

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

F-64

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

F-64

**Standing Committee on
Finance and Economic Affairs**

Estimates

Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training
and Skills Development

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Tuesday 17 September 2024

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

Budget des dépenses

Ministère du Travail, de l'Immigration,
de la Formation et du Développement
des compétences

1^{re} session
43^e législature

Mardi 17 septembre 2024

Chair: Ernie Hardeman
Clerk: Vanessa Kattar

Président : Ernie Hardeman
Greffière : Vanessa Kattar

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House Publications and Language Services
Room 500, West Wing, Legislative Building
111 Wellesley Street West, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Telephone 416-325-7400
Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Service linguistique et des publications parlementaires
Salle 500, aile ouest, Édifice du Parlement
111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS**

Tuesday 17 September 2024

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

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

Mardi 17 septembre 2024

The committee met at 1500 in room 151.

ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF LABOUR, IMMIGRATION,
TRAINING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Good afternoon, everyone. The Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs will now come to order. The committee will now begin consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. Are there any questions from the members before we start?

I'm now required to call vote 1601, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the minister.

Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. David Piccini: If we could, I spoke with my colleagues today, MPP West, about just a brief moment of silence for the worker who passed away on the job site.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Any objection? Hearing none, a moment's silence for the worker who passed away.

The committee observed a moment's silence.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. Now with that, Minister, I would ask that you begin your presentation. Now the time will start.

Hon. David Piccini: Thank you, Chair, thank you, colleagues and thank you, MPP West, for that.

Chair, it's wonderful to be with all of you here today to talk with the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs on estimates. I'm honoured to be here to discuss how our ministry is safeguarding the rights of workers, empowering individuals to prepare for and secure quality jobs and driving initiatives to make our province an even more desirable place to live, work and raise a family. I'd like to extend my gratitude to Premier Ford for his leadership in these efforts for giving me the ability to take on this remarkable portfolio, to the deputy, the entire department and to my minister's office team for their steadfast work to make life better for Ontario's workers.

Our government understands that the key to building a stronger Ontario, including the delivery of 1.5 million homes by 2031, along with schools, hospitals, roads, bridges, the Ontario Line and subways means we need to attract and train the best talent. In fact, in the words of Mayor Drew Dilkens, whom I was with yesterday, it's a war for talent, and we have to win. By ensuring Ontario remains the premiere

place to live, work and thrive, we're laying down the foundation for sustainable growth and success.

Of course, we have to put workers first. That means addressing the nearly 201,000 jobs that are currently unfilled, costing our economy billions in lost income. We're committed to helping employers bridge this gap by equipping people with the skills and opportunity they need. It's about ensuring that those in Ontario who are struggling to find full-time work can access the training and supports required to claim those uncollected paycheques and contribute to our province's overall economic growth.

Today, I want to talk about how the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development is addressing these challenges, how we're leading Canada and North America in finding ways to support and protect workers, how we are keeping and attracting top talent to our province, how we're helping people train for and find meaningful careers. I'm glad to say that our work is making a difference. Our Working for Workers acts continue to help millions of people across Ontario. Most recently, our Working for Workers 5 holds the promise, Chair, of helping even more Ontarians.

In May, we introduced a new groundbreaking Working for Workers Five Act. It builds on the successes we've seen through our previous Working for Workers bills. Ontario continues to set standards across Canada and even North America when it comes to supporting workers. This bill and its complementary regulatory changes and other actions focus on opening pathways into the skilled trades. I recall fondly the announcement I made with MPP Barnes at Judith Nyman about the focused apprenticeship in the skilled trades and what we're doing in partnership with the Ministry of Education to empower those youth who were there with us, and what this means for securing their own future, for ensuring their own self-determination.

Removing barriers to employment: I think to recent funding announcements we've made at Newcomer Women's Services Toronto with Sara Asalya and the work we're doing to support asylum seekers in finding jobs in Ontario, the work we're doing with the OPFFA, for example—firefighters—to support recognizing their heroic sacrifice, lowering latency periods in honour of heroes like Captain Craig Bowman. We are the first province in Canada, when it comes to these latency periods, to lead Canada, and other provinces are following suit.

We're supporting women at work: PPE, properly fitting protective equipment; ensuring that we bring the same stan-

dards of washrooms on Bay Street, just next door, to main street, to people on the job site. And boy, is it making a difference for people like Lindsey, whom I met at Mattamy Homes's health and safety day. She's a product of Oaks Revitalization, and she is now a champion for health and safety on the job site. We had a great conversation. She spoke to me about how we're empowering young women like her to get, through better training, a better job with a bigger paycheck.

If passed, Working for Workers 5 would increase fairness for job seekers by requiring employers to disclose whether vacancies actually exist in public job postings—seems like common sense—and to respond to applicants who interview for a publicly advertised job posting within the prescribed time, again, elevating that discourse. We're not elevating society by not giving people the dignity of a response and saying to them, "Hey, here's why you didn't get the job." For me, for example, I just realized I have gum in my mouth. It could be things like that; my mom would be horrified if she saw that. But these are little things that you deserve, the dignity of a response, lest we elevate the quality of discourse to ensure that job seekers get the feedback they deserve as to why maybe they just missed out on that job. They deserve that. It's elevating the discourse.

For those already employed, we're proposing to double the maximum fine amount for individuals who are convicted of violating the Employment Standards Act to \$100,000. This would more effectively deter employers from violating employees' rights.

We'd also prohibit employers from requiring sick notes for the three unpaid sick days under the Employment Standards Act, which would save people who are already sick from making a trip to their doctor and reduce unnecessary and burdensome paperwork for health care workers. It's about removing barriers and putting patients over paperwork.

The proposed changes in Working for Workers 5 improve safety protections as well. If passed, our changes would better reflect the increasingly common digital work environment by addressing virtual harassment under the Occupational Health and Safety Act. This is a crucial step for women, who are disproportionately more likely to face workplace harassment, including online harassment, compared to other workers. Our efforts are aimed at creating safer, more inclusive workplaces where everyone can thrive without fear of discrimination or abuse.

Our proposed changes would also better protect the dignity and health of workers by requiring that washrooms for workers, when provided, be kept clean and sanitary and records of cleaning be maintained—again, the same expectations on Bay Street to main street. We're the first province in Canada to do that.

Importantly, our proposed changes would ensure better support for Ontario wildland firefighters by including them in the PTSD presumptive coverage already provided to municipal firefighters. Again, Chair, this is a government, this is a Premier that's working with members of the opposition on measures like these to ensure we're pro-

tecting our front-line heroes. This is a government that will leave no stone unturned when it comes to improving the lot for workers.

We are also supporting all firefighters by proposing presumptive coverage sooner in the case of skin cancer. I already alluded to that, but we know we have to do more. That's why I'm laser-focused on additional measures, which I'll be introducing when we resume the Legislature, to keep supporting our heroes on the front line, be they paramedics, be they police, be they firefighters.

Finally, to help more people access the high-quality jobs waiting to be filled across our province, we are proposing measures to make it easier for individuals to pursue careers in the skilled trades as well as measures that would improve job access for newcomers, helping to put internationally trained professionals on a path to success. We have a great Fairness Commissioner: Glasberg. He's given his life to public service. We're empowering our Fairness Commissioner to work with the regulated bodies, because you've got to work together. But, respectfully, if they could have figured this out on their own, they would have, and we wouldn't have doctors driving cabs.

But Premier Ford and our government are laser-focused on removing those barriers to internationally trained professionals, and it is working. We've seen thousands of new nurses join the front lines in partnership with the College of Nurses, with the Ontario College of Family Physicians, the CPSO. We're working with them as well and we're removing those barriers.

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It includes changes to introduce a new mature-worker policy for people to enter the skilled trades, increasing access to apprenticeship training for individuals who have historically faced barriers to entry.

This also includes changes to require regulated professions to have a policy to accept alternatives where applicants cannot obtain required documents for reasons beyond their control, such as war—we saw that in Ukraine, in Syria—conflict, or natural disasters. The deputy just said how we're speaking about the challenging realities in Lebanon. These are the things we want to make sure that, when people are here, we're setting them up for success. We don't want them underemployed—or worse, Chair, we don't want them working in the grey economy. We have to get them paying taxes, the dignity of a job, a better job with a bigger paycheck—and requiring regulated professions to have a plan, as I mentioned, to enable multiple registration steps to happen simultaneously. This is common sense. This is crazy. I think it's multi-tasking. It's ensuring that we're concurrently moving multiple steps forward to ensure these people aren't languishing.

These groundbreaking initiatives open doors for workers to rewarding opportunities while addressing critical labour shortages in key sectors, building on the work we've done in previous Working for Workers acts. We've strengthened wage protections for workers in the restaurant or hospitality industries, making it clear that employers can never deduct employees' wages in the event of a dine and dash, gas and dash, or any other stolen property. I'd like to ac-

knowledge MPP Anand for his leadership. Of course, a lot of what we do starts with the story of a constituent, and I want to thank him for his leadership. We've strengthened wage protections for those workers.

We've also explicitly banned unpaid trial shifts. We're protecting service workers' hard-earned tips by requiring employers to disclose and publicly post if they have a policy of sharing in employee tips, to help ensure employers are more transparent about how tips are distributed in the workplace.

In response to the rise of digital payment platforms in the service industry, which can include fees for workers, taxes or tips, as well as technical and security issues, our changes now require employers who pay tips using direct deposit to allow their employees to select into which account they want them deposited.

I spoke with workers at a local breakfast spot—and I'm having too young a senior's moment; I'm forgetting the restaurant—it was great—in downtown Toronto. But most importantly, I spoke to those workers about having a say in that. We know with a digital economy, where apps are on our phones, these apps shouldn't be deducting those tips. You should be able to say, "I want that in my chequing account, thank you very much." So we're focused on ensuring that every dollar a worker earns stays where it belongs, in their wallet, and this is reflective of Premier Ford's culture. We've introduced no new taxes. We know the alternative. Opposition parties would impose punishing taxes on Ontarians at a time where they can least afford it today. These punishing taxes are very much driving what we're seeing federally, not the least of which is the job-killing carbon tax.

We're keeping those measures. We want Ontarians to keep more of their hard-earned dollars in their pockets, because then they're spending it in their communities, they're spending it as they know best, and that's a fundamental reflection: that we believe Ontarians know best how to spend that money.

We're helping job seekers make informed decisions in their career by requiring employers to disclose salary ranges in job postings—that has been a big winner with workers in the province—and requiring employers to disclose if artificial intelligence is used during the hiring process. We have more work to do there, but with our privacy commissioner, with people in both the university and college sector—people like Jim Balsillie, who we're talking with—we're going to ensure that Ontario remains at the forefront.

This legislation is also helping injured workers by giving the government the authority to make super-indexing increases, if needed, to the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board—WSIB—benefits above the rate of inflation. Let's not forget, just a few years ago, this was an organization on life support. Today, they're in a very healthy position, empowering the agency, IMCO, that manages the asset; taking the handcuffs off; working with workers to expand injured worker protection and simplifying the system. You shouldn't be drowned in paper the size of a book they gave me for estimates just to get an injured worker claim. We have to make it easier. These brave heroes that we work with—and heroes in all walks of life. I just spoke

about a hero who tragically passed away building a better Ontario. They deserve dignity; their families deserve dignity. We have to create safe workplaces, empowering our health and safety agencies with Working for Workers—days like health and safety day at Mattamy Homes in Oakville—we were there for their day. That's an employer who takes health and safety very seriously. But it starts with Skilled Trades Ontario; it starts in our colleges; it starts, dare I say, even younger than that, to ensure that we're constantly making progress and that we're learning from the very tragic lessons of any workplace fatality.

Finally, the changes made Ontario the first province in Canada to ban the use of Canadian work experience as a requirement in job posting application forms. You should be assessed on your competency. Premier Ford wants a province, I want a province—dare I say all of us here—where you're not judged on creed, colour, religion—as has been said, by the content of your character, by your competency. That's how one should be assessed. Again, we know Ontario is a province people want to be in, and we have to remove barriers to employment, one of which is not assessing competency—rather, where you've worked. By removing that, that's another step in the right direction.

Building on successes in Working for Workers, even prior to 4—these most recent changes in our current proposal build on the strong track record of this ministry. Working for Workers acts 2021, 2022, 2023—it's like Sister Act; it's like Harry Potter: They just keep getting better because we keep learning and keep working with stakeholders and working with opposition members to make these Working for Workers better:

- protecting people's free time and privacy by requiring employers to have written policies on disconnecting from work;

- ensuring rights and protections for digital platform workers who provide rideshare delivery or courier services;

- ensuring fair treatment for people who work solely from home by including them in mass termination provisions;

- requiring recruiters and temporary help agencies to have a licence to operate to better protect vulnerable workers, and our ministry just recently landed the regulations on that, posting—I'm sure you'll see in estimates we've developed the digital platform to do that. The opposition will say, "You then cut it," but we've developed it, and it's done, so we're not spending any more money—have to respect the taxpayer. But that licensing framework is an important step to crack down on unscrupulous temporary help agencies. I've always felt these middle people making a profit—we've got to crack down on that, and our government is taking steps to do that;

- requiring certain employers to provide a naloxone kit to reduce the risk of death from opioid overdoses: I had a great conversation with Mike Crawley and the CBC on that, and I appreciate his interest in that. On our job sites, we've empowered tens of thousands of workers now with training on that;

- reducing barriers for out-of-province and internationally trained workers who choose to come to Ontario, the best province in Canada;

—holding employers accountable by increasing fines for non-compliance with our occupational health and safety and employment standards laws.

I want to take a moment just to talk briefly about occupational illness prevention. It's better, of course, to prevent occupational illness from the start so no one needs to rely on after-the-fact benefits. But that's why, in April 2022, we launched our first-ever review of the province's occupational illness system. The review evaluated how occupational illnesses in Ontario are identified, monitored and prevented. This past October, the final report on how to better address harmful exposures in our workplace was released, and we've already started to make progress. Ontario's Chief Prevention Officer, Dr. Moody, who's behind me, has established an occupational illness leadership table made up of industry experts and system partners who will help guide the implementation of the report's recommendations.

The great team behind me in the ministry here is also working with the Occupational Cancer Research Centre to build Canada's first-ever occupational exposure registry. This is how we tackle clusters; this is how we tackle issues I know we all care about here. This will better track harmful exposures, diagnose workplace diseases faster, improve worker compensation and reduce costs to the health care system.

Chair, we're also helping women in construction. I can't wait next week to get out with A Women's Work and Natasha Ferguson, who was at our recent announcement with LIUNA 183 for the work they're doing. As important as it is with incredible labour partners, who are coming en masse behind Premier Ford and this PC government because of our collaborative working relationship.

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But, as much as I give those union leaders credit, what was really powerful was to see the partnerships that they brought to that announcement, the people benefiting from the better training centre that we're supporting—people like Natasha Ferguson from A Women's Work who faced all sorts of terrible racism, quite frankly, when trying to enter the skilled trades. She experienced and faced things that I as a man just wouldn't face. It's been powerful seeing women—

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Hon. David Piccini: And, gosh, I have pages more because we're continuing. But in particular on young women, we've seen a 34% increase in women registration in apprenticeships: properly fitting PPE; working with traditionally under-represented groups, making sure that we're responsive to industry surveys that are engaging women; talking about better mentorship for women on the job sites. Oaks Revitalization was there, Building Up was there—behind these organizations are faces, real Ontarians challenging our government to do better.

I welcome their challenge, I will rise to that challenge, and I thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to estimates from our great ministry today. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much for your presentation.

Before we commence with the questioning, a reminder to the committee: I will allow members to ask a wide range of questions pertaining to the estimates before the committee. However, it must be noted that the onus is on the members asking the question to make sure the question is relevant to the estimates under discussion.

The ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address. If you wish, you may at the end of your appearance verify the questions and issues being tracked with the research officer.

For any staff appearing today, when you are being called on to speak, please give your name and your title so that we may accurately record in Hansard who we have.

We will now begin questions and answers in rotation of 20 minutes for the official opposition members, 10 minutes for independent members of the committee and 20 minutes for the government members of the committee for the remainder of the allotted time.

We will now start. First up, 20 minutes with the official opposition—MPP West.

MPP Jamie West: I want to thank the minister for a really good speech, actually, frankly. It's always interesting listening to you speak, and my compliments.

But what I wanted to thank you about was the moment of silence. Very often when you make the news it's usually in conflict and when you're arguing or something, and I think that it'd be nice if we made the news once in a while for the stuff that we do together, because there is stuff that we do together. I know that all of our colleagues from all parties are all troubled when we hear about people being injured or, especially, when they're killed, and so my hat's off to you. When we discussed it, there's always this feeling, Chair, that there's going to be maybe a second shoe that's going to drop when someone says, "Let's do the right thing," and maybe it's a set-up for something else. So I appreciate that we all got to work together on that.

I'm going to talk about fines in general. In your speech, you talked about increasing fines, and then one of the things you said earlier was about prohibiting employers from violating the employees' rights. Partial end-of-year numbers for this year suggest there's as much as \$104 million in unpaid fines that were levied under the Occupational Health and Safety Act.

It's not easy to get a fine. The inspector has to be there, has to decide to write a fine, so \$104 million is pretty staggering. They're often levied after a company has been found responsible for serious or critical injuries or, worse, death of the worker. But there is \$104 million outstanding still on the table, and that is \$104 million that remains in employers' pockets. We're not talking about the greatest employers; we're talking about employers who were found guilty of violations of the act.

I'm just wondering, is that number accurate, the \$104 million of outstanding fines for the Occupational Health and Safety Act?

Hon. David Piccini: When it comes to collecting fines, it's important that this is a snapshot in time. We also have ongoing court proceedings as well that would factor into it.

I'll be honest, MPP West: I take pride that we have among the highest fines in Canada for bad actors, whether it be withholding passports, whether it be the Occupational Health and Safety Act, the Employment Standards Act.

And it's more than just fines; it's having good inspectors on the ground who are enforcing that. I know the deputy and I have been talking about the new inspectors that are coming online over the summer, who are getting training. I hope to do a ride-along, as I've done with police, with those inspectors. It's about ensuring healthy, safe workplaces, and PPE.

But I'll turn it over to the deputy. I don't know if you wanted to elaborate any more on the specific \$104-million number.

Mr. Greg Meredith: It's Greg Meredith, Minister Piccini's deputy minister. I'm going to ask my ADM for enforcement to come up, to elaborate a little bit on the process of issuing fines and the role of courts. A part III prosecution could result in a very significant fine to a company, and then the courts have to enforce that. My ADM of enforcement's inspectors also issue fines, and I think Sandra could elaborate on how that process works.

Chair, I can't speak to the member's specific number—I'm not quite sure where it was sourced—but we could come back and confirm it for you.

MPP Jamie West: Okay.

Ms. Sandra Lawson: Thank you for the question. I'm Sandra Lawson, assistant deputy minister of the fair, safe and healthy workplaces division. I can tell you that in 2023-24, the total amount of fines that were levied under the Occupational Health and Safety Act were \$172,400.

Now, to your specific question about the fact that you understand that there is \$104 million in unpaid fines: When fines are levied by the courts in response to a prosecution, the monies go to the municipalities, and so the responsibility for collecting on those fines is with the municipalities. We don't have numbers on how many of those fines, be they part I prosecutions or part III prosecutions under the Provincial Offences Act, are unrecovered by the municipalities.

MPP Jamie West: The number, to me, is staggering, and it feels like it would be a priority of the minister to ensure, if the deterrent to having something happen is a fine—for example, they reduced the speed limit in my area. I got caught by a speed camera doing five over, a \$100 fine. I had to pay \$100. I really, really watch my speed going through that area now, right? That's the idea of it.

So if we're telling workers we're going to make you save for—some of the Working for Workers acts increased the maximum fine. In previous estimates, I've asked, "Well, how many people have we given that fine to?" I never received a response. You don't have to answer that now, but I'd love to get a response to that. How many people get that maximum fine?

But what I'm getting to right now is that if it's \$200,000 or if it's \$100 million and we're not collecting it, I don't think it's going to be a deterrent, and I don't think other people will be worried either.

Hon. David Piccini: I would say that I agree; I don't want a single dollar that's uncollected. We obviously want to ensure that. As you can see, there's a process to that.

And I know when I talk to workers, and I've talked to a number of labour groups about issues that arise in the workplace—I had a very difficult discussion with one just the other day, with our steelworkers. It is important to note, as frustrating as I get it is, that it's not David Piccini who comes into the workplace and issues—you don't want politicians of partisan stripes going into workplaces and issuing fines. We have dedicated inspectors whom I don't have direct communication with. I work with the team at the ministry, because I don't even want that perception, MPP West, that if I'm going in and we're looking at that—I want to look at those measures.

So what I can do is increase those fines, as you've said. We can make sure that the process to receiving access to justice is improved and is a faster one. I think you've seen we're constantly trying to do that in our Working for Workers bills.

MPP Jamie West: Just in terms of timing—

Hon. David Piccini: Yes, of course.

MPP Jamie West: My colleague just sent me a note saying that these are defaulted fines. These aren't ongoing; these are ones where the employer was found guilty and has not paid. I'll move on to another question, but I really think this is a priority for a lot of workers. If we're talking about protecting workers and we're saying, "Here's the stick and here's the carrot," and there is no stick—because there is a carrot for WSIB: If you don't have reported injuries, your premiums go down.

1530

I want to go to wage theft. In the employment rights and responsibilities program, part of that responsibility is ESA enforcement. Last year, it was reported that Ontario workers were owed as much as \$9 million in outstanding wages owed to them by their employers. So \$9 million in wage theft—we colloquially call that wage theft. That was based on the ministry's data. And, overwhelmingly, these workers are usually lower-paid workers. These are immigrants, students, servers, that sort of thing. How much has ESA enforcement efforts recovered in stolen wages since last year?

Hon. David Piccini: A few things on the wage piece: I just want to start by saying our temporary help agency framework, working with temp help agencies, is one good employers welcome to crack down on things like wage theft. We've strengthened the Employment Standards Act to ensure that we have robust tools in place and deterrents in place.

As for the specific number in recovered wages—Deputy?

Mr. Greg Meredith: Yes. I think I'll invite my ADM of enforcement to come back up. She'll have some specific numbers for us.

Keeping in mind that the minister is quite right: We have put in place another regime for licensing temporary help agencies. In the past, we've found they're often a source of—well, "wage theft" is not a phrase I would use,

but I take the member's vocabulary for what it implies, which is people not getting paid.

The question's premise is quite right as well. It's very often those people at the end of the wage scale who are the least able to protect themselves who are most often the victims.

Sandra?

Ms. Sandra Lawson: Just one minute, Deputy. I'm just trying to find my reference.

Hon. David Piccini: If you'd like, MPP West, I can follow up with you and get the exact number of recovered wages.

MPP Jamie West: Okay. And does the ministry track how much is collected?

Hon. David Piccini: Absolutely. And I think another important note is that withholding wages—we've just implemented in Working for Workers a multiplier effect as well. So sometimes employers make honest payroll mistakes, and it's about educating and working with them. But when you see systemic patterns and it's affecting multiple workers or a targeted subset of workers—we're the first province to add the multiplier effect with the penalties that we've associated with that. Other provinces do have that, but we never had that under previous governments. I think that's an important piece that we implemented in recent Working for Workers bills.

MPP Jamie West: I'm curious, too, if there's an estimate towards how much we hope to collect in the upcoming years, because, again, this goes back to the deterrent—that if you learn as an employer that you can get away with violating the Employment Standards Act—I mean, there will be a fine, but you don't have to pay it—then people don't pay it.

I remember, in the 1980s, my sister had a summer job in France. There was a bus system there and, very quickly, people told her, "Just jump on the bus." If you take the bus twice a day, the fine is less than the bus. So, as students, nobody in their twenties or younger than that really paid for the bus. It became sort of a joke that, if you were stopped and asked and you got the fine—very unlikely they would collect on it, and if they did, as long as you took the bus twice that day and didn't get caught, you were still ahead.

That's the fear I have when it comes to these workers. We're all facing this affordability crunch, so if you're a low-wage worker and you're feeling the pressure, like we all are at all different levels of income, and wage theft happens to you and you find out that it's not even going to be collected back, it's a very frustrating experience. It almost signals to those unscrupulous employers—the ones we're all upset about; I've heard the words "bad actors" describing them—whatever the right term is. I'm not saying that any of us are fans of these people, but it does signal to them that this is an acceptable practice and that you can continue doing this, and anyone else who's looking at it, this might be a business practice for you as well to keep more money in your pocket and maybe take some of the money away from the workers that you owe them.

You mentioned some of the older Working for Workers bills, and I want to talk about digital workers. Does the ministry track the number of Ontarians who are digital workers? Is that part of the data that we collect?

Hon. David Piccini: Go ahead, Deputy, on the exact—

Mr. Greg Meredith: We do, but the numbers are quite variable, so it's very difficult to determine how many people are sole employees or workers in a digital platform environment. I think the number is in the range of 137,000. Some of them would be duplicates; if you're working for Skip, it might be Uber at another time.

MPP Jamie West: Right.

Mr. Greg Meredith: But there's a very large cohort, yes.

MPP Jamie West: The reason I'm asking is because previous bills—I think it started in Working for Workers 2—started discussing the protection of digital workers' rights act. It sounds really good, but I have argued—in fact, in this room, I've argued a couple of times—that it's very limited. You have the right to be paid only while you're engaged. You have the right to make a complaint about it, and if you make the complaint and they find out that—I'm trying to think of the organization that was here that represents the digital workers in Toronto, but they talked about making about four bucks an hour.

Back when I was in high school, I had a job at Baskin Robbins. In the summer, it was incredibly busy; in the winter, not so much. But I wasn't paid just when I was scooping ice cream; I was paid for the time I was there. And so the argument is, these workers, who are providing the vehicles, should make, as a baseline, the minimum wage. However, the DPWRA, the Digital Platform Workers' Rights Act, says, "only while engaged." So there's a Shoppers Drug Mart about a block from here. If you go there and you're picking up some soap, that worker is only paid for the minute you show up in the store, and they have to keep an eye on you and ask you if you need help while you pay? Once you walk out the door, if the store's empty, no more pay?

I'm wondering, Minister: Do you think it's fair that a growing number of Ontario's workers are making less than minimum wage?

Hon. David Piccini: I think that for me and this government, we've wanted to take progressive steps to recognize that through technology and the digital world, there are increasingly new forms of employment. From conversations that I've had with workers, they like the flexibility of going on and off the app at their leisure. They understand that they work when they want to work.

I know we've taken steps to ensure transparency around pay systems, around taking steps to ensure that anyone who's kicked off the app—to establish regulations around that, coming in the very near future—and have worked with other provinces on this, as well. BC and Ontario are the first two in this space.

I think there's a flexibility, and I think what this government strives to seek is recognizing the balance. We don't want to create a work environment where we have people pouring on an app who aren't actually performing

the function. You use Uber because you want to get somewhere. You want someone to take you there. You don't want somebody sitting in a parking lot not doing that; you want to get them there to alleviate congestion and the frustration of waiting etc.

So we're working with workers that I speak to in this space, with our local mayors and the actual platforms that recognize that they have a responsibility as well. I think it is an iterative process and I think it's something that this government has shown we will have to keep a keen eye on.

MPP Jamie West: The thing with this, though, with the digital workers, a couple of things I've learned, because I have been intentionally taking Ubers, taking Lyfts, talking to those drivers, delivery drivers and taxicab drivers—my understanding is that in a taxicab, there's a flat rate that you're going to earn for the time that you're there. I'm sure that we could work out the details if you're not working eight-hour shifts—as a platform worker, if you were working different shifts—but the reality is, at the end of the day, these workers are telling me that they're making less than minimum wage.

It's not just that, but the digital workers' rights protection act also misclassifies them as contractors. They don't fit the ABC test to be contractors, but they're misclassified, and the Conservative government has enshrined this in law that this is okay. So every time I hear you say, "bigger paycheques" and "better jobs and bigger paycheques" and all these things that I hear, I'm confused when I speak with the digital app workers, because they're not seeing it. What they're seeing is that they're making payments on a car—more and more are going electric, because they can't afford gas, but they've got to pay for gas or insurance or brakes and tires—and they're not even making minimum wage out of this, right?

1540

And so this is something that has to be addressed because, as New Democrats, we don't think that people should make less than minimum wage, and we also don't think that people should be misclassified as contractors so that billion-dollar companies—Lyft and Uber are doing pretty good, if you look it up. I don't know what they're worth now—\$4 billion, the last time I looked. They're doing okay. But if their workers are making less than minimum wage, it's frankly unfair to Ontario's workers, and they need a government who's going to have their back and is going to say, "This is unfair and you deserve at least a baseline of wages for the work that you're performing, and we're going to remove that stipulation so that you're not misclassified as contractors so you have the rights of the Employment Standards Act, you have the rights of the Occupational Health and Safety Act—all the rights that other workers get, you should have those rights as well."

Am I getting to the one-minute mark, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): You have 1.4.

MPP Jamie West: The question was asked before. Could I get a reply in writing for the stats? Thanks.

Hon. David Piccini: Absolutely. I think it is about balance. The bottom line is we are the first province in

Canada to establish a minimum wage and other foundational rights for digital workers, and so they will get minimum wage for the work they are doing, and in many cases, much more. But we are the first province in Canada to establish those foundational rights, and I'm very proud that Premier Ford has done that.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Hon. David Piccini: I recognize that being a first mover means you expose yourself to others saying, "I would've done this; I would've done that," but I'd rather be the first in line in Canada to enshrine these basic rights for a group of people who otherwise wouldn't have had any of these rights, if not for Premier Ford and this government.

So we'll continue working with platform workers. I, too, will engage in the discussions you engage in when I choose to use these services; I also take cabs. And I look forward to continuing that dialogue because it is a balance. I don't think any of us want skyrocketing prices either or platforms leaving Ontario, so we want to make sure that we get this right and we do so working with all of our partners.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you—

Mr. Greg Meredith: Mr. Chair, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I do have a correct figure for the member on the estimate of the number of workers—

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Okay, you have one second to get it in or do it in the next time around. We will be coming around again.

Mr. Greg Meredith: It's 187,600.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): We'll now go to the government side. MPP Barnes.

Ms. Patrice Barnes: Minister, you spoke a little bit about really looking at connecting workers with their skills and having people come here and be able to have successful employment and to participate in the economy, both giving back but also having really good paycheques that would help them to establish a life and be here.

I just want to talk to you a little bit more about things that I hear in my riding around the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program. What does that program look like in bringing qualified workers to Ontario, and how are we really leveraging that program to address some of the shortages that we have within our employment spaces, especially around skilled trades and the health field?

Hon. David Piccini: Thank you very much, MPP Barnes. First off, when I think to the experience of many, I think to my own family experience. My dad's side had a grandfather who sought a better future here in Ontario; he came over with no formal university or college education and worked in a union in the steel factory. My dad was the first to get a university education in that family, and his son is Minister of Labour today, so that's the sort of progression and hope and opportunity that this country offers.

But to do that, I would say I would take a step back. You have to have a system with integrity. Today, that system is under great strain, so we're working with our provincial counterparts and the federal government to make sure they are taking steps to make sure that we have a province that's welcoming and a province that's actually able to get people

into employment, and health care services have the education services ready in that they're not under great strain and able to welcome newcomers.

Having said that, our primary tool to welcome newcomers, which is predominantly a federal responsibility—I'll ask ADM Lee to come up, but I would note Ontario has approximately 4% autonomy right now into those who do come through our Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program, and we've taken a number of steps. We're a points-based system; we're prioritizing skilled trades and health care professionals. We've brought in thousands of nurses. We're streamlining our regulated professions pathways, ensuring that those who are here are set up for success: the dignity of a job, the self-determination, the ability to stand on one's own two feet.

That is our mission: filling those gaps in labour market needs, as I said, skilled trades being a big focus, and Francophone immigration as well. We've hit our targets in previous years on Francophone immigration. The team is working hard this year.

I will say that we've ambitiously, under Premier Ford's leadership, sought greater autonomy for Ontario. We are the best and biggest province, the engine of the Canadian economy. To think that Quebec has complete autonomy over their system and we have about 4% autonomy is not right. It's not right for the workers in Ontario. It's not right for the employers who are desperately seeking those, and it's not right to all of the immigrants who choose Ontario. They don't choose Ontario via an Atlantic province or another province. Many do end up coming to Ontario whose first port of entry is another province; we know that.

Ontario is where it's at, under Premier Ford's leadership, with electric vehicles. We've brought back manufacturing jobs—800,000 jobs. Who doesn't want to be a part of that? I spoke to the team at NextStar when I was down in Windsor. People want to be a part of the EV future. Honda—we're the only province that has our six major automotive players to exist, the only jurisdiction in North America who has that, and people want to be a part of it.

But I will turn things over to our associate deputy minister, just to talk about the work that she and her team are doing. They are doing a great job on regional programs to get immigrants into underserved areas in the north—I think to our critical minerals sector—and the OINP program as a whole.

Ms. Gloria Lee: Hello. My name is Gloria Lee, and as the minister said, I'm the assistant deputy minister for global talent settlement services.

Under the Ontario Immigrant Nomination Program, we have the opportunity to nominate foreign nationals and temporary residents for permanent residency in Canada. Last year, the federal government allocated 16,500 nominations to Ontario, which was a 70% increase over the previous year. Of the 16,500, roughly 30% were made in skilled trades, so we were able to nominate 4,592 applicants; 2,045 nominations were made in health care workers; 5,391, which is roughly a third, were made to nominations in tech workers; and roughly 400 were French-speaking.

In terms of recent improvements, our nomination allocation for this year is 21,500, and we are tracking to

achieving those targets. We will be nominating roughly 30% in the skilled trades; 10% in health care; 2% to 5% in French-speaking, and that's because we have to collaborate with the federal government on that; and, again, 30% in tech workers.

We've also introduced a number of initiatives to increase the skilled workers coming in. Under the health care stream, what we've done is we do targeted draws to help ensure that we can nominate as many people in the health care field. We've also introduced some program changes through regulation to expand eligibility for internationally trained nurses. We just made some ministry regulations in July that would make it easier for nurses to come here by waiving some post-secondary foreign equivalency requirements.

Those are just some examples that we could talk about.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Over to MPP Harris.

Hon. Mike Harris: Thank you, Minister, Deputy and your team for being here today. It wasn't too long ago that I was in your shoes on that side of the table. I know it's always a bit of an interesting adventure, so thank you for taking part in the questions and comments here today.

I want to talk a little bit about where MPP Barnes left off, the skilled trades and the OYAP program; how we're getting young people interested in the trades; how we are helping them with their journey through middle school; seeing those trades programs, the auto shop, the wood-working, the metal shop, the different things in those middle school programs into high school; getting them into that OYAP training program; seeing them come out into their fully signed apprenticeships and then off to their, you know, journey person or whatever-they're-going-to-be-doing role.

1550

So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about some of the investments that your ministry has made in OYAP, and maybe talk a little bit broader about what the skilled trades apprenticeship landscape looks like under our government, versus what we've seen previously.

Hon. David Piccini: Absolutely. You know, I think it's important to start from where we were to where we're going. I don't think the previous Liberal government was as passionate. I mean, if attendance dictates one's passion on this, we can see all we need to know. Full credit to members of the New Democratic Party, who have brought us ideas to work with our government; Liberals are asleep at the switch, and it's not a surprise.

Under the previous government, we saw a decline in registrations. We saw shop classes close—and that's if you're lucky; it was mainly just high schools outright being closed in rural communities like mine. You can't train a next generation if you've shut down Norwood High, something they would've done in my community; if you'd shut down Port Hope High, something Liberals would've done in my community.

So there's a suite of things. It starts in K-to-12. We launched the FAST program. You know, I often reference my experience with an Advanced Placement course that counted towards my university degree. I could do that. Why can't young men and women do that in the skilled

trades towards their level 1? You might be lucky in a high school if everybody even knew what levels 1, 2 and 3 were.

I've been increasingly inspired by the boards who are taking an active interest in this, partnering with union training halls, partnering with non-unionized employers, and so I'm seeing that excitement amongst teachers. Why? Because we also launched a Level Up! skilled trades fair. We just had it kick off in Cobourg, and it was fascinating. "I've never tried this before" were the words I heard over and over and over again from young boys and girls who were being exposed to the exciting careers in the skilled trades. Teachers, who are so passionate—and I don't fault them; they've gone through a formalized university education system. They haven't necessarily been exposed to that, unless their spouse or significant other has those sorts of experiences, or maybe a parent or someone in their family. They are inspired by it. Board members are inspired by it. Trustees are inspired by that.

This is the biggest Level Up! skilled trades job fair—like, on steroids. I mean, this is incredible. We're doing 15 now this year, and I thank PA Barnes and our entire caucus for their ideas on this. We're incorporating a parents' night, targeting parents, so I think to friends of mine like the young friends of mine, young parents, who joined that night. I think to a friend of mine who works at McDonald's, she mentioned to me, "David, my daughter was there. I went in the night. I went in the evening to see what my daughter couldn't stop raving about." The young girl who showed me how to do sheet metal—again, we're targeting at a young age.

The Ontario College of Trades—I mean, this was a Liberal government that imposed punishing fees. And do you know what? If they were here, I would actually ask them, because we're talking about estimates: What would they increase that fee to? That's a number I'm curious about. What would Bonnie Crombie increase the fee for men and women to enter the skilled trades? Because we've cut it in half. We've removed fees, and we're not done there. Stay tuned for more coming on that.

You know, it's symbolic of how it was mismanaged under the Wynne-McGuinty government that the loan program to get tools—only Liberals could have a program that cost more to administer than actual loans that go out to young men and women in the trades. Jamie, that wouldn't happen under any of us here. That is ludicrous. We've said, "If we're going to take a loss, let's empower the people with it," and we've turned it into a grant program.

I was at a local hall just the other week and met a young woman who came from Colombia here, who has got her first set of tools thanks to programs like the one this ministry is offering, who had child care support thanks to supports this ministry offers, and is now on her way to level 3. She was at the Labour Day parade, as well, and we spoke to her for Local 27.

These are the sorts of things we're doing: tackling the stigma; going after parents; empowering youth through those opportunities that treat it as a profession, as we do any other course that you go through university or college

for; making sure that those soft supports are there as a government after the disastrous, punishing fee/taxation legacy that we inherited. That's important, because when I look at the groups we're supporting today, when I see men and women in the justice system who have been a net police expense, a net expense in the court system, a net expense in the penal system—the justice system and the prisons are now on the job site today.

For those who were at the 183 announcement we just made in Vaughan with Minister Lecce, with PA Laura Smith, that young man who spoke to the Premier after was in the Lindsay penitentiary just last year, and today he's earning a better, bigger paycheque, paying taxes, working, and stands as a role model. These are the sorts of programs we're empowering Ontarians with.

I was just on the phone with James St. John of the Hammer Heads youth program on the way in, talking about the work they're doing with the Pinball Clemons Foundation—good thing he's not speaking here; I hate speaking after that guy. That is an inspiring man who has all sorts of lived experiences. Orlando Bowen, who they've partnered with—what a tragic experience, targeted as a racialized young man—and what he's doing now in the trades system. Seeing the face of our next generation, the best thing we can do is support these sorts of programs, because that's the change I want to see on job sites.

Hon. Mike Harris: Minister, if I may, I want to tell you a personal story about how my family has seen the investments that this government has made actually come to fruition. Many of you here will remember my son Jaxon. He was a page here back in—oh, my gosh, it was 2019, I think, and over the course of the last few years, he went through the OYAP program at KCI in downtown Kitchener, became a signed apprentice over this summer, and on Labour Day we just dropped him off, Jamie, in North Bay at Canadore College, and he's now going to school to become, essentially, an aircraft mechanic.

So I've seen first-hand what this looks like and what that journey is, and it's nice for you and your team to be able to hear that from us as legislators. You noted your friends, as well, who have had someone go through that similar process. It's been welcoming to see, because one of the things, for years and years, that we always talked about was that stigma. You don't necessarily have to have that corner office on Bay Street—that's just the example that we often use. We need elevator technicians. We need aircraft mechanics. We need folks to be able to fix the equipment in the mines in Sudbury, right? It's nice to see the government signal and focus on those jobs and those in-demand skills that are really, truly there, and it's good to hear that the OINP program is looking to alleviate some of that as well.

I know there's not a whole lot of time left for colleagues here, but I don't know if you want to just touch on that quickly.

Hon. David Piccini: I'm glad you mentioned that, because he's on a journey now. Once you sign a registered training agreement, which he will sign, then you're on a journey to become a certified professional.

To everyone who's here today—because I'm the sum of this ministry and the work we've done, and we are talking estimates. We launched a portal to register a training agreement—and I think of firecrackers like Antonella, who's with the international painters' and tapers' union; she'll tell you what's working and what's not. I think to Merissa Preston with 506 and some of the feedback she's provided. It may be a bit unorthodox, but we brought the provider who's doing it; the deputy, the team, me—we brought them in. We just huddled around a table and listed all of the challenges we're facing, and so the changes we're making are a result of productive round tables like that. It wasn't, "Write me a letter. Get a response six months later. Share it with the deputy, who then shares it." We just got everybody in a room and said, "How do we improve on that?" We had a bit of a working table on this, and I'm pleased to say we're making improvements on that system, because, again, it's constantly iterative. I'm certainly far from perfect. Nothing other than maybe my wife is perfect from the get-go.

1600

So, we're constantly working in an iterative process to improve that: working with ministry officials, working with providers, working with those who are signing registered training agreements in a union or non-unionized setting. We have a skilled trades special adviser who's out there talking about those pathways.

And behind it is a story: the story of your son. This is their story, and how we can better reflect it and better make the system easier for them is our mission to ensure we get a next generation of skilled tradesmen and women—

Interruption.

Hon. David Piccini: —who can fix the light.

Ms. Patrice Barnes: Time, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): One point four-eight.

Hon. Mike Harris: Oh, gosh.

So, yes, I think it's great to be able to know that you and your ministry team as well are taking that to heart and are getting out there and are doing the consultations. It's extremely important to get out of the Queen's Park bubble, if you will, and go and talk to all those people who you have mentioned. I know that you have done a phenomenal job of picking up where Minister McNaughton left off at continuing those personal relationships and getting out across the province. Every time that we speak, you're always talking about someone that you've just been on the phone with or someone that you've just seen, and you remember the name, you remember what the issue was and you remember who they were. I'm very thankful that we have someone like you in your position that is really up to the task, up to the challenge, to be able to make a difference when it comes to your ministry. I do applaud you and thank you, sir.

Hon. David Piccini: Thank you very much for that. We're on a mission. We're open to ideas to get more young men and women into the trades. But to take it full circle back, we won't do that by imposing punishing fees like the previous Liberal government—\$500 minimum per worker

saved right off the bat. The 80% decrease in the time for apprenticeship registration—under the previous government, that spiralled to over two months.

And it matters, because these little stories do matter. Walking Max and Lena, my dogs, the other day, Alex Papp—I played soccer with him, a hydro worker like his dad—said, "Hey, I've got my fees coming up. When are you going to lower those fees?" So even—I reminded him that we've cut them in half—

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time.

We'll now go to MPP West.

MPP Jamie West: Chair, I'm going to pass it off to my colleague for a minute.

At the end, we were talking about the digital worker rights protection act. I wanted to clarify: The minister had said that you're guaranteed minimum wage, but you're only guaranteed minimum wage for the hours you're working. So in order to make an eight-hour shift, some of these workers are working 14 to 16 hours, which seems unfair. So in terms of recommendations—he said he's open to recommendations—I'd like to address that.

The other thing I wasn't aware of but I learned while speaking to some of these Uber drivers and Lyft drivers is that because they're misclassified as contractors, that work experience isn't eligible for them to get their citizenship. So they have to pick up another job to get the hours needed to qualify for the citizenship. That's something we need to evaluate as well.

I'll pass off to my colleague Terence Kernaghan.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you, Minister, for your comments about your family. I think back to my great-grandfather and my great-grandmother. My great-grandmother came to Canada shortly after my great-grandfather was murdered with four children in tow.

It was because my grandfather landed a union job at Ford in Talbotville that it changed the trajectory of my family. My mother was able to qualify and gain a Ford-sponsored scholarship, went to university. Both my parents were union members. I myself am a union member, and, in fact, sitting next to me, MPP West is similarly a union member.

This morning, we met with workers from Western University CUPE 2361: 325 people who have been off the job for three weeks, which has been made far longer than it should have been because of the use of scab labour. Workers wanted me to ask you, Minister: Will Minister Piccini do the right thing and pass anti-scab legislation this fall?

Hon. David Piccini: Thank you. I've just got to say, thanks for acknowledging your family history. I love the stories that we learn about one another. And the important employer-based scholarship programs—again, Stelco, no different for our family, so I'm glad you mentioned that.

I will say, 98% of deals are done at the table in Ontario, which is good. I mean, deals have to be done at the table. That's collective bargaining, and that's the reality in Ontario.

As I've long said, I'm always open to ideas. We've had good dialogue with a number of partners on ways to ensure

that we're getting folks to the table. I think Ontario has done a good job, as I said: 98% of deals done at the table.

I did see your announcement. I question your choice of leaders that you stand with to make that announcement, but I would hope that they're truly representative of all their workers. I'm aware of the challenges there, and I do want to—

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I'm going to reclaim my time. Thank you, Minister. I appreciate you appreciating the substance of that message about those workers from CUPE 2361.

I want to turn my questions now to the OINP. I think anyone in this room with a constituency office is well aware of the gaps that exist within the system. While the online portal has been incredibly helpful, decision-making timelines have been vastly longer than what had been stated or expected. Many constituents I have indicated that they were meant to hear back within 60 days, but they've been left waiting without any indication for well over 100 days. I think everyone can agree that this is far too close for comfort when it comes to deadlines such as OSAP or enrolment and PR renewal and application deadlines.

Since there is a worker shortage across various sectors in the province, how will the province fill labour gaps in manufacturing, education, transportation and public works with the current ranking system? And do you think the system is working properly and the funding is sufficient when people are waiting longer than the stated promise or deadline?

Hon. David Piccini: I would start by saying I think the federal government themselves recognizes the challenges under the immigration system, and Minister Miller and I are working—he's been responsive to the provinces—to fix it.

Our timelines through the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program range between 30 to, on the exceptional case, 120 days. That is significantly faster than the often well over a year we hear for IRCC for their processing. That's why you heard from Gloria, who spoke to our increased autonomy under the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program, where we went from 16,000 to 21,000. We want to increase that number.

And we're meeting our targets, so we want the federal government to view Ontario as a partner in that. The closer you get to the ground, the better you know the labour market challenges. This dates back to the consensus established in the early 1990s under Prime Minister Chrétien on labour market and who knows it best, empowering the provinces. Regrettably, the federal government cut our Labour Market Transfer Agreement—shameful.

So we're seeking that greater autonomy, through online portals and IT investments—surely neglected investments in the past, and I think we're working with the team to make the right investments to make sure the process is easier. Again, it is an iterative process, but I'm proud of the work the team has done to lower timelines, to make sure they have the supports.

Honestly, the biggest issue, and something we recently overcame, was the fact that we've been so ambitious with

that autonomy. It's making sure we have the team in place to support those timelines. The deputy and I have worked on that. I'm pleased to say we are growing the team to be able to process with the same sort of speed that you'd expect to get a call back from the Premier.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Great.

Next, I'd like to turn back to employment services. In 2019, social assistance employment services were moved into Employment Ontario, so if you lost a manufacturing job, Employment Ontario would help you find something new; if you were disabled, impoverished or suffered other types of marginalization, ODSP would help you find a new job. The Ontario Disability Employment Network and Community Living Ontario surveyed 68 providers who said red tape has ballooned under the new model, leaving less time to work with job-seekers, while staff turnover has been rampant. Since assuming responsibility for administering the employment services transformation program, does the Ministry of Labour track the number of participants who have come from Ontario Works or ODSP?

Hon. David Piccini: Yes, we do. One of our biggest challenges, MPP Kernaghan, has been the referrals that our system managers at municipal level are making into the new employment services transformation. As is the case, we just announced the transformation in Toronto and the biggest region in northwest Ontario as well. So we don't have, I think, an accurate sample size in big cities like Toronto to truly say whether it has worked. I don't think anybody expects it overnight.

1610

However, our early indicators show that under the EST transformation, it is working. We're getting more people into employment, including the hardest to place. I think to Employable Me, a program one of our providers is rolling out—I visited that in Alberta—helping those with disabilities access jobs. I think to, again, those in and out of the justice system, formerly incarcerated. I mentioned some of the stories already about work that we're doing there. So I think we've seen meaningful progress made.

Deputy, I don't know if you want to touch on any of the stories you've heard.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Before I forget, Minister, could I have please a copy of both of those numbers?

Hon. David Piccini: Absolutely.

Mr. Greg Meredith: Yes, yes, of course.

The Employment Ontario system served, last year, 869,000 clients. The employment service system found jobs for 193,000 individuals, including 59,000 people who were previously on social assistance. And we do track them through their employment contract, their employment planning, through to their engagement and how many months they're working, how many hours for those months they're working. So we have quite a range of data that we can provide you on the performance of the service system managers.

The minister's quite right; we've only just begun burning in the last group of service system managers, and so we expect the data to improve. We already know that the performance of the most experienced system service

providers is best, so the new ones are learning from the previous ones and the system is improving.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: You had mentioned how many participants in the program are staying employed as a result of the program. How many people who have used the program will return to Ontario Works or ODSP? Do you have numbers for that?

Hon. David Piccini: So I know the system that we're going—almost everybody ended up back in the system prior to our changes. We've seen, in my own catchment area, where Fleming College is a service system manager, significant numbers of those placed. I think, last I checked, we were well over 5,000 placed, and after a year, which is an important indicator—that you remain employed after a year. So these are the sorts of things we're tracking. We've helped over—

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Could I please have those numbers as well?

Hon. David Piccini:—clients to date, 59,000 social assistance clients are actively working towards finding employment today and 74% of clients who have completed services have found employment and continue to be employed. The regions where we adopted our new one window, 82% of clients have completed pre-employment services, have found jobs. And that pre-employment piece is key into retention long term.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Great. I would like numbers, Minister, with your consent, of course, for people who have been involved in the employment program and then have returned to Ontario Works and ODSP.

Another concern that we have with this new, integrated system is that private companies have never been so involved in Ontario's employment services. These profit-based system service managers, people have said that they typically only serve the easiest to serve because of incentive-based pay—incentives such as how long a client is able to stay on a job. Disturbingly, many critics have said that these incentives, which replaced funding in the previous system, are much, much lower. Since the program has been expanded province-wide with this mix of service providers, both not-profit and for-profit entities, can you please tell us how much has been paid to third-party providers?

Hon. David Piccini: I've got to say, because I feel really strongly about this: I want to see outcomes. The deputy and I touched on some of our early indicators, strong outcomes, to get people a job. The system where people are just ending up back on OW is not working. We don't measure success by clients served, by a growing list of people the state is supporting; we measure success by the people who have the dignity of a job. We have some incredible stories.

As I owe you a few follow-ups on numbers, I would ask maybe you join me with one of our SSMS, and in particular, one of the private sector SSMS, to see some of the lives that have been changed through employments like WCG, who introduced me to a man who was homeless just months ago, who has now been employed over six months and reunited with his pet. I don't mean to sound trite but

that matters—little things like that. So those stories matter, and I think we want it outcomes based. I'm laser-focused on those outcomes.

We've seen jurisdictions that have adopted this and have seen success—from Australia, among others. I know—category C, because you said, “easiest incentives.” I'm driving a system where service system managers are incentivized to place what we could call stream C clients. After the total outcome, after 12 months, we have performance-funding outcomes that are the highest for category C—think incarcerated; think homeless, very unhoused. Incentives are the highest for employment 12 months or longer. The total outcome for payments almost quintuples from those easiest to place to hardest to place.

So I take issue with any assertion that the system incentivizes easy-to-place because, factually, that's just not correct when we talk about incentives for those hardest-to-place stream C clients.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you, Minister. I'd very much recommend that you reach out to Community Living, as well as the Ontario Disability Employment Network, who have interviewed folks and have offered those suggestions.

As well, this committee is tasked with the estimates. While you rightly say that you're concerned about outcomes, we're also concerned about the fiscal realities of those outcomes. Will you share the amount that's being paid out to third-party providers, these SSMS?

Hon. David Piccini: Again, we've increased funding for employment service transformation. I want to ensure that those outcomes are strong and getting people employed, and so—

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Will you share the numbers, Minister?

Hon. David Piccini: Again, we've increased funding—it's in the budget—and those numbers for employment service transformation. We have a variety of partners—

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Chair, I'm going to reclaim my time. It doesn't sound like I'm going to get an answer on that, respectfully.

We often hear words about transparency, accountability. Now, a third-party report which was analyzing the integration of this system has not been released to the public. In December 2023, the Ministry of Labour said it didn't release the final report about the system integration because too much time had passed since it was written.

My question is, will you be releasing the final report, the full report, and the analysis of the integration of Ontario's employment services system?

Hon. David Piccini: We've released analysis of our early adopters, like in the Haliburton-Kawartha region; like Fleming College, as I said. It was a snapshot of employment service transformation when it was not fully implemented. We've acknowledged areas for improvement and welcomed the constructive feedback. I think it's important as well that, as we're doing these snapshots in time, we're having an accurate sample size, as I mentioned earlier, to make sure that we have accurate reporting and a really good snapshot of the discrepancies and the difference

between this vast province, from the north to the rural to urban.

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As we continue to move forward, I'll continue to provide updates. Everywhere I go, in speaking with employment groups, we're talking about the metrics, we're talking about areas for improvement—as I mentioned, referrals with our municipal service managers, and we're working with them. I think to recent conferences like AMO where we've worked with them to ensure that we're improving, and letters I've written to service system managers to say we've got to increase that collaboration and those referrals. So that's been, I think, one of the biggest things that early reports have shown, but I look forward to continuing to work with the service system managers as—ultimately, success for me is fewer people on OW and on ODSP. Making moves like we've made to ensure those who work with a disability—I think to alleviate for flare-ups and chronic diseases—

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you, Minister. I would say, it appears to me as though the full report is not going to be released and it is not forthcoming. I do think that is unfortunate. You'd mentioned that the full report showed promise and it showed good signs, so I don't see why it remains secret.

I also wanted to point out Ontario's publicly funded workforce development sector works tirelessly to serve Ontarians and to help them find meaningful employment. Employment service providers, ESPs, are nimble; they're efficient; they save money, delivering roughly 2% annual cost savings to accommodate inflation; yet their operational funding has been unchanged since 2010. There's a lack of operating funding for ministry-managed programs.

An example: First Work has asked that the ministry increase Employment Ontario front-line-service delivery operational budgets by 5%. This request was made, Minister, in April 2024—

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: My question: Will you, Minister, address this 14-year-long gap in operational funding?

Hon. David Piccini: In fact, I just met with my literacy provider locally. I hate the name, too. We're going to be changing the names for this because I profoundly dislike how this is referred to. They did mention, and I would mention, programs like Skills Development Fund, and we've made a series of one-time investments that have been a very important cash injection to support these organizations.

As we look at Employment Services Transformation and where the puck is going, the literacy networks are a vital, vital partner, an important piece. So I met with my local provider today who shared some of the challenges over the past. I recognize that we live in a world where costs are going up for everyone, and—

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time.

MPP Hogarth.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Thank you, Minister and Deputy, for being here today.

We've been talking a lot about—and it's so important to talk about jobs, but I just wanted to share something

that's happened in my riding. I know, Minister, you actually had the opportunity to join me at a location called Building Up. On Thursday, they are celebrating their 10th anniversary. Marc, who is the CEO or executive director of the organization—I met with them a couple of years back with Associate Minister Charmaine Williams to meet with women. Building Up is for people who need jobs; they're not sure where they fit in in this world, and they need employment just like everybody else.

So we met with these young women to talk about what the barriers are to getting into the skilled trades. Some of those discussions talked about the basics: child care, clean bathrooms. We just take that as a norm. We walk down the hall, and our washrooms are clean. I think, Minister, you had mentioned that during your opening statement. But this young lady—we went back with you, and I actually said, "What you told us at this round table actually made a difference and made it into legislation." So having these round tables all around the province really does make a difference because we get to hear from young women on why they aren't sticking with the trades. How do we change that so we can—I think about your comment about having properly fitting PPE. That should just be a given, but it never was, so I thank you for these initiatives that you've brought forward.

But back to Building Up: This was an organization that, when I spoke to Marc, he said he gets hundreds and hundreds of applications for this program. What they do—it's a non-profit; it trains workers to be apprentices. When you and I were there, we learned a little bit about drywalling, and I actually got to use a saw. They trusted me with a saw. It was a lot of fun, but after, I didn't realize the person who was talking to the minister and I was actually not the professor, not the teacher; he was actually one of the trainees. I was really impressed. Safety first; he knew all the rules. It is just such an amazing organization. From your visit with Marc and that group of young people, they applied for the Skills Development Fund and were given an extra \$830,000 to help with this program.

Minister, I just want to say thank you. You have changed lives. Now, these aren't just lives in Etobicoke–Lakeshore; they're lives from all the GTA. People come to this place. Now they're able to grow this program. Unfortunately, they may have to grow out of my riding because of the size, but these are real examples of lives that we've changed. These people will actually be able to form a career. We're going to be able to help more people to build, and that's what we're asking for.

That's not the only example in my area of Etobicoke–Lakeshore; we have an organization called Pathways to Prosperity. It's adult learning. They're not learning skilled trades like building a house, but they're new to Ontario, new to Canada, and they're learning how to read—simple skills to help them get jobs. We are changing these people's lives, or your ministry is, with the programs like the Skills Development Fund. And your ministry, for this adult learning program, gave just over \$370,000 so they can continue and train more people in just the basic skills of learning how to read, or those with different abilities are able to learn different skill sets.

So I just wanted to share—I know I’m a fiscal conservative, and when you see budgets double or triple when it comes to this Skills Development Fund—you did add extra money to the Skills Development Fund, but it is making a difference. By investing these additional funds, how do you feel? This is just a small example about my area. How are you feeling it is making a difference across Ontario, and what can we do to help the process, to make it even better and more streamlined for more young people to apply and actually have a future and a job and a great career in this amazing province we have?

Hon. David Piccini: Thank you, and thank you, MPP Hogarth, for inviting me out to see Marc and the team at Building Up. That was exciting, because we got some real, literal hands-on experience.

I think you led with the question about women in the trades specifically. I think to Obioma, who was there, who was one of, I believe, their case managers who works with youth going through that program. These are the role models we’re helping empower in community, meeting people where they’re at, helping them get into the trades, and it’s changing lives, literally.

I’m excited about having the support of the Premier and the government and cabinet to increase investments in the Skills Development Fund. We announced \$260 million into our latest round of Skills Development Fund funding. This is a program that is oversubscribed. There are remarkable examples. The team and I and the deputy minister, who is overwhelmed—when it comes to all these applications, it’s very difficult, I’m sure, as they go through the applications and assess them.

Our challenge is also now working with partners and providers, and Building Up is a great example, because, of course, they have such deep and rich partnerships in the community and are able to offer the experiences of people like Obioma, whom we met, empowering young women.

So I’m very excited about this next round. I’m excited that we have a Premier and a government that are making these record investments. I’m excited that we see—mimicry is the greatest form of flattery, from Alberta to federal parties talking about these sorts of investments that we are doing, that Premier Ford has led the way on.

But it’s not without its challenges, you know. The federal minister of skills development tried to take credit for one of our recent announcements, ignoring the fact at the bottom that it was the training stream that traditionally got funds under the cut labour market transfer agreement that they cut. But I can forgive his ignorance there, because we actually have a capital stream too. We’re continuing to do so much as a government that unfortunately we had—Randy got it wrong on that one. But it’s been difficult, and it’s been difficult for the other provinces who want to emulate what Ontario’s been doing, our leadership, but aren’t getting that support from the federal government.

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But I digress on that because it’s about stories, and it’s about the stories of the young men and women whom you introduced me to in your riding. Seeing a record number of women go through these classes, traditionally under-

represented groups in the trades, as I’ve said—and it’s about reducing barriers, so from washrooms on job sites; common-sense changes; properly fitting PPE, like you said. It’s common sense, but sometimes common sense isn’t all that common. But under Premier Ford, it is and we’re making those changes: removing barriers from transportation to employment, to funding mobile try-a-trade trucks like Ian Howcroft and the team at Skills Ontario, whose truck came to communities like mine in Cobourg—actually, Hiawatha First Nation. Chief Carr invited him down, in my community.

They don’t have a training hall in Hiawatha First Nation. It’s a small Indigenous community on the north shores of Rice Lake, but thanks to investment this government has made, there’s new trucks coming off the line. We are exposing these remarkable careers—because when you have a job in the trades, you’ve got a career and a career for life—to communities that otherwise wouldn’t have had that exposure. So I’m inspired when I see Indigenous youth in Hiawatha exposed to the trades and I’m inspired by the Skills Development Fund, which has revolutionized the way we do it. IBEW 353 did the same thing with a truck, and they work with our ministry. Originally, we’d said, “This isn’t fixed training,” and they said, “Well, we’re actually taking the mobile vehicle into communities to meet these youths where they’re at.”

This is all part of our plan to make sure people have better training and better jobs with bigger paycheques.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Thank you, Minister. I will pass it off to my colleague, but I just wanted to say these programs are extremely important, not just to my community but all across the province. They are making a difference. They’re making a difference in people’s lives everyday. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Hamid.

MPP Zee Hamid: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Deputy Minister, for all the conversations.

My question is along the same line as Minister Harris’s. Just like his son, my son also is interested in the skilled trades. He’s in grade 12 and took a couple of trades courses last year. His teacher introduced him to a contractor, and he got a chance to work with him over the summer. He did some framing, did some drywalling, did concrete work, did foundations—a lot more than I’ve ever done. He’s taking two trades courses this year.

Now, I was talking to his boss, who’s also a general contractor and lives in my riding, and he’s concerned about—you mentioned the grey tsunami as well, and he’s concerned about that. He’s concerned that a lot of trades he worked with are at the verge of retirement, and that would be disastrous if we don’t have enough young people ready to replace them. And I’m hearing him. I’m also concerned that if we don’t have enough young people replacing the retirees, we won’t have enough people to build roads and bridges and hospitals and homes and highways and all the infrastructure that needs to be built.

Can you tell the committee what our government is doing to encourage more young people and pulling them into trades?

Hon. David Piccini: Thank you very much for the question and for your leadership—I mean, my goodness. In Milton, I think to landscaping; I think to horticultural; I think to the training centres we've supported. It's no wonder all of those labour unions were out there to support you in becoming such a fantastic voice at Queen's Park for that community and backing your recent campaign.

But you want numbers—600,000 workers. That's how many have benefited: 92,000 in manufacturing; 66,000 in construction-working trades; 36,000 PSWs, supported health care workers. These are the lives we're changing. That's 600,000 people who would be worse off under people like Bonnie Crombie, and that's unfortunate. So we're going to keep making those investments to support them into entering these meaningful careers, and I'm excited.

I'm excited for the stories. We met that young woman—remember the mental health story she told us in Milton—who's now working in the equine industry and the harness-horse-and-horse-racing industry—a big shout-out to the work that they do. My predecessor is working in, of course, that industry today, and I know it supports so many in rural communities like mine and young women in communities like yours, whom we met. This is the transformation that we're having, and I'm proud to see that your son is embarking on that mission. He's got two good role models and a government that's got his back.

MPP Zee Hamid: Thank you, Minister.

Just one more thing where I think you should take credit—you're being too humble. Seven years ago, when my daughter was looking at a career, she wasn't even thinking about skilled trades because in her mind, she saw it as a step down from what her potential was. Just a few years later, we've changed the conversation so much that my son couldn't be more excited, and I couldn't be more proud of him. So in addition to all the training and funding we've done, we've changed the narrative. I think the previous government, over 15 years, did a huge disservice to a generation of young people, and we're suffering the consequences of that. So thank you for your leadership on that.

Hon. David Piccini: Thank you very much. As I said, it's exciting, I think, to try a trade—high schools like St. Mary in my community. I know I'm preaching to the converted, so you'll be at our Level Up! in your community, but this is something I think we should all be at. I will have an even bigger smile when I see all members of the Legislature, including members of the opposition, at the Level Up! skilled trades fair, supporting it with their schools. I've seen many in our government out there talking to parents, having those discussions, trying it for themselves.

I had a friendly competition with the mayor of Cobourg, who has a trades background, and I beat him at the carpentry challenge. I hope he's watching. That was fun.

It's more than just the trades, too. London Health Sciences—their Skills Development Fund program. I think to construction management, from York to other business schools that are making those investments and working through the Skills Development Fund. Leonnova, as well—some of the work that they've done, when I've met their graduates, working with predominantly immigrants from cyber security.

While I'm at it, I think to Claudette McGowan, who was the keynote speaker at the Toronto Region Board of Trade—I think the first Black woman to have over \$10 million in Toronto in angel investing into her program. That is an inspiring woman; that's why she spoke. Her program exposing under-represented groups into the world of cyber security and the work she's doing with our major financial institutions—the Skills Development Fund is backing all of this.

While we've spent a lot of time talking about the trades, I'd be remiss if I didn't talk about all of those other in-demand careers that we're supporting.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Triantafilopoulos.

Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos: Thank you, Minister, for being here today, along with your excellent team from the ministry.

In your opening remarks, you spoke about the rather persistent challenges that women continue to face in the workplace and the barriers to entry for certain specific industries, the under-representation in leadership roles, and also the continuing harassment that many find in the workplace.

Could you explain some of those specific actions that your ministry is doing to address these cultural and structural issues that persist, in order to encourage more women to want to go into these specific industries that we know, to date, have been very difficult industries for them to be able to actually break through?

Hon. David Piccini: I appreciate the question.

I think, again, a big employer in your community—you brought me out, when I was environment minister, to see the geothermal work being done in the Mattamy Homes development, which is now—it was a development. Today, it's a community; today, it's homes; today, it's families who live there. What's inspiring, as I mentioned on the health and safety day—Dr. Moody and I were there. Lindsey, who I've mentioned, from Oaks revitalization program came up to me. That's a story, but I think there are countless other stories that have benefited from requirements—like menstrual products to be provided on larger construction sites like that Mattamy Homes site.

Properly fitting PPE—we were at the meetings of ministers of labour in Victoria, and we heard a transformer worker who didn't have properly fitting gloves and is working on transformer lines. But they acknowledge, their own building trades, that Ontario has taken a leadership role in properly fitting PPE.

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Women-only washrooms on job sites as well: Again, common sense isn't often all that common. So, making these requirements to bring those expectations from Bay Street to main street—these are our everyday heroes who are building a stronger Ontario.

In direct response to advocacy from stakeholders, from tradeswomen—I think to a recent round table that we had with so many leaders. I think to the woman we've tasked to head this up, Melissa Young at Skilled Trades Ontario, as a tradeswoman, and her experience that she brings; and advocates for women like Victoria Mancinelli, who has

spoken to us about challenges and introduced me to young women on their job sites.

Better washroom facilities and those requirements to maintain sanitary conditions and cleanliness on job sites: Again, we've sadly seen some of the age-old stigmas perpetuated by some. I won't get political, but a former MPP of the opposition exacerbated that. I think these common-sense changes have made a difference and, statistically, a 30% increase in women registering.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Hon. David Piccini: Virtual harassment, to the definition under workplace harassment in the Occupational Health and Safety Act and telling creeps that their days protected by NDAs are done: These are just creeps and predators. These are initiatives we've done. MPP Smith was there at the YMCA—again, a very active player in this space and a valuable stakeholder.

So there is more work to do, without question. I'm excited. I recognize that, again, I'm a vessel, and there are so many voices that we've touched on today, from Building Up to Oaks and the Lindsey story, that are informing policies. And again, like we introduced red tape—red tape for injured workers, that they can have faster access to supports—we have a red tape ministry, the first government to mandate that multiple times.

We also have Working for Workers. J.K. Rowling and that trilogy have nothing on what we're doing with Working for Workers. We're going to keep going—

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): And we also have run out of time.

We'll now go to the official opposition. MPP West.

MPP Jamie West: During the last round of conversation with my colleagues and everything, a couple of times the Skills Development Fund was brought forward. It reminds me—I have a bunch of information; it might take a little bit to go through. The minister had mentioned how thick his binder was preparing for this. The amount of information I have about this is pretty thick as well, so I tried to make a timeline of it.

This has to do with the Skills Development Fund and Scale Hospitality. In 2021, Amin Massoudi, whom we'd remember from the greenbelt scandal, one of the Conservative aides, met with two people from Scale Hospitality. That's part of his role, obviously. And then, on September 28 of that year, the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development announced second funding of the skills development funding—that was going to be \$83 million; that's good, to get our skills going around—and the start dates for it.

Then you fast-forward to February 24, 2022. The staffer discussing the Skills Development Fund and Scale Hospitality—the minister's office had reached out to them to express an interest in moving forward with what Scale Hospitality was doing. They were supposed to be working on some application stuff, but they redirected the work to review these things. They assessed the late Skills Development Fund application from Scale Hospitality Group. The minister's office was asked that the application from Scale Hospitality be evaluated and rolled up to the minister's

office separate from batch 6, and it's noted here it scored very low on the ministry's re-evaluation rubric. It scored a 51%—I'm assuming that's out of 100; that seems not very high on it—so it was submitted late and scored low.

A couple of days later, February 27 and 28, the ministry staff are discussing it, and they say, "The email contains summaries of the assessments of the two Skills Development Fund projects submitted after February 7 that the ministry's office requested an assessment of. Just a reminder that below is a summary of the Scale Hospitality Group, which was assessed low."

February 28: The minister's office sets a deadline for the final review and selections of the Skills Development Fund round two funding applications. And the ministry's office congratulatory letter to Scale Hospitality—the people I had mentioned earlier, who coincidentally are big donors to the party—was drafted: "to inform this application has been selected to proceed to the next phase for negotiation."

March 16: The two individuals—I don't want to say their names—signed a transfer payment agreement with the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. The request—and I think it was rewarded in full—was \$5,960,000—almost \$6 million.

March 25: Scale Hospitality's Skills Development Fund funding application receives four other levels of Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development officials' approval, including the previous minister on March 30.

On September 26, the ministry announces a third funding round of the Skills Development Fund. It's going to have \$90 million at this point. They set the dates when applications are open.

On March 24, the minister notes that Scale Hospitality received round 2 funding and that they are on track to meet performance commitments and expend the full budget allocation.

March 29: The minister—the previous minister, not you, Minister—asked to sign the TPA to approve Scale Hospitality's—oh, sorry, it didn't make the full amount. So, \$5,397,501 for round 3 funding.

So, the funding, you may be curious—it was sort of micro-credentials to work in the hospitality sector. There's a bunch of documents; I'm doing my best to summarize that. They were going to help upwards of 2,500 job seekers. The training would be between 60 and 90 days. I did the math: It's roughly \$2,300 per worker.

I'm curious, Minister, or to your ministry: How many workers were trained out of this funding?

Hon. David Piccini: Look, I think it's clear to everyone here where you're attempting to go here with the question. But I would say that the programs are reviewed by our team. You said it right there yourself: performance indicators, that there are performance indicators. Each eligible application is evaluated based on criteria set out in the SDF training guideline.

We've done this with the hospitality sector, the hardest hit during the pandemic, taking the longest to recover. Unite Here also received funding, the hospitality workers'

union, predominantly racialized, predominantly women, same with the group that you mentioned.

Behind this investment are stories of thousands of workers. They estimated—I believe it was close to 5,000-plus workers that have been benefiting from training, and there are stories behind all of them. I assume you know the IBEW business manager in your own community. They also benefited.

So rather than denigrate individuals who are advocating for worthwhile funding for racialized groups in hard-hit sectors, I think we focus on the performance indicators like IBEW in your own community that received \$812,000. And you know what? Now I know that business manager too—

MPP Jamie West: I think we're spinning away from the conversation.

Hon. David Piccini: I think he's doing a great job.

MPP Jamie West: We're talking about an organization that was awarded over \$5 million. This specific organization—I'm not talking about IBEW; I'm not talking about a different—I'm not saying that the Skills Development Fund is a bad thing. I'm saying, in this instance, it feels unusual that the ministry's office would say, "Please review this one. It did not score very well. It did not score very high." For some reason, it made it over the bar and Ontario's taxpayers gave \$5,397,501. And so maybe if you could follow up—because it took me a while to pull all this forward—in writing to find out how many people were helped through this. Did they hit their target with the 2,500 job seekers? Were they able to build the training institute? Because that was in their assessment for a while that they could build a training institute out of this.

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I'd also like to know how often would the ministry's office get involved with this sort of thing, make the request, and why would the ministry's office do it? I know this is a previous minister, but is it something that you would do as a minister?

Hon. David Piccini: As the minister, with Skills Development Fund programming and our latest round, Skills Development Fund Capital Stream—it's our first round doing that, MPP West—after every round, I reflect with the team on how we can improve that. We incorporated a wage subsidy from one of our union partners—a union partner that has, in the past, endorsed your party; a union partner that has, in the past, endorsed the previous government. Dare I say, they're probably going to endorse us this election because they get that feedback and they have a minister, a minister's office and a ministry that are responsive to concerns, like the mobile training unit I mentioned going into Indigenous communities. So after every round, we are responsive to industry feedback from a wide variety of stakeholders—

MPP Jamie West: But I'm not asking about that, so if I could reclaim my time on that.

I'm just wondering if I could get in writing: What did the Ontario taxpayers get for this investment? And I understand this is important work. This was during COVID, following COVID, in order to help attract people in there, get the skills up there so we could have people back in restaurants. This was an industry on life support. I'm not

saying it's a bad investment; I just want to know, in this specific instance, what was the return on investment for Ontario's taxpayers? So we can try to get that.

I'm going to move on to food banks because earlier the minister had mentioned the better jobs and the bigger paycheques that they like to talk about so much. So the latest Feed Ontario report says that there's been eight consecutive years of rapidly increasing food bank usage. Very obviously, you've only been in power for six years, so this started under the Liberals, but I know in 2018, my party, the New Democrats, our slogan was, "Change for the Better." The people voted. They voted in the Conservative Party, and I think we can all agree they voted out the Liberals because of the bad job they were doing. They had 15 years and things were getting worse and worse. But it's eight consecutive years of rapidly increasing food bank usage, so I'll blame the Liberals for the first couple of years when you were elected because it takes a while to turn the ship around, but you've been in power for more than six years.

So Feed Ontario is saying that one million people in Ontario visited a food bank last year; that's a 25% increase from the year before. One in 14 people in Ontario are using a food bank to survive. Last year, 800,822 people visited Ontario food banks, and this year, that number climbed to 1,001,150. The stats in this are staggering and a little bit embarrassing for any of us as legislators, I've got to say.

As somebody who grew up in poverty and below the poverty line and knows what those pressures are like economically—and as much as my mom did her best to hide them from me, you still feel them as a child—but we can do better. All of us can do better on this.

So one in three of the visitors are children going to food banks. One in two are adults on social assistance. But the one that bothers me the most is one in six are employed. That's an 82% increase over 2016-17. And, again, you were elected in 2018, so it takes a while to turn the ship around, but the ship doesn't seem to be turning.

I believe, and as New Democrats, we believe that anyone working should make enough money to afford the basic necessities: rent, hydro, food. I think we're all aligned on that, but it's not going around. So my question, Minister, is, what resources are being spent to reduce this, and how do we balance the narrative, the rhetoric of good-paying jobs versus one in six people who are employed are using food banks and that number increasing year after year?

Hon. David Piccini: Thanks, MPP West. I acknowledge across Canada that people are struggling across this nation. We're seeing challenging times across our country. We're seeing things like encampments, largely a result of terrible federal policy with respect to supply of narcotics etc.

We have to do better, without question. Our Skills Development Fund has trained 600,000. It's built on relationships. You were talking about relationships at length, and these are relationships to get important feedback with our labour partners. Your party acknowledged in your 2022 election review, "We are recommending initiatives to renew our relationship with union members...." Those sorts of initiatives that have caused those union members

to move in droves to our party are things like the Skills Development Fund, which—Lindsey’s story—

MPP Jamie West: We’re drifting away again.

Hon. David Piccini: You asked about poverty to jobs. Lindsey is a very, very good story—

MPP Jamie West: I’m going to move on, though, and I’m going to reclaim my time on it.

You talked about one of the reasons this is happening is because of the increased hardship. We’re all feeling it. Inflation is record high. Many people feel like they’re being gouged when they go to the grocery store. The prices of stuff have doubled or tripled. It’s unreasonable. It doesn’t seem to make sense. But what they call it at Feed Ontario is “legislated poverty.” What they say here is, “Insufficient and inadequate social support programs legislate people into poverty.” I want to underscore “legislate.” They don’t in their thing, but I do, because we’re legislators.

They say, “Insufficient and inadequate social support programs legislate people into poverty.”

“—Social assistance remains the primary source of income for the majority of food bank visitors with 26% relying on OW and 28% relying on ODSP.”

The reason I bring that up—and I know there’s a separate ministry for OW and ODSP, but if your bills are so high that you’re evicted, your bills are so high that you can’t afford to make ends meet and you lose your housing, you end up in temporary shelter or something else, and you’re trying to get back on your feet and get back into the job market, if you’re on OW—it’s even harder to get on ODSP and it’s even harder to get employed if you’re on ODSP, but if you’re on OW and you can’t afford food and you can’t afford rent, you’re not getting back in the job market without a miracle. We know this. I know we know this. I know that the government in power isn’t allowed to say things like this, but the reality is the poverty line is here, ODSP is here and OW is here. Anyone working who falls in the water sinks down here, and they cannot swim back up without the government’s help. That’s where your ministry comes in. If there’s 17% of people relying on food banks, an increase to ODSP and OW—you have to recognize the correlation between work, losing that work, not being able to get back to the surface to get back on your feet and get back into a good-paying job. This has to be addressed. This has to be important to your ministry.

Hon. David Piccini: And it is. I think where we’re going here, though, is just a fundamental—we both want to get there; we differ in ways. You said social programming. You want a world where we define success based on the number of people living off the state, living off social programming. That is not my outlook. I respect you, and we will differ. I want people to have a job. I think to Unite Here workers union graduation, a Bahamian woman who was impoverished, living on the streets, who now has a job, the Sheraton workers at the door who were huddled looking at her to get her first certificate. You will measure success based on the number of people who get an OW certificate and an even bigger one. I measure success based on people getting away from that and getting a certificate of an education. We will never see eye to eye because you want people to live off the state; I want them to achieve

self-determination with sometimes a guiding hand but without us—

MPP Jamie West: Frankly, Minister, that’s incorrect. I want to be able to be clear about what I want. What I want is a social safety net that is a hand up. I know that you want to paint people on the left as socialists and stuff, but it’s not what I want. What I want is—do you know the expression, “It’s hard to pull yourself by the bootstraps if you don’t own boots”? We need people to be able to afford boots.

We talked about getting more workers into skilled trades. I talked with workers who were in supportive housing where I grew up. I think that it was a hand up, and it benefited me and my family. I’m a living example that a hand up can be helpful. I know you want to paint people who are poor as moochers and sponging off the system, but I meet with people who are poor on a regular basis, and they desperately want that hand up. They want to get those good-paying jobs. They need that incentive to help them to make ends meet so they’re not in crisis mode.

When you meet with people who are in housing where it’s geared to income, what happens is their children, when they get these trades jobs, as their pay goes up—because every year of your apprenticeship, your pay increases a little bit—it becomes household income and their parents lose their housing, so the kids drop out. These are things that we can do and we can help with.

Hon. David Piccini: Just on the boots program you mentioned: When you were in government and the Liberals, you had the opportunity to actually support people—

MPP Jamie West: I wasn’t in government with the Liberals. I never was.

Hon. David Piccini: —with boots. We do now. It’s a grant program, and you get boots. So we do it. We literally do that to get people on the job the dignity of a job.

MPP Jamie West: You can’t see the forest for the trees, Minister. Come on.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Any further—1.4.

MPP Jamie West: With a minute left: Look, we have tough conversations in this room, and I think it’s important that I am never personal. It’s always policy, not personal. I know that we have good people on each side, and I know that when we run, nobody sits down with their family and says, “I’m thinking of running for politics. I hope to make the province worse.” So I hope that we all leave in good spirits, even though the end was a little rough.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. With that, the time has expired for the committee’s consideration of estimates of the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote?

Shall vote 1601, ministry administration program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 1602, pay equity commission, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 1603, labour relations program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 1604, occupational health and safety program,

carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 1607, Employment Ontario, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 1608, global talent and settlement services, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The vote is carried.

Shall vote 1605, employment rights and responsibilities program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall the 2024-25 estimates for the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2024-25 estimates for the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

There's another page here that says, "The committee is now adjourned until September 19, 2024, at 11 a.m."

The committee adjourned at 1704.

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