge issues with food security. In September alone—by the end of September and beginning of October, we had hit almost the exact amount of usage for our food bank that we did all of last year.

So part of the larger issue, alongside housing costs, of being able to afford a house, is that students are having a hard time being able to support themselves as is, just being

able to get through to the next semester, pay their tuition, buy textbooks—all of those very basic things of just being able to be a student.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Give me an idea of where the state of things is with people in your generation.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: What is their housing plan, going forward? To stay with their parents until a certain time when they can afford a down payment or something like that?

Ms. Emily Poirier: Yes. For a lot of people, their plan is usually to stay at home for longer than they would like to. It also is often impacting where they're able to take work.

A lot of Western students are from the GTA. I, myself, am from the GTA. So a lot of students, to be able to afford the cost of housing—it makes more sense for them to go back and live in Mississauga or Guelph or other places where they're able to live for free, and not be able to live in London, even if they would want to, just because it's an additional expense that it doesn't make sense for them to take on.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Thank you very much. Those were all my questions.

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The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That concludes the presentation from this panel. Again, I would like to say thank you to each one of you for taking time and presenting.

LONDON AND DISTRICT
LABOUR COUNCIL
CHILD WITNESS CENTRE

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): At this time, we're going to move over to the next set of panellists. We have the members from the London and District Labour Council and the Child Witness Centre of Waterloo region. Please come to the table.

You have seven minutes for your presentation. After we have heard from all the presenters, the remaining 39 minutes of the time slot will be for questions from the members of the committee. I will be giving you a heads-up at one minute. Please do not stop; it's just a heads-up.

I would like to request the members from the London and District Labour Council, who are on Zoom, to please start with your name for Hansard. Over to you.

Ms. Patti Dalton: I'm Patti Dalton. I am the president of the London and District Labour Council. I am so pleased to have this opportunity.

In our community and all across this province, people are suffering. Levels of poverty have increased. The numbers of unhoused have increased. People are being renovicted or forced to leave their homes due to escalating rent costs.

Just last night, I attended a London United Way event titled Make it Livable that focused on the fact that people on social assistance do not get nearly enough money to

live with dignity, much less afford basic needs, and there is no way that they can afford the skyrocketing rental costs. We heard heartbreaking stories about those forced to live rough and precariously due to the lack of availability of shelter spaces and decreased funding overall for many local services.

We know, also, that more people with full-time jobs, including a number of unionized workers, are going to food banks, and that use of food banks in communities has sharply increased. Additionally, many more Ontarians are struggling to afford housing and the increased cost of living. This is a dire situation and the result of specific policies and decisions.

The current Conservative government, in my view, has a responsibility to address it and to do better. There are a number of ways this can be done—first of all, by ensuring that we have strong, universal, accessible and fully funded public services. Ontario's program spending per person has consistently ranked at or near the lowest among provinces across Canada since 2008. The fact is that the current government could ensure full funding of public services but has instead chosen to underfund them and to go down a path of privatization. We are seeing the lived reality of those choices right now. We need universal, accessible and fully funded public services. That means:

- ensuring the corporations and the rich pay their fair share of taxes, including taxes that remain unpaid and undeclared;

- investing in, and improving access to, publicly delivered universal services and programs, such as health care, mental health care, pharmacare, dental care, eye and vision care, child care, long-term care, affordable and co-operative housing, elementary and secondary education, post-secondary education, social and community services, and public pensions for all residents of Ontario; and

- providing public services in an inclusive and equitable manner and centring equity concerns in the design, delivery and expansion of services, and definitely stopping the privatization of our public services and assets, including crown corporations, as well as our health care, education, child care and infrastructure systems.

Also, we need to implement professional-level wages for all public sector workers.

And on the topic of fair wages: ensuring a livable, higher minimum wage, and, as we in the labour movement have called for countless times, paid sick days.

I return to the issue of social assistance. We have seen the increase in inequality, with Ontarians who were already among the poorest and most vulnerable prior to the global pandemic now worse off than they were previously.

The solutions include doubling social assistance rates and ODSP rates to a level well above the poverty line; implementing a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy that ensures food and housing security, access to education and job training, employment opportunities and other supports; expanding access to social assistance for all persons regardless of their immigration status; and providing supports with dignity, care and respect.

Key to addressing the affordability crisis is to ensure affordable housing, and again, the solutions are viable, including creating a comprehensive provincial social housing program that treats housing as a public utility; legislating rent rollbacks and controls for all renters in Ontario; implementing a comprehensive housing strategy that provides housing for unhoused people without policing them and secures housing for people in precarious accommodations; and passing real rent control and a tenants' bill of rights, capping mortgage payments as inflation rates rise as well as stopping evictions and foreclosure.

As previously stated, the full funding of all public services is critical to improve the lives of Ontarians.

Public education is foundational for ensuring that everyone has the ability to fulfill their dreams and aspirations regardless of socio-economic status or other factors. In public education, the fact is that right now there is \$1,200 less in funding for each child in Ontario, which has resulted in fewer educators and support staff in schools; more crowded classrooms; less time to provide individual attention; lack of supports, including mental health supports—which we know increased due to the pandemic—and a lack of overall funding, infrastructure funding.

The solutions include providing enhanced and sufficient ventilation, including government-mandated and funded assessments and upgrades for schools and all essential public institution buildings; reducing class sizes while maintaining adequate levels of staffing and educational support in schools; increasing supports for students with special education needs; launching an anti-hate strategy that works to protect students and staff in public schools and spaces from open hate and further encourages education on compassion, belonging and respect for all; also, upgrading—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Patti Dalton: —the Ontario curriculum to include Black history and a review of equity, diversity and inclusion overall in Ontario's K-to-12 curriculum.

In closing, a word specifically to those of you who are serving in the current government: You have the power to change the lives of so many people who are suffering in our province. You have the power to revitalize public services for the benefit of all Ontarians. I urge you to find the courage to move in that direction. Work with the labour movement and labour councils and the solutions we are proposing. Collectively, we can improve the quality of life for all Ontarians, now and for generations to come.

I thank the entire committee.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes the time for the presentation.

Over to the member from Child Witness Centre of Waterloo region: Please start with your name for Hansard.

Ms. Robin Heald: My name is Robin Heald. I'm from Child Witness Centre of Waterloo region. I'm excited and thankful to present to all of you today.

The following is a request toward provincial funding of our programs for 50% of our program cost. Adult victim services continue to deserve to be funded at 100% by

MAG Ontario. Last fiscal year, Child Witness Centre of Waterloo region was cumulatively funded by all three levels of government at 30% of our annual budget and only 17% of the actual need of our child witness program being funded by MAG.

The gap between sustainable funding and the growing need in victim services continues to grow and has reached a funding crisis for our organization that has resulted in a wait-list for the first time in our 42-year history. More children are asking for an advocate and caseworker than we have the resources to provide every day in our organization. Today, there are 109 children on our wait-list who need vital services, such as support through the investigation process, needs assessments, safety assessments, referrals for needed services, court preparation, support for victim impact statements, regular court updates regarding their case and, most importantly, one-on-one support while navigating the judicial process.

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We simply don't have enough revenue to help all the children who need a caseworker to guide them through the process of being a victim and/or witness of crime as they walk through the judicial process. As a former child victim and witness, I know personally what it's like to walk through the judicial process without support. I want to strongly advocate for the 109 children on our wait-list right now, the more than 500 children who spent time on the wait-list last year, and all of our future child victims and witnesses who may not get what they need when they need it most.

Our current MAG budget allotment has been a consistent \$165,000 per year since 2007, when we served 663 children in our child witness program, which covered 53% of our budget in 2007. That same funding allotment is now expected to cover 950 victims, 749 who we served last year and the 201 not served by the end of year. At an average of \$1,000 per child, \$165,000 is enough to support the program for 165 children. The other children are either supported by local fundraising efforts or not served.

Throughout our journey on lobbying for funding, we often hear that victim support is a provincial responsibility. Although I strongly feel that every level of government and the community shares the responsibility for providing victim services for children, I feel the provincial government should be responsible for, at minimum, 50% of the burden of this valuable resource.

I want to share with you some of the factors that have caused our numbers to grow beyond our capacity. Before the #MeToo movement, approximately one in 10 child victims reported abuse; that number has grown to one in seven, causing a surge in our numbers. With this movement continuing to make progress, we know that this ratio will continue to improve. We need to be prepared—and eventually almost every victim coming forward with their story will get the resources they need when they need it.

With COVID-19, the economic stress on families, the increased risk of unlicensed child care and social isolation took a toll on families. These factors combined caused an increase in domestic and child abuse. These factors con-

tributed to a perfect storm of increased risk factors to produce a shadow pandemic that increased the crime rates against women and children. With the need for physical distancing and other COVID-related changes and protocols during the entire judicial process, clients suffered huge delays and much longer wait times throughout their journey. The unhealthy burden led to more care needed on our end to walk children and their caregivers through the increasingly difficult judicial system, and the process pivoted to accommodate physical distancing and remote testimony. Simply put, the court process is much longer at this point and much more expensive to support.

An even bigger challenge, specific to our region, is the population growth that we've been experiencing. Not only has the growth rate been exceptional, but the projections also include a growth rate at 1.19% to 1.21% per year. With the population in our region being almost 650,000 at the end of 2022, this equates to well over 6,000 more people per year.

We're not currently able to keep up with the need for our services prompted by the population growth in recent years, let alone be prepared for the continued projected growth over the next decade. The only way to proactively be prepared to meet the upcoming indefinite needs for child victim services is to move to a per capita funding model, where child victims and witnesses are funded at \$355 for each child per year who do not need to testify yet, and \$600 a year if they are supported through the court process. Cumulatively, if the child is served over two years as they await trial, they are supported with \$955 MAG funding, approximately 50% of the estimated cost. If this funding happened last year, MAG funding would amount to \$349,010 and we would not have had a wait-list.

We would propose that this funding be projected each year, based on program growth projections, then reconciled with budgetary adjustments in Q1 and Q2—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Robin Heald: —the following year, based on actual, similar to how the OPP is funded.

The breakdown of the yearly client numbers and funding that I've provided above in this package shows the yearly tracking of how consistent MAG funding has had diminishing program coverage, with the burden of fundraising for our program no longer able to keep up with need.

With this needed funding adjustment, and considering future population growth projections for our region, our unmet need will continue to grow at the considerable detriment of our children, who will not get the critical help they are requesting when they need it most. Please consider our detailed proposal package that explains the growing unmet need and projected future challenges that we're facing.

We're asking for your voice to be added to ours in advocating for per capita funding for our services that moves us toward being funded 50% by MAG. Thank you very much.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. This concludes the time for the presentation.

We will be going to the independent member for the questions. MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: To both of you, thank you for coming in and presenting to us today.

I want to go to Robin from the Child Witness Centre of Waterloo region.

This truly breaks my heart. Yes, you're here for funding, and there are a lot of organizations like yourself here for funding. But when we're looking at children, when the system fails them, who we have to protect—and then we do not have enough funding to take proper care of them.

I want to bring you to the second page in your presentation. This is what hurt me while you presented this. You said—thank you for doing that—“I want to strongly advocate for the 109 children on our wait-list right now,” and then, “the more than 500 children who spent time on the wait-list last year.” Can we spend some time on this section? Where do they go?

Ms. Robin Heald: They spend time at their home, with their families, being unserved, without all of their needs being met.

Sometimes they're on the wait-list for weeks. Sometimes they're on our wait-list for months. And sometimes they time out on our wait-list, meaning they don't get the support that they need because their case closes before we get a chance to do referrals with them, needs assessments, safety assessments. Those are the children I feel we have failed utterly.

MPP Andrea Hazell: That is why I want you to spend some time and talk about that. I feel there's a magnitude of risks that are going to those children. If you're not looking after them in time, what happens to the end journey of those children?

Ms. Robin Heald: There are so many statistics that talk about their outcomes, based on whether they get the preventive services that they need and deserve, versus when they don't. The children who are unserved through this process are 26% times more likely to be homeless and four times more likely to be suicidal during their lifetime. Those are some pretty significant statistics. I come from a family that went through trauma, and we were unserved. We didn't have a child witness centre in my area. Those two statistics speak to me very personally in that my sister did commit suicide and spent some time homeless, leading up to that time.

We know that when these needs are not being met—I know very personally the cost that is involved with that. We have so many statistics that show that unsupported children who aren't given the tools that they need to go through this process are re-traumatized throughout the process. That's something that we try to mitigate every step of the way with advocates and caseworkers for our children. Unfortunately, we cannot do it every week for every child.

All of the children who are our clients and on our wait-list are children who want an advocate and caseworker to walk with them through the process. And the hardest job of all of our staff—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Robin Heald: —is when they choose who comes off the wait-list and who does not yet come off the wait-list.

MPP Andrea Hazell: In my next go around, I have a question for you. Thank you. That's my question in this round.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): We will be moving over to the government side. MPP Leardi.

1520

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I'm going to be asking Ms. Dalton of the London and District Labour Council some questions. I want to start by thanking her for being here today. It's really great to have the London and District Labour Council participating in today's proceedings. I really think that's super.

I want to give Ms. Dalton a little idea of what happens in my region. I'm from Essex county. We have a LIUNA training centre in my region, and we also have a training centre which is operated by the carpenters and joiners union. These training centres that are run by LIUNA and the carpenters and joiners union have a specific program which allows high school students to get trained at their facilities while simultaneously getting some high school courses such as mathematics and English right at their facilities. I think this is a great program. It allows these high school students to get into the skilled trades much faster and, of course, the exposure to the skilled trades is extremely valuable.

My question to you is, does the London and District Labour Council have any kind of similar training facilities—you or your members—with this kind of partnership with the provincial government?

Ms. Patti Dalton: You may have a misunderstanding about labour councils. We are comprised of a number of private sector and public sector unions. We do not have the resources to provide that kind of program.

However, I'd just like to comment on what you're saying. I taught for 33 years at our local community high school, Clarke Road Secondary School. We have technical studies programs with state-of-the-art technology, whereby students would get the full benefits of public education from grade 9 through grade 12 and they would be able to take part in any technical studies programs that they would wish to. I believe, as a former secondary teacher—and as the London and District Labour Council—that students need to be able to finish a full education. I'll leave my comments there.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: You said something about how labour and district labour councils work. I'm fully aware of how they work.

My question to you is whether or not you have any members who have a training facility and who have participated in this government's sponsored program—who have partnered with the Ontario government to offer that type of program. If you don't know, it's okay. I didn't expect you to have all the answers off the top of your head. I'm just asking, and apparently it's not quite—you don't have any members who do anything like that around here, who work in London and district?

Ms. Patti Dalton: Just in terms of affiliates, again for your information: We have a separate trades council in London. LIUNA is not affiliated to the London and District Labour Council. I'll leave my comments there.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I would presume that the carpenters and joiners aren't either?

Ms. Patti Dalton: They are not.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Thank you for that clarification.

You and I have something in common. You have teaching experience, and so do I. I didn't teach that very long, but I'm a former teacher myself.

With regard to OYAP, the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program—I presume that you're familiar with that as well?

Ms. Patti Dalton: Yes.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: In your experience, that has been a program that's certainly worth continuing, I would presume?

Ms. Patti Dalton: Yes.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: And in your experience, what were the top three categories where students seemed to experience the greatest amount of success with the OYAP program?

Ms. Patti Dalton: Well, certainly in terms of understanding the trades and building their skills.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: When I said what job categories, I was trying to get more specific. Were there some job categories that seemed to experience more success than others?

Ms. Patti Dalton: I really can't answer that question.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Let me move on, then.

I had an opportunity to take a look at the London and District Labour Council's website before we opened up our proceedings here today. There was a lot of commentary on a whole wide range of issues. Not all of them are narrowly labour or restricted to labour, but I understand that the council is free to express its opinion on a variety of issues.

What I thought was interesting was that the website did not seem to present any position on the existence of the carbon tax. I'm talking about the federal carbon tax.

I'm just going to inquire: Does London and District Labour Council have a position on the federal carbon tax or not?

Ms. Patti Dalton: We do not—not officially, no.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Moving on: Can you give me an idea of the number of affiliates that you have representing the total number of members? If you've mentioned that before, I apologize; I didn't catch it.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Patti Dalton: Well, as I mentioned before, we have a number of public sector and private sector affiliates. Just off the top of my head—numbers aren't my strength, but we do have a good diversity of public sector and private sector unions.

You may know—or maybe not—that Unifor, which was actually a very important founder of the London and District Labour Council, is not currently affiliated. We are seeking, in the broader labour movement, to make sure

that we bring Unifor back into the fold, and I am assured by leaders at the national level that that will happen. As I said, Unifor—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes the time for this round.

We will be moving on to the opposition. MPP Gretzky.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: First of all, I want to thank the presenters, Patti and Robin—especially Robin, who travelled quite a distance in what could be some interesting weather.

I have a question for Robin. You have in your presentation—I know what it means, but not everybody who's watching this or who reads the Hansard down the road will know what it means. Can you explain what MAG is, for the record?

Ms. Robin Heald: It's the Ministry of the Attorney General of Ontario, which is the main pocket of funding that is used for victim services, policing and things like that in Ontario.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I appreciate that. Like I said, sometimes people are watching or reading the Hansard later on and don't know the acronyms.

I want to talk about what you have here in your presentation. You said that the money you've been getting, your budget allotment, has been \$165,000 a year for basically the last 17 years.

Ms. Robin Heald: Indeed it has.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Pretty much the last 17 years.

In 2007, you were able to serve 663 children in the child witness program, which took up about 53% of the budget at the time.

You still have the same funding allotment, and yet you're expected to cover 950 victims. So there are 749 who you were able to bring in and service, and there is a wait-list of 201.

Having those numbers in mind, and for people not from your region who may not fully understand what kind of supports and services you provide, could you go into a little more depth and explain the process when a child does come in for service and what that looks like—going through the process?

Ms. Robin Heald: I'm glad you asked that, because I did want to explain that the statistics on page 5 are showing our child witness program statistics, mainly; it doesn't cover our child advocacy numbers.

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When we are first called, it's often that we are called by the police, saying they're going to bring a child in for an investigation at, say, 10 a.m. or 6 p.m.: "Do you have an advocate available?" Then, that advocate walks with them through the investigation process—welcomes them to the building, lets them know where the washrooms are, helps them with the process so they understand what the investigation process is. The advocates work with them through that first phase, and then the child witness program, the one that we're talking about the funding for today, takes over as soon as a charge has been laid—in our region, that's nine a week, in the Waterloo-Wellington-Kitchener area. So nine children a week enter our program, or go on our wait-list, and then we walk them through needs assess-

ments and safety assessments to make sure that they are safe in their home, they have safe housing, they have enough food, and the many different things that contribute to risk factors and preventive factors for them. We also give them lots of tools and activities to get them through that initial process, to make sure that they understand what the process is going to be, and we walk with them through that entire process of learning. We go into much more depth than an adult would get. An adult might get a booklet or might get a 10-minute discussion. We pull the toys out with a toy courtroom, saying, "This is what a courtroom looks like. This is where the judge sits. This is the witness stand. You have a choice of sitting on the witness stand or testifying from our remote testimony room in our building, which is a block from the witness centre. You can testify with Monet, our service dog, on the witness stand or in our witness area."

We also work with children on writing a victim impact statement, when that time comes, and we do court updates with the family. It's very hard for families who are unfamiliar with the judicial process to stay on top of all of the different moving parts and pieces, so our caseworkers are checking those dockets and knowing what case is coming up soon, and, in an ideal world, having the child completely prepared for court when the time comes.

We also walk with them through the testimony and sentencing, until the entire case—which sometimes takes three years from beginning to end.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Thank you for that.

I also want to say that I'm sorry to hear about your sister.

Ms. Robin Heald: Thank you.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: It is always tough when you lose a family member. I would argue, from my personal experience, that it is even more traumatic and harder to live with when you lose somebody suddenly and unexpectedly. I did not lose a sibling the way you did; I lost one to an overdose, and it has been five years—it's not exactly the same circumstances, but it is very difficult. I applaud you and appreciate you for the work that you do, knowing that you have been through a similar situation and are now working with other witnesses and children going through some similar experiences, to try to make this place a better world for them.

I just want to be clear on the funding piece. It's 30% between three levels of government—so municipal, federal and provincial. What percentage is provincial, currently? Do you know?

Ms. Robin Heald: I could do the math—\$165,000 over \$380,000 total, I think, that we're getting; so about half.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: We're about to get the one-minute warning. I can see him trying to flag him to turn the mike on.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Bingo.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: So what you're asking for, basically, if I'm understanding it correctly, is to be funded at the same level as the OPP when it comes to—

Ms. Robin Heald: No, the same system.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: The same system; sorry.

Ms. Robin Heald: So, per capita funding. We know the numbers are going to continue to evolve and change. We absolutely know that. The only way to be proactive, instead of reactive, is having funding based on per capita, meaning the numbers that come in our door—that we have half the funding provided by MAG, and then we spend time fundraising for the [inaudible]. We feel quite strongly that having half the burden provincially is a responsible way to look at it—a guaranteed funding piece from you, comparable to how OPP is funding or corrections is funding, based on per capita methods.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I would argue that you shouldn't have to fundraise at all.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That concludes this round.

To the independent: MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Robin, thank you so much for taking care of our vulnerable children.

I'm going back to your presentation. We know that the increase in our population is actually just bringing on more challenges with whatever we've got to deal with before. In your presentation, you talk about it as an even bigger challenge for your region—the population growth. You put a projection with your numbers that the growth right now is at 1.19% to 1.21% per year. My concern is that you are stretched as it is, and then the population is growing, and so that's more people on your wait-list who are not going to get help. You've already explained in detail what's going to happen to these children if your services are not able to meet those needs.

I don't want to talk about funding for your organization over 2024-25.

What can the government do—because your organization is imperative to the children. Over the next decade, what are you hoping to see? Let's put that on record.

Ms. Robin Heald: What I do know is that our current funding comes from victim surcharges. When our children are in court with their caseworkers, when the judge is asked to waive that victim surcharge, the judge rarely asks for any burden of proof of need from the defendant to waive that. They simply waive it when asked, a lot of the time, which is emotionally very difficult for a victim to hear—that that victim surcharge, which they know is the funding piece for our program, has been just simply waived. Educating judges on that victim surcharge and when to waive it, when not to waive it, and to weigh different things while making that decision as opposed to just simply waiving it—that would be one of the things.

I also think that adding victim surcharges to other crimes might be a benefit to build that pot. I think that we have to start looking outside the box. If we can't create enough within victim surcharges, then we need to change the model to not be 100% dependent on that.

For example, I don't want to ask for more funding for Child Witness Centre and then have adults lose part of their 100% funding model. I don't think that they should lose in order for us to gain. I think that more money needs to be added to the pot. We need to be prepared for the #MeToo movement, for the population growth and all of

the many factors that are going to affect our numbers. And I think we have to be ready with a per capita model that's going to allow us to adapt as all of those things keep changing year after year after year.

MPP Andrea Hazell: That's very detailed and very good for the record.

Beyond all of that, what—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

MPP Andrea Hazell:—priority funding needs do you really need from today? You can't do this all by yourself.

Ms. Robin Heald: I would love for you to add your voice to our call for action on this. I would like all of you to join in this call for action. We need to look at the system. We know that the OPP funding model, although imperfect, works. We know that the corrections funding model, although imperfect, works. We need to start working toward that same type of funding model and build that with victim services. It's already present in adult victim services. It is not yet present in child victim services. We need to build that. We need to strengthen it. We need to be able to be proactively ready for those changes in numbers as they occur.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That concludes the time for the independent.

Moving over to the government side: MPP Jones.

1540

Mr. Trevor Jones: I want to thank you for your presentation today.

Being a former provincial police officer, I have some interaction—and I applaud your work. I am really impressed with the level of detail you have and the comprehensive detail in your ask in your presentation, especially to most of us in the room, who are lay people when it comes to understanding the complexities of the work you do.

I have some experience with the Windsor Essex Child/Youth Advocacy Centre. I'm wondering if you understand their mandate, how yours overlaps it, or if there's something unique.

I know with the Windsor Essex Child/Youth Advocacy Centre, you can go online and see a complete, detailed breakdown of the financials annually, where money comes from, what their needs are, and what the trends are and the uses.

Being a long-time advocate for victims of crime—I still remain an advocate for victims of crime, in this role—I'm wondering if you're checking with similar organizations around the province and finding best practices and best ways of doing things with the limited resources.

Ms. Robin Heald: We are definitely working within the province, but we're also working nationally—so both. We have a provincial group that gets together, and a national group, and we're working in a coordinated way to develop training resources, funding resources, and working on a lot of different approaches that are going to make things better for all of us.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Have you looked at partner organizations or similar organizations like the Windsor Essex Child/Youth Advocacy Centre to see what they're doing?

Ms. Robin Heald: Absolutely.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Is your mandate different than theirs would be? Does it extend to offer more resources or more supports? Victims of crime need to be supported.

The adult victim/witness program, as you said, is fully supported, and our children's witness programs and children of abuse need supports there.

It seems like the Windsor-Essex program operates in a very transparent way, by delivering resources. I'm wondering if you can share what your organization does that may be different from what theirs does, just because I'm not as familiar with yours.

Ms. Robin Heald: We have a lot of resources on our website, including our annual reports. On the CRA charities listing, of course, it shows annual revenue and expenses and the percentage that we get from all government sources year after year. So the transparency is there in our funding pieces in both of those locations.

Each child advocacy centre and child witness centre has some differences, some nuances. One of the examples that we have that many don't is, we have a service dog that can attend court with a child, should that be important for the child.

We have different pieces that are different in different centres. We have a combined space at our advocacy centre, and we are in the same building with police, family and children's services, intimate partner violence, mental health supporters and other partners. At that space, we provide full, wraparound support for the children we serve, and we do referrals out of that wraparound piece for additional services.

I can't speak for every single child advocacy centre, because different ones have different budget models, and some of them have a much smaller budget than we have and much fewer services. But we do have some really amazing strategic goals that we'd like to continue to improve upon in our space.

One of the weaknesses of ours is that—we do have a remote testimony space that saves children from having to directly face their abuser in court. They can testify in our space. We don't yet have the budget to make it 100% accessible. Our building is not accessible, our bathroom is not accessible, and our testimony room is not accessible for someone with significant mobility needs. Some other organizations do have accessibility but not a service dog.

So there are a lot of differences across the board provincially and federally.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Thank you very much for your time. Thank you for your work. You've given us a lot to think about, a lot to consider. You can be confident that we're going to work together to support all victims of crime.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): We have three minutes. MPP Dowie.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Robin, thank you for your presentation.

Actually, I want to echo what MPP Jones said. I'm wondering, just based on the framework of your funding, is your situation the same as other similar organizations in the province, or are they one-off investments that have just come through history?

Ms. Robin Heald: I don't see a strong correlation between actual per capita needs and funding models in the other child advocacy centres that I've connected with, so there isn't a strong case for this many children being served and this funding pocket being directly coordinated with that. That's something that we'd like to see done differently. We'd really like to see, across the board, having a unified system of per capita funding to be able to have some more fairness grow. As MPP Gretzky mentioned, our goal is 50%, but really, 100% would be the ultimate goal, and moving toward that. I know that we have to move that way in baby steps, and this is our baby step that I'm proposing today.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Are there others in your space, or are you the sole delivery agent for the services you provide?

Ms. Robin Heald: We have a lot of partners. We have two police departments that share in our wraparound service, one that investigates child abuse—anything from shaken baby syndrome to physical abuse to sexual abuse—and the many, many other types of investigations, the thousands of other types of cases that we have come through our door. We also have a police department that works with child sexual exploitation, those who have been exploited through sexual crime—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Robin Heald: —and child pornography, and also preventing the ones who are at risk for that. We have family and children services, and we have communal support—mental health, intimate partner violence. We're strongly connected with them, as well.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I'll leave it there, Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That concludes the time for the government side.

Now, we will be moving over to the opposition. MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you to our presenters who have arrived here today, as well as those participating virtually.

My first questions will be for Patti. It's great to see you, Patti.

This government speaks a lot about working for and working with workers, yet it's strangely ironic, given that they have voted against protecting workers, with anti-scab legislation. It's very curious when we see one thing and then another.

I want to thank you for summarizing a tremendous amount of information in the year-over-year neglect that we've seen from the Ontario government. You've spoken about the things that they could do and, quite frankly, should do to help people who are struggling.

Recently, I've been reading about the Ontario government now allowing hospitals to run deficits. Some hospitals are even taking out high-interest loans. When you look at this scenario, what does that make you think about these publicly funded institutions having to take out, or being allowed to take out, high-interest loans?

Ms. Patti Dalton: I know that a colleague of mine and co-chair of the London Health Coalition, Peter Bergmanis, will be presenting tomorrow in London, and I'm sure you

will get a comprehensive view on that. But yes, it's categorically wrong, and we see a lot of effects of this move.

As I mentioned, a theme in my whole presentation is the move of this government to privatize public services. This has resulted in such a detrimental effect on all public services, but you're mentioning hospitals in particular. What we've also seen is the chronic understaffing of hospitals and also a number of workers who, because they literally are finding it too difficult to work within the current public hospital system, are moving more into privatized areas. This chronic underfunding of public health care—and we see the closures of emergency rooms and different critical services across the province.

It is absolutely critical that the current government, again, move in the right direction, like I said at the end of my presentation, and halt the privatization of public health care and all public services. A lot more people will be in much better health overall if they do so.

Thanks for the question.

1550

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It's an interesting and curious and concerning transfer of wealth, when you consider that public tax dollars are being used to line the pockets of multinational corporations. Looking at the retrofitting of Walmarts and Staples—very profitable, foreign-owned corporations that do not need taxpayer support, and yet the government is having a party with that money, providing those ServiceOntario locations and kiosks for them.

I want to turn to your comments about child care. In your presentation and in the written presentation, you mentioned how they've removed a series of checks and balances, such as undue profits and ineligible expenditures. What is that going to do to our child care system? Will that result in fewer children and fewer families getting that \$10-a-day child care?

Ms. Patti Dalton: I didn't actually address public child care in my presentation, but I understand that that falls under the scope of public services. I absolutely think that, again, there needs to be full public funding for child care. We know that's a huge issue.

I think I might have missed the first part of your question. Could you repeat the first part of your question?

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Yes. It's concerning that the government, in their program, has removed checks and balances, where they've removed a restriction on undue profits—removal of ineligible expenditures. These are restrictions that would have prevented operators from being able to use public money to finance their mortgages or pay executive bonuses, but it's yet another part of that trend of seeing public dollars going into private pockets. It's estimated that by 2026, there could be 227,000 children left without spaces.

I want to thank you for your advocacy on social assistance rates and folks living well below the poverty line.

This government will congratulate itself for a paltry 5% increase in indexing, but when you're keeping people below the poverty line, they will remain below the poverty line.

My next questions will be for Robin.

The court process itself can be incredibly exhausting and traumatic for adults, so I can't imagine what it must be like for a young person.

I want you to outline for this committee: What does it mean for those children who can't access the supports that you provide?

Ms. Robin Heald: They're waiting. We give them some resources, so they have an opportunity to self-navigate through the system until we're able to serve them. It's very challenging for them, for sure. A lot of the resources—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Ms. Robin Heald:—that we're able to provide are resources that help mitigate the risk for them, help mitigate the trauma for them.

I can say without a doubt that going through the judicial process—both investigation and the court process—is traumatizing for children. It's traumatizing for adults. It's traumatizing for children. They have a perception sometimes of court process from TV, whether it's Judge Judy or other judges, that might not be reflective of the Canadian judicial system.

Also, there's a great deal of fear of facing the accused and that challenge for them. Without the buffer of an advocate and a caseworker as they walk through that system, there's a lot more trauma through the trepidation of what's going to happen next. The unknown is much more traumatizing than what is known. When they learn all of those steps, it helps a lot.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes our time for the scheduled presentation.

Our next set of presenters will be joining us at 4 p.m. That gives us an opportunity to take a five-minute break. We'll recess now, and we'll reconvene at 4 p.m.

The committee recessed from 1555 to 1600.

ONTARIO CATHOLIC SCHOOL TRUSTEES' ASSOCIATION

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Good afternoon, and welcome back. It's 4 p.m., and we will be starting the committee again.

With that, it is time to request the panel from Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association to come to the table.

As always, the presenter will have seven minutes for your presentation. After we've heard from the presenter, the remaining time will be for questions from members of the committee, with seven and a half minutes to the government, seven and a half minutes to the official opposition, and four and a half minutes to the independent.

I will request the member to start with your name for Hansard. At the one-minute mark, before seven minutes, I will be giving you a heads-up. Please do not stop; it's just a heads-up. Over to you.

Mr. Patrick Daly: My name is Patrick Daly. I'm the president of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and committee members. I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of Ontario's 29 Catholic school boards. I'm joined virtually this afternoon by our executive director, Mr. Nick Milanetti. We are extremely grateful for the opportunity to share with you some of the key financial priorities of our member boards. For a comprehensive list of our priorities, challenges and recommendations, please refer to our 2024 pre-budget submission.

At the outset, Mr. Chair, I would like to thank you, members of the committee, and indeed all MPPs throughout the province for your valuable service and much-appreciated support for Catholic education in Ontario.

I would, as well, like to thank Minister Lecce and his Ministry of Education staff for their willingness to meet frequently with us and for his openness to listen and positively respond to many of our recommendations.

Our association was founded in 1930, and we represent the 237 locally elected Catholic school trustees in Ontario. These faith-filled leaders serve on 29 English-language Catholic boards in our province that collectively employ over 59,000 dedicated staff, operate over 1,320 schools, represent over 2.2 million Catholic ratepayers and, most especially, are entrusted with the governance of Christ-centred school systems that educate over 550,000 JK-to-grade 12 students and many thousands more in our adult education centres.

Each year, we are pleased to submit a pre-budget submission to the government with recommendations for improvement to the funding of education in Ontario. Our recommendations are consistently based on a number of guiding principles, which I will leave for you to read at your leisure.

I want to acknowledge at the outset that we appreciate—there are many competing and complex demands faced by the committee and the provincial government. Saying that, we know that effective, transparent and accountable publicly funded school systems are essential and key to sustaining caring and economically strong communities. In this regard, we support the government's commitment to building a strong foundation for student learning, including focused resources in support of literacy and numeracy and expanded opportunities in skilled trades and apprenticeship programs.

Acknowledging the significant impact the pandemic has had on young people, we want to, in the strongest terms, recommend increased and multi-year funding in support of learning recovery, faith formation and well-being.

Just to cite a few of the areas outlined in our report, Mr. Chair: First, in terms of student mental health, as you know and as we do, COVID-19 had a significant impact on young people, as have had a number of other factors in society. We appreciate the government's enhancements in funding in the 2023-24 GSN with regard to student mental health, but we continue to recommend that the government review funding for student mental health needs and ensure that it is adequate and equitable; further, that the Ministry of Education continue to support funding for a board-level

mental health lead; and, finally, that the Ministry of Education continue to address the changing nature of student mental health and well-being needs, as evidenced in the need for ongoing enhanced prevention and intervention.

A second area, and one that has been ongoing for decades, is with regard to adequate funding for special education. Our boards remain committed to providing outstanding programs to special-needs students. However, due to the complexity of student needs today and a number of societal factors, many, if not the vast majority, of our boards are experiencing a deficit in special education funding. In particular, the area of autism spectrum disorder and serving those young people well has increased the challenges with regard to special education funding. We respectfully recommend that the government establish a special education working group to review the adequacy and flexibility of special education funding; secondly, that the government review needs-based funding models for high-needs special education students; and, finally, that the government continue to survey and monitor the current situation with boards and provide program and financial support, as required, to ensure students with special education needs can be provided the psychoeducational assessments in a timely manner.

A third area—and I really cannot stress the urgency in this area—is the funding of costs associated with sick leave. Time won't allow me to get into all the reasons—collective bargaining and others. The cost to cover sick leave and absenteeism in our member boards has increased dramatically over the last number of years, and there's significant financial pressure on each and every one of our boards in that area. Secondly, it impacts student learning—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Patrick Daly:—when staff are absent.

I could speak about the need for school board flexibility and autonomy; however, time won't permit me to do that.

I would like to conclude, Mr. Chair, by talking about our strong recommendation to urge the repeal of the regulation freezing executive compensation, first, as a matter of fairness. The senior staff in school boards across the province have had their compensation frozen for 11 of the past 12 years. Secondly, there is really becoming a compression issue between principals, vice-principals, superintendents and directors of education and recruitment—

The Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much for your presentation.

We'll be going to the government side for the first questions. MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Mr. Daly, thank you for being here, and Mr. Milanetti, thank you for being here. I'm a former Catholic school board teacher myself. I had a very brief career in that area. So I have a very particular interest in what you're bringing here today.

I'm looking at page 10 of your presentation with regard to the federal carbon tax costs. I note that you've stated that estimates from school boards show, for example, that

the carbon tax comprises between 10% and 30% of the total natural gas costs for boards. My question to you is: Can you put some dollar amounts to that? And if you can't do that today, would you be kind enough to forward those dollar amounts? Perhaps if you could select a few example school boards and show us the dollar amounts that we're talking about—would you be able to do that for us?

Mr. Patrick Daly: Through you, Mr. Chair: We would be happy to. I don't have the figures in front of me, but I'm happy—my home board and as many as you like. We can get that information.

Clearly, it's added significant financial pressure.

1610

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I'll ask for the numbers on your board and the numbers for the Essex Catholic district school board.

Mr. Patrick Daly: Windsor-Essex?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Yes, please. If possible, I would also like you to include a projected number based on the carbon tax tripling by the year 2035. I understand you might not be able to provide those numbers, but I'll request them, if it is possible for you to provide them.

Mr. Patrick Daly: Through you, Mr. Chair: For sure, we'll try to gather the information.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Thank you. I'd like to move on to a different topic now.

I'm looking at page 3 of your submissions, towards the bottom, where you provide statistics with regard to sick days, giving present-day costs and increases as compared to what appears to be sick leave as it was exercised from 2010-11 to 2015-16. If I understand your presentation correctly—and I would like you to correct me if I'm wrong—sick leave being taken by various employees has increased by approximately \$1 billion. Did I understand that correctly?

Mr. Patrick Daly: I believe, Mr. Chair, we're referring to the total cost, not so much the increase. I haven't been involved with this—I can confirm—but my understanding is that the total cost of absenteeism and sick leave coverage in Catholic school boards is \$1 billion, and the change occurred in 2012, when a collective agreement was put in place by a previous government.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Looking at page 4, with regard to the same topic, the statistics that you've provided—elementary teachers taking 16.75 sick days; high school teachers, 14.5 sick days; educational assistants, 22.1 sick days; early childhood educators, 20.7 sick days; and custodians, 19.7—that is a breakdown, as an average, across all 63 boards that participated in the survey. Is that correct?

Mr. Patrick Daly: That's right. There's an agency that many schools—63 of us—use with regard to assisting in absenteeism strategies, and those will be the averages of those 63 boards.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: One of your recommendations, also on page 4, is that the Ministry of Education support school boards in implementing effective attendance support and disability management programs. What would those look like? Can you give me one or two examples?

Mr. Patrick Daly: Through you, Mr. Chair: Yes, I can. A number of boards have them in place. I'm not going to comment on the success; clearly the numbers, the averages, continue to increase. But I know a number of boards, including my own, have policies and procedures in place where if staff meet various thresholds—they're off for a certain number of days—they would receive a letter, and then see if there was any support that could be provided, because obviously that would be the first, hopefully, to assist. And then, after a second level of absenteeism, they could be called into a meeting in terms of finding out the causes of the absenteeism. Then, it would gradually proceed to other various levels. I know a number of boards use those kinds of procedures.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I take it that part of your strategy in dealing with absenteeism runs into the problem of dealing with people's privacy with regard to their medical concerns. Am I right about that?

Mr. Patrick Daly: For sure, and collective agreement language.

I do want to stress that our first motivation in any of the 29 Catholic boards would be on the wellness side—to encourage and to support staff, to assist them in terms of their own mental and physical health and well-being. But there's the other side of it: As an employer, we have to ensure that staff are present for work.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I'd like to switch gears now and talk about the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program. Do you know how many—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: —of your boards participate in that program?

Mr. Patrick Daly: I can't say for certain, Mr. Chair—maybe Mr. Milanetti knows—but I think all 29. I would be surprised—the government funds all 29, and I know that it's a very important program for the reasons I talked about, in terms of the skilled trades and all of that. As far as I know, all boards participate.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: If I had to force you to pick one job category, which one do you think would be the most popular? I'm not looking for a scientific answer; just a guess.

Mr. Patrick Daly: Yes, I have my bias. I come from a construction family home business, a large drywall company, but that's not the most popular, for sure.

I think a lot of the new technologies—auto manufacturing, health care, depending on which parts of the province. I don't know, Nick, if you would know, but those would be my guesses—auto mechanics, manufacturing, health care.

Mr. Nick Milanetti: Another popular one would be hospitality. Hospitality has certainly gotten big, too.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): We're moving over to the opposition. MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you to our presenter here today and our virtual presenter.

I know that, across the province, the repair of schools has been neglected for quite some time. The infrastructure demands are growing and growing, and schools are crum-

bling. Many have leaky roofs, boilers that aren't working. Kids are, unfortunately, in substandard conditions, in many cases, in our great province.

I wonder if you have a number to address what your board is seeing in terms of—what is your financial number for the school repair backlog?

Mr. Patrick Daly: Through you, Mr. Chair: Thank you for the question.

That would, as you know, vary from board to board, clearly, depending on size, age of buildings. I don't have any numbers with me. I know that it can range from the low millions to perhaps \$1 billion in some of the larger boards. That has been an ongoing problem and challenge for many years. You can imagine, just in our system, with 1,300 schools, that it's a significant investment.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Yes, it's huge. It's in the neighbourhood of, I believe—province-wide, I think \$25 billion was the last number I heard. It's a deep concern, because we want to make sure kids are as safe as possible and people are in good environments.

I noticed within your presentation that you talked about the mandatory and statutory increase to CPP and EI—a cost that, despite being a mandatory increase, has been borne by school boards and not made up by the governments. Do you know what the financial impact is for this across the Catholic school boards?

Mr. Patrick Daly: Thank you for the question—a very good one.

Particularly over the last few years, where the federal government has increased CPP, EI and other statutory benefits significantly, this is a huge pressure.

I don't know the total from across the Catholic boards, but I know I've seen many school board budgets, and it would range from a couple of hundred thousand dollars into the millions. I would suspect the increase alone could be \$50 million or more.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I want to thank you for your words about properly funding special education and the ways in which the government has moved away from ensuring students have all of the supports they require.

Is it the position of OCSTA that students should have the funding that addresses their particular need and exceptionality?

Mr. Patrick Daly: Through you, Mr. Chair: I was part of the review of the funding model in 1997—obviously, a previous government—and it has been a challenge since then, and probably prior to then. So it's one that is highly, highly complex. Student needs have changed dramatically, so I would not cast any blame on any one particular government.

I know that we receive significant funding, but it's extremely challenging to meet the costs, just in terms of the complexity of needs, violence—those kinds of related issues. That's why we continue to recommend ongoing review.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: So it would be fair to say that there is not enough funding to address student needs in terms of their exceptionality, as well as their needs within the classroom?

1620

Mr. Patrick Daly: I've been on and off the OCSTA board since 1993, and every year I've said that. Yes.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: How much time do I have left, Chair?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): You have three minutes and 45 seconds.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Okay.

You mentioned the sick leave for folks within the boards. With those numbers, I wanted to know how many of those folks have accessed short-term disability.

Mr. Patrick Daly: How many individuals?

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Within those numbers that you've presented here at the committee today, how many of those folks have accessed short-term disability?

Mr. Patrick Daly: We would have to survey our member boards.

I can tell you that in my own board of Hamilton Catholic—the last figures I saw, if I remember correctly, out of 4,500 employees, I think it was 45 or 50.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: As I understand it, you have to surpass a certain number of sick days, and then—what does an employee have to do in order to access those additional days, or that short-term disability? What does that require?

Mr. Patrick Daly: Mr. Milanetti can help, as well.

Obviously, they would go beyond the 130 days of sick leave which is permitted in the collective agreement—

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Oh, past the—no, I think the 120 days are the short-term disability days.

Mr. Patrick Daly: Yes, that's what I'm saying. They would go beyond that, and then they would apply for long-term disability.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Okay. My understanding was that once they went past a much smaller number—I believe the threshold is 11 days; it's somewhere in the single or double digits—then, I believe, in order to access short-term disability, it was my understanding that an individual would have to see a health care practitioner and have them address that within the form of a sick note.

I do look forward to any numbers that you have in terms of the school repair backlog, and I'm very interested in having this government make sure that they are providing funding to address the mandatory CPP and EI increase, because that's something that you're mandated to pay and so, really, it's the government's burden to do so.

Mr. Patrick Daly: Mr. Chair, do I have one minute to comment—or 30 seconds—on the LTD?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Absolutely.

Mr. Patrick Daly: Thank you.

I'm going to ask Mr. Milanetti, because he would have more experience.

I think staff get 11 days at 100% and 120 at 90%. I'm not sure at what point—I think at any point, to be honest. If it's cancer or some situation where they know they're going to require LTD, they can apply. I don't know if there's a specific number of days

Through you, Mr. Chair: Nick, I don't know if you know.

Mr. Nick Milanetti: Rates would vary according to boards. What Pat was talking about was long-term disability, but short-term disability happens at various points along the way. It depends on the board, but as soon as an individual produces medical information, they are able to access short-term disability.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you very much for the clarification. I just wanted to make sure it was something that did require the sign-off of a physician. That was my understanding.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That concludes the time for the opposition.

We are moving over to the independent members. MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Pat and Nick, thank you for coming in and presenting today. I must tell you, your presentation is very robust and very detailed. Thank you for taking the time and putting in the passion and the work. These kinds of presentations take a lot of time, so I really appreciate that. I promise you that I will read it. I've already counted the pages; it's 22. So that I can promise you.

On page 1, this is what jumps out at me. In your presentation, you mentioned, "Recommendations are thoughtfully made on the basis that the education funding system in Ontario must be in alignment with four essential principles." The first one jumps out at me, because when I look at everything I do—it has to be equity, it has to be fair, and it has to make sense. You said, "A funding formula must distribute education dollars equitably and fairly among all Ontario school boards and their students."

I'm thinking, no matter where your school board is situated, it must be fairly funded. Can you elaborate on that for me, for the record?

Mr. Patrick Daly: Through you, Mr. Chair: Thank you, MPP Hazell, for the question.

When OCSTA was closely involved in the funding model reform in the 1990s, we developed these principles.

Just to speak to the one that you've commented on in terms of equity or fairness, every school board—French, English, Catholic or public—should be funded fairly and equitably. As well, boards should do their best to fund the schools within their systems using the same criteria.

To take it further, Bill 160, which brought in the new funding model in 1998—part of that legislation is that the actual language be non-discriminatory to really emphasize the need for fairness. So that's an actual legislative requirement.

MPP Andrea Hazell: As I said, there's a lot of information in your presentation. Your numbers make sense. I

will be following up. If I have any questions, I'll reach out to you.

My three kids went to the Catholic school, as well.

No further questions.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Over to the members on the government side.

Mr. Rick Byers: We very much appreciated the presentation. Thank you so much for all your work and for your presentation today.

We have no further questions

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Now we're moving over to the official opposition.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I just want to thank the presenters today—those who are still here, the last holdouts—and everyone else who came today or presented virtually.

No questions over here.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Over to the independent: MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I can ask more questions—education is very important. But I'm just going to rely on the 22-page document that you sent to us.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): MPP Jones.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Thank you, Chair, and through you: First, I want to thank all our guests, all our contributors and our panellists.

I thank the committee, our Clerk and staff, for everything you've done.

Thank you very much for an exceptional day in my riding of Chatham-Kent-Leamington.

Mr. Chair, through you: I move that the Clerk of the Committee be authorized to schedule additional witnesses in Cornwall, Ontario, on January 25, 2024, and that, based on a prioritized list of witnesses already provided by the subcommittee, seven additional witnesses from Ottawa be invited to appear.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): MPP Jones has put forward the motion. Is there any debate? Seeing no further debate, are we ready to vote? All in favour? All opposed? Seeing none, I declare the motion carried.

Any further business? Seeing none—again, thank you so much to all the contributors and the presenters, and more than that, all the other stakeholders, including the staff who are here to make this presentation seamless.

This concludes our business for today. Thank you to everyone.

The committee is now adjourned until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, January 17, 2024, when we will resume public hearings in London, Ontario.

The committee adjourned at 1629.

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