

Third Session – Forty-Second Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
DEBATES
and
PROCEEDINGS
Official Report
(Hansard)

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MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Forty-Second Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
ADAMS, Danielle	Thompson	NDP
ALTOMARE, Nello	Transcona	NDP
ASAGWARA, Uzoma	Union Station	NDP
BRAR, Diljeet	Burrows	NDP
BUSHIE, Ian	Keewatinook	NDP
CLARKE, Eileen, Hon.	Agassiz	PC
COX, Cathy, Hon.	Kildonan-River East	PC
CULLEN, Cliff, Hon.	Spruce Woods	PC
DRIEDGER, Myrna, Hon.	Roblin	PC
EICHLER, Ralph, Hon.	Lakeside	PC
EWASKO, Wayne, Hon.	Lac du Bonnet	PC
FIELDING, Scott, Hon.	Kirkfield Park	PC
FONTAINE, Nahanni	St. Johns	NDP
FRIESEN, Cameron, Hon.	Morden-Winkler	PC
GERRARD, Jon, Hon.	River Heights	Lib.
GOERTZEN, Kelvin, Hon.	Steinbach	PC
GORDON, Audrey, Hon.	Southdale	PC
GUENTER, Josh	Borderland	PC
GUILLEMARD, Sarah, Hon.	Fort Richmond	PC
HELWER, Reg, Hon.	Brandon West	PC
ISLEIFSON, Len	Brandon East	PC
JOHNSON, Derek, Hon.	Interlake-Gimli	PC
JOHNSTON, Scott	Assiniboia	PC
KINEW, Wab	Fort Rouge	NDP
LAGASSÉ, Bob	Dawson Trail	PC
LAGIMODIERE, Alan	Selkirk	PC
LAMONT, Dougald	St. Boniface	Lib.
LAMOUREUX, Cindy	Tyndall Park	Lib.
LATHLIN, Amanda	The Pas-Kameesak	NDP
LINDSEY, Tom	Flin Flon	NDP
MALOWAY, Jim	Elmwood	NDP
MARCELINO, Malaya	Notre Dame	NDP
MARTIN, Shannon	McPhillips	PC
MICHALESKI, Brad	Dauphin	PC
MICKLEFIELD, Andrew	Rossmere	PC
MORLEY-LECOMTE, Janice	Seine River	PC
MOSES, Jamie	St. Vital	NDP
NAYLOR, Lisa	Woleseley	NDP
NESBITT, Greg	Riding Mountain	PC
PALLISTER, Brian, Hon.	Fort Whyte	PC
PEDERSEN, Blaine, Hon.	Midland	PC
PIWNIUK, Doyle	Turtle Mountain	PC
REYES, Jon	Waverley	PC
SALA, Adrien	St. James	NDP
SANDHU, Mintu	The Maples	NDP
SCHULER, Ron, Hon.	Springfield-Ritchot	PC
SMITH, Andrew	Lagimodière	PC
SMITH, Bernadette	Point Douglas	NDP
SMOOK, Dennis	La Vérendrye	PC
SQUIRES, Rochelle, Hon.	Riel	PC
STEFANSON, Heather, Hon.	Tuxedo	PC
TEITSMA, James	Radisson	PC
WASYLIW, Mark	Fort Garry	NDP
WHARTON, Jeff, Hon.	Red River North	PC
WIEBE, Matt	Concordia	NDP
WISHART, Ian	Portage la Prairie	PC
WOWCHUK, Rick	Swan River	PC

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Thursday, May 13, 2021

The House met at 1:30 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Doyle Piwniuk): Please be seated.

Good afternoon, everyone.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Introduction of bills? Committee Reports?

Tabling of Reports? The honourable Minister of Justice (Mr. Friesen)?

Okay, we'll go on to—ministerial statements?

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

Irene Gamey

Mr. Greg Nesbitt (Riding Mountain): Irene Gamey of Strathclair has been inducted into the Manitoba Fiddle Association Wall of Fame in the accompanist category.

Born in 1930 on the family farm in the Rural Municipality of Edward in southwestern Manitoba, Irene remembers being paid 10 cents for taking her turn at the piano, chording for dances at the Eunola School, probably when she was just 11 years old.

After she moved with her family to Pierson, Irene played for regular Saturday night dances in the hall with the local orchestra, which included her brother Innes, who played the fiddle.

Irene married Roy Gamey of Strathclair—who was also a fiddler—in 1955. The couple passed their love of fiddling and old-time music to many family members. Four grandchildren play the fiddle. All three of her children, as well as all five grandchildren, chord either on the piano or guitar.

Irene became the organist at the Strathclair United Church in the late 1950s and she continues in that role today. As well as accompanying many fiddlers in competitions and at talent nights, Irene found the time to play twice a month with the Harmony Music Makers for 20 years from 1981 to 2001. She also joined the Strathclair seniors' orchestra—the Carlton Toe Tappers—in the late 1980s, playing at area dances and providing entertainment at local events.

Currently, Irene accompanies two of her grandsons when they play at local bars, the Strathclair

Community Centre and at other events. How cool is it to have your grandmother play with you in a bar?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, on behalf of all Manitobans, I want to thank Irene Gamey for her contribution to music in Manitoba and congratulate her on her very worthy induction into the Manitoba Fiddle Association Wall of Fame.

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Government House Leader): Mr. Deputy Speaker, could you canvass the House and see if there is will to revert to tabling of reports, following all the members' statements?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Is it will of the House to actually revert back to tabling of reports after the minister's—after the members' statements? Agreed? *[Agreed]*

Liam-James Moar Young

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): I rise today to pay tribute to a great young Manitoban by the name of Liam-James Moar Young, or Lemon to his grandma.

Liam's mom describes the eight-year-old as always happy, really smart and good with technology. She tells me her goal has always been to make every day good for him, and that's meant trips to the zoo, Assiniboine Park and Liam's favourite: The Forks. Walking around, climbing on structures, playing with bugs.

Now, Liam faced some challenges early on. He was diagnosed with autism, but his parents got him help. And because of that, Liam developed a tremendous love for going to class. Everything about school, he loves: his school work, gym class, making art, music class. Just an enthusiastic student with a great love for being at school. Did I mention his school friends? Because there are many.

But of all his interests, though, No. 1? Trains. At a young age, Liam developed a love of trains. Watching them, talking about them, playing with toy trains. Liam recently told his mom: I want to work with trains when I get big. Sounds like the type of dream shared by so many Manitoba children.

Sadly, Liam passed away just four days before Christmas. He is dearly missed by his mom and dad,

his little brother Landon, his aunties, cousins and grandparents.

I never had the chance to get to know young Liam. I simply opened the mail one day to find his Aunt Sheila had made this mask and sent it to me in his memory. So I wear it in the Chamber and give this speech with the family's permission so that the memory of this good Manitoba boy—Liam-James Moar Young—can live on in the permanent record of our Legislature forever.

Carmen Trudeau

Mr. Bob Lagassé (Dawson Trail): I'm honoured today to introduce to you a remarkable young lady who has been recognized provincially for her countless hours of volunteerism and community service.

Carmen Trudeau is a grade 10 student from Ste. Anne Collegiate. Carmen loves her family and it is incredibly important to her. She has two sisters aged 12 and seven. She also has two cats of her own and her family also fosters dogs from Lexie's rescue. At times, they may have up to 8 dogs.

Carmen, when she was only seven years old, began volunteering by spending time with seniors at Villa Youville in Ste. Anne. She would play bingo, go for walks with residents and peel potatoes. She has brought smiles to many people's faces. Carmen cannot wait to get back there once COVID is past.

Carmen has also volunteered at the Richer rodeo, Summer in the City, Teddy Bears' Picnic, Mini Soccer coaching, Kismet Creek animal sanctuary. She also volunteered her time helping pets at Waldenway Canine and Kitty Camp. After countless hours of volunteering at the camp, she is now a paid employee. She also works at BP Sport Horses, working with the horses.

Carmen has an incredibly supportive friend and she is thankful for. Her friend Katie often comes to volunteer with her.

Carmen was the recipient of this year's Student Citizenship Award from the Manitoba School Boards Association for her exemplary and outstanding role in her community. She received a signed certificate as well as a prize of \$1,000, which she plans on investing half for her post-secondary education and the other half on something fun for herself.

Carmen believes that citizenship means you are willing to go above and beyond for your community to make a better place for everyone.

Please join me in recognizing another Dawson Trail hero, Carmen Trudeau.

Conner Roulette

Ms. Amanda Lathlin (The Pas-Kameesak): Today, I want to highlight the achievements of Conner Roulette, a rising young star in Canadian hockey who recently won a gold medal representing Team Canada at the under-18 IIHF world hockey championships.

Canada went undefeated in the tournament, winning their first gold medal since 2013 and beating Russia in a final 5 goals to 3.

Conner put his first-round NHL potential on display at the world championships, scoring two goals and three assists in the seven games he played.

Conner's achievements are no surprise to his mother, who's known for a long time that Conner would eventually have to leave home to pursue his hockey dream.

Before being selected for Team Canada, Conner moved down south to play left wing for the Seattle Thunderbirds, where he scored 19 goals and 20 assists in 54 games in his rookie season with the WHL team.

His coaches describe him as a well-rounded offensive threat who is talented enough to potentially lead the league in scoring.

However, for Conner, hockey is not just about scoring goals and winning games; it's also about being a role model for other Indigenous youth.

Roulette comes from Misipawistik Cree Nation and has said that it's an honour to represent his family and all Indigenous children when he's out on the ice. He takes pride in the fact that many Indigenous kids come—from his home community and across Canada have reached out to him expressing their support and looking for advice.

I want to wish Conner nothing but the best in his future, and I look forward to continue seeing him on the ice for many years to come.

Today is another big milestone for Conner as it's also his 18th birthday, so please join me in congratulating him on his outstanding achievements and wishing him a very happy birthday.

Ekosi.

Order of Manitoba Inductees

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): I note that yesterday, new members were chosen to receive the Order of Manitoba, the province's highest honour.

The ceremony of the order is always a special one. It's a humbling reminder of the many extraordinary people from all walks of life and their contributions to our province, enriching every aspect of our lives.

And I mean that: science and innovation, agriculture, the economy, sports, music, arts, television, film, heritage, philanthropy and politics—representing institutions that define Manitoba—Indigenous history, the Folk Festival, the Manitoba Museum and the Blue Bombers, to name just a few.

We certainly hope the third wave will have diminished and it'll make it safe to gather again on July 15th for the ceremony.

This year's inductees include Mr. Steve Bell, Mr. Franklin "Lynn" Bishop, Elder Ruth Christie, Dr. Michael Eskin, Dr. Gordon Goldsborough, Mr. Gregg Hanson, Mr. Kyle Irving, Ms. Ava Kobrinsky, Ms. Claudette Leclerc, Ms. Doris Mae Oulton, Mr. Greg Selinger and Mr. Arni Thorsteinson.

Of those inductees, I have the pleasure of knowing three, two of whom are constituents. I grew up with Gregg Hanson's nephew, Darren, who says his uncle is a great man. He's right.

* (13:40)

I worked with Claudette Leclerc at the Manitoba Museum, which is one of my favourite places in the world. Kudos to her.

And congratulations to Greg Selinger, who served St. Boniface and Manitobans as a city councillor, MLA, minister and premier. We thank him for his service.

When I see these accomplishments, it reminds me of the plaque at the New Iceland museum in Gimli: Therefore when we build / Let us think that we build forever. / Let it not be for present delight / Nor present use alone. / Let it be such work / As our descendants will thank us for / And let us think / As we lay stone upon stone / That a time is to come / When these stones will be held sacred / Because our hands have touched them. / And that they may say / As they look upon the labour / And wrought substance of them / See, this our forebears did for us.

Congratulations, again. Félicitations.
[*Congratulations*]

TABLING OF REPORTS

Mr. Deputy Speaker: As agreed, we're going to go back to tabling of reports.

Hon. Cameron Friesen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I'm pleased to table the following report for the Department of Justice: the 2018 Annual Review of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Now for oral questions.

ORAL QUESTIONS

COVID-19 Third Wave Hospital Staffing Levels

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Well, I want to thank the Minister of Justice for getting us so pumped up as we head into QP with the tabling of the reports there.

We know that there have been 560 new cases today of COVID-19, which is the highest non-adjusted case count we've seen in a single day. But now we also know that hospitals in Winnipeg and in Brandon are continuing to be understaffed. There's a staff shortage precisely when we need them the most.

I'll table these documents for consideration of the House which show that in the weeks ahead, as we are dealing with the impacts of the rising case counts of the third wave, that there will be 15 empty nursing positions at the Grace Hospital's ICU.

Why has the Premier left hospitals in such a staff shortage position as we deal with the third wave?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): Well, we've just announced 60 new full-time ICU positions have filled.

We recognize, of course, the challenges that all front-line workers—all of us, as people—are facing as a consequence of this pandemic, but in particular those on the front line, and applaud them and thank them for their work.

We did inherit a mess, in terms of the health-care system in our province. We are endeavouring to clean it up, and we are especially motivated by the situation that has arisen as a consequence of the COVID pandemic.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Kinew: You know, it's National Nursing Week, and what we hear when we talk to nurses is that the health-care system is worse than it's ever been.

That statement started before the pandemic. The pandemic has only served to burden and stress out nurses even further.

The PC caucus claps for an announcement mid-third wave that they're going to start looking for help, but if you're trying to fill 60 positions while you already have 15 nurses short at the Grace Hospital ICU, this third wave is going to be very difficult for Manitobans.

Why has the Premier cut health care over the course of his time in office, and why does he refuse to admit the mistakes he's made?

Mr. Pallister: Three quarters of a billion dollars of additional investment in health care isn't well defined as a cut. The member opposite is unfortunately resorting to political posturing to try to achieve political advantage during a global pandemic.

I would emphasize to the members of the House again that these investments that we are making are focused, have been focused and will continue to be focused on improving access to service, and service not just during this pandemic but going forward, as well.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a final supplementary question.

Mr. Kinew: The health-care system is short 1,300 nurses: 1,300 nurses missing who should be caring for people at the bedside but are not there because of the cuts that this government has made.

They've cut nursing positions. They've cut health-care support at the bedside.

I'll table the document again: 15 nurses who won't be there in the ICU precisely at the time that we need them 'moth'—most. We know that there's also an issue in the ERs, both at the Grace, at Brandon, at hospitals throughout the province. The PC obsession with cutting health-care resources served us poorly before the pandemic, but now, as case counts continue to rise in the third wave, it gets even more serious.

Why has the Premier cut health-care staff leading up to the pandemic, and why hasn't he learned from his mistakes?

Mr. Pallister: Again, unadmitted mistakes is a theme that the member can speak to with great authority here in the Chamber and elsewhere, but chooses not to.

The fact of the matter is we're investing three quarters of a billion dollars—*[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Pallister: —more in health care this year alone—this was pre-pandemic, I should mention, Mr. Speaker—more than the NDP ever invested. I should mention that 12.6 new ICU positions for Brandon hospital have already been filled. I should mention, also, that the previous NDP government promised to end hallway medicine and created an even worse situation during their time in office.

And so I would emphasize to the members opposite, it is most certainly true that, according to the Canadian institute of health information, Manitoba, at the end of the NDP term, had the longest waits for emergency treatment in the country of Canada.

We inherited a mess. We're cleaning it up.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a different question.

Manitoba Hydro's Finances Compliance with PUB Request

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Well, the nurses at the bedside tell us things are getting worse. They're as bad as they've ever been, and it's because of this government.

We also know that it's because of this government that Manitoba Hydro is being forced into this campaign to try and discredit itself, to try and mistreat the very workers who give it health. This government has sought to obstruct the people of Manitoba's right to know what is going on with their most important Crown corporation.

Luckily, Bill 35 has not passed and we still have a Public Utilities Board who has stepped in to order Manitoba Hydro to show the people the truth about its financial health.

The question remains for the Premier to answer. It's very simple.

Will he order Manitoba Hydro to comply with the Public Utilities Board today?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): So, speaking of not learning from the mistakes of the past, the member has just said that we should do what the NDP did when they were in government, which was to direct and interfere with Manitoba Hydro's operations, to disrespect the management and staff of Manitoba Hydro and to—furthermore, to disrespect the people at the Public Utilities Board in the process.

And we won't do any of those things.

What we'll do instead is make the Public Utilities Board stronger with multi-year hearings that will be more transparent so that never again can a \$10-billion series of projects be pushed through without the Public Utilities Board even having a chance to review them before billions of dollars is invested.

Again, a mess at Manitoba Hydro caused by the deception—bipole west line—deceit by the previous NDP government. That can never happen again. With these reforms in place, it will never happen again because the real owners of Manitoba Hydro are Manitobans, not the NDP.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Kinew: If the Premier has nothing to hide, he should call for a general rate application at the Public Utilities Board today. But he won't. He's afraid that his political narrative, carefully constructed with taxpayer money, will fall apart.

We know what he's going to do in the absence of a Public Utilities Board.

Ask yourself, Mr. Deputy Speaker, why haven't we seen the budget implementation bill yet? Is it because they're planning to raise hydro rates again? They raised it during the second wave. We're in the third wave now. I guess they're going to raise hydro rates again.

Will the Premier simply put an end to this charade and order Manitoba Hydro to comply with the Public Utilities Board right now?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable First Minister. *[interjection]* Order.

Mr. Pallister: Well, again, the member speaks of something which he knows: deceit and cover-ups are certainly the thing of his past, and that of the NDP. And the fact is, they tripled the debt of Manitoba Hydro without asking the owners for permission, without asking the Public Utilities Board, which he now pretends he stands behind.

Actually, Mr. Speaker, the NDP have never shown any respect during their time in office for the Public Utilities Board, and the fact of the matter is we have the respect for the Public Utilities Board in mind with these reforms, which will put us in line—multi-year rate setting is what virtually every other jurisdiction does—will put us in line, in terms of the transparency and disclosure requirements, with other jurisdictions.

* (13:50)

The NDP says they're opposed to those changes. Why are they opposed to openness? Why do they want to keep the present system, which allowed them to cover things up?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The—*[interjection]* Order. Order.

The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a final supplementary question.

Mr. Kinew: We're opposed to the PC Cabinet raising hydro rates on Manitobans without a public hearing. It's that simple.

We're opposed to them doing it again a second time this year. If the Premier believes anything of what he's just shared in the House today, call a public hearing, let the Public Utilities Board take a close examination of the facts and let them tell the people of Manitoba where the truth is.

But we know that they won't do that; instead, the PC caucus will continue to clap for their flailing leader as he claims to liberate the public 'ilities' board from their responsibility to regulate Manitoba Hydro. Just as they turn around and liberate Manitobans from more money from their bank accounts as they raised their Manitoba Hydro rates.

Let's put a stop to this.

Will the Premier simply order Manitoba Hydro to comply with the Public Utilities Board today?

Mr. Pallister: Well, what—let's be clear what the member is advocating for: he's advocating for political interference in the operations of Manitoba Hydro. No, we'll not do that. He's advocating for political interference in the operations of the Public Utilities Board. No, we will not do that either.

Instead, he's also advocating for an increase in rates as a consequence of the millions—tens of millions of dollars that has to be spent for rate application hearings in this province, and almost alone is this province. Every time there's a rate application hearing, it costs millions of dollars for Manitoba Hydro, for Manitoba Public Insurance, for everyone else.

In fact, in the past 10 years alone, Mr. Speaker—*[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Pallister: —the member—if the member would stop spouting and might—he might learn something. *[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Pallister: In the last—get a little control. Recklessly out of control yet again.

In the last 10 years alone, Manitoba Hydro's rate-payers have had to pay \$92 million for rate hearings every two years, and we're virtually the only province where ratepayers have to pay that.

That pushes rates up; we're having an interim, low rate increase; we're saving Manitoba Hydro, bringing it into the light.

Education Property Tax Rebate Premier's Financial Disclosures

Mr. Mark Wasyliw (Fort Garry): You know, it's not just anyone—*[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Wasyliw: —in Manitoba who gets breaks on their luxury tax for their third residence in a foreign country. But Manitoba's Premier does: an 80 per cent amnesty on taxes he was dodging.

The important thing in Manitoba is that any political leader needs to be honest with Manitobans. When asked about the amnesty on his tax dodge, his spokesperson said that the Premier, quote, did not request to take part in any such program.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it's an application-based amnesty. The Premier applied for the amnesty, and he timed his application in order to maximize the benefit he would personally get.

Why is this Premier once again trying to mislead Manitobans? *[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I just want to remind everybody in the House that when we're in virtual, we can't hear them, and Hansard can't hear them, so if—they're actually members of your own team, so I—if everybody can have some decorum here.

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): I do appreciate any question from any member of the NDP on taxes. So, the senior members of the NDP have alleged that their leader, presently in place, did not pay his taxes for many, many years.

Now, I have paid mine. My life is an open book. But he has not, allegedly, paid his. Now, he has the opportunity to address this issue. He could provide some evidence that he has paid his, and I invite him to clear the air. I invite him to say that he has, in fact, fully paid his income taxes in Manitoba and Canada.

And, if he has, I look forward to him saying so. *[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The clocks are ticking.

The honourable member for Fort Garry, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Wasyliw: All I can, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is, wow, this Premier certainly lives in an alternative reality.

Now, this Premier dodged a flood and said he was at a wedding in Calgary. Turns out he was in Costa Rica. This Premier dodged his taxes, then he said they were paid. Turns out he got an amnesty.

Now the Premier's caught in a web that he himself has spun. He tells the media he had no knowledge of the amnesty and that he did not request to take part in any such program, but you had to apply for this program, and we know this Premier not only applied for it, he timed his application to maximize his benefit.

Whether it's his conduct in Costa Rica or in Manitoba, why should anyone trust anything this Premier says?

Mr. Pallister: I was at a family wedding in Lacombe, not Calgary, and I would invite the member opposite, again—

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Pallister: —I would invite the member opposite again—*[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Pallister: —to declare—since, Mr. Speaker, my family's taxes are fair game—*[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Pallister: —since my family's taxes are fair game, and I accept that and I answer questions about that all the time, then I think it is only fair—*[interjection]*—then I think it is only fair—that the Leader of the Opposition should answer the same types of questions about his tax background. If my taxes are an issue, why would his not be an issue? This is an issue of fairness.

And so I can only say, if the member would simply avail himself of the opportunity—it is not me making the allegation; it is his own people. If he won't even address this issue with his own people when they raise it, then I would suggest he's fuelling the idea that he has something to hide.

Taxes: it is an honour to pay them and I pay them. Does he? Does he?

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Are you done now?

The honourable member for Fort Garry, on a final supplementary question.

Mr. Wasyliw: For once, I think I agree with the Premier. This is about tax fairness.

Now, this Premier got a break on taxes when he dodged, you know, for his third residence, his tropical villa in Costa Rica, but that wasn't enough for him. Now, back in Manitoba, he wants big breaks on his second residence, as well as his mansion on Wellington Crescent.

Bill 71 puts thousands of dollars a year in the Premier's pocket. He's doing this while clawing back benefits from renters, many of whom are the critical workers fighting this pandemic. It's obscene, it's out of touch and completely in character for a Premier who governs only for himself and for his friends.

Why does this Premier and his ministers think there is one set of rules for them and another, harsher—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable member's time is up. *[interjection]* Time is up.

Mr. Pallister: We'll be making additional investments, significant investments in the education system using general revenue. The major way that you fuel general revenue is, in every other province, not taxes on property—not taxes on property. My rebate is actually lower than the Leader of the NDP's and the member who just asked the question.

The actual fact is we'll raise money for education from income taxes, and so my question for the member opposite is, why does he not feel that he has the obligation to prove to Manitobans that he pays his? *[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Order.

Death at Correctional Facility Request for Public Inquest

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): William Ahmo, a 45-year-old Indigenous father from my home community of Sagkeeng First Nation, died February 14th, 2021, after an altercation while housed at Headingley correctional facility.

Lory-lawyer Corey Shefman, working with Mr. Ahmo's family, recently uncovered that the altercation that led to William's death started with racist jokes and ended up with stun grenades and gas canisters.

There is a clear need for an independent investigation into Mr. Ahmo's death.

Will the minister call for an independent inquiry into Mr. William Ahmo's death, today?

Hon. Cameron Friesen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): The member for St. Johns is the critic for Justice and clearly understands that there is a process that is involved whenever there is a death in corrections.

It's always a tragedy when there is a death in corrections, and that member knows very well that the RCMP's major crimes unit is investigating this, and I'm not able to make any comment while that investigation continues. It's important and independent work.

* (14:00)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable member for St. Johns, on a supplementary question.

Ms. Fontaine: The details emerging are disturbing.

William, an unarmed man, but for some reason guards needed to use full tactical gear, stun grenades and gas canisters to respond to his reaction at racist comments. William Ahmo's mom, Darlene, deserves to know what happened to her son leading up to his death.

I spoke with Darlene just an hour ago and she shared with me, and I quote: I want answers. I don't want this swept under the rug. My son was a human being and didn't deserve to die like that. He was supposed to be in their care. I want accountability within the justice system.

Will the minister answer the call of a grieving mother and call an independent investigation into Mr.—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable member's time is up.

Mr. Friesen: The member and I have found a point of agreement: the family does deserve answers. And that is why there's an independent investigation undertaken by the RCMP's major crimes unit into this matter. When that work is concluded, it will be reported to the family and to all Manitobans.

Any death in custody is also reported to the Chief Medical Examiner, and an inquiry will follow under this process.

Deputy Speaker: The honourable member for St. Johns, on a final supplementary question.

Deaths at Correctional Facilities Reinstatement of Mandatory Inquiries

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): Mr. Ahmo is one of six citizens to die in correctional institutions in Manitoba in 2020 alone.

In Manitoba, approximately 75 per cent of all people in correctional facilities are Indigenous and 70 per cent of those citizens, including Mr. Ahmo, have not been convicted of the crime that they're accused of committing.

This government must call a public inquiry into the deaths of all people incarcerated in Manitoba, as well as the systemic racism that is present within the justice system. The need for transparency and accountability is greater than ever.

Will the minister restore mandatory inquiries into the deaths of all peoples in correctional facilities in Manitoba today?

Hon. Cameron Friesen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): That member knows that in Manitoba, there is a very significant process that is put into place when there is a death of an inmate in custody in one of our correctional institutions.

That process is now under way with the RCMP major crimes unit investigating. When that process is concluded, it will be reported to my office and will be reported to Manitobans. The death will be reported to the chief medical examination-examiner's office. An inquiry will follow.

The issue is this: we have confidence in the process that is now under way. All members should have confidence in the process that is under way.

Internationally Educated Nurses Recruitment and Retention

Ms. Malaya Marcelino (Notre Dame): Mr. Deputy Speaker, cuts and consolidation left our hospitals in horrible shape: over 1,500 nurse vacancies in Winnipeg and Prairie Mountain regions alone, and the Pallister government cut 70 nurse training spaces at Red River College.

Manitoba hospitals are facing the cresting third wave of this pandemic in far worse shape than they should have.

Now, other provinces chose not to cut as this government did, and they went much further in recruiting internationally educated nurses. They made credential transfer and recognition far more affordable and fair.

Manitoba has done none of this. We are losing talented people to other provinces when we need them.

Why has this government not prioritized internationally educated nurses?

Hon. Heather Stefanson (Minister of Health and Seniors Care): I thank the member for the question.

In fact, we are expanding the bachelor of nursing programs to get more registered nurses into our system. Twenty new spaces have been created in the University College of the North's diploma and practical nursing program, which is now being offered to students in and around the Thompson and Flin Flon areas. And we're working hand in hand with the Provincial Nominee Program to find individuals with professional nursing backgrounds.

So we'll continue to work to ensure that we get more nurses in the province of Manitoba.

Deputy Speaker: The honourable member for Notre Dame, on a supplementary question.

Ms. Marcelino: Mr. Deputy Speaker, whatever this minister says they are doing is not enough.

Cuts and consolidation have left a hole. Chief nurse Lanette Siragusa concedes that there is now a nursing shortage in Manitoba. Small wonder, as one of the first acts of this PC government was to cut benefits for graduating nurses.

Other provinces have not done so. I'll table information about an Ontario nurse program. They are providing a \$10,000 bonus for a commitment of one year of service. Ontario also funds direct support for internationally educated nurses. In British Columbia, they are offering free accommodations.

In Manitoba, nurses have been without a contract for four years, and this government has cut training spaces and they have not prioritized internationally educated nurses.

Why is this government driving front-line health care into the ground?

Mrs. Stefanson: Recruitment and retention of nurses is nothing new in the province of Manitoba. It was something that was alive and well under the previous NDP government. We're continuing to clean up their mess.

We'll work very closely with the college of nurses to ensure that we recruit more nurses. And we'll—we are continuing to train more and more nurses. We did announce last week, in fact, 60 more ICU nurses that

were trained and we will be adding to our acute-care system.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable member for Notre Dame, on a final supplementary question.

Ms. Marcelino: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Manitoba has a pool of internationally educated nurses ready to get trained, tested and work in Manitoba's hospitals. But, under this government's watch, Manitoba now has a notorious reputation for unfair barriers to credential recognition for nurses.

For the past five years, the Manitoba Provincial Nominee Program has not accepted nurses, and right now Red River College's bridging programs for nurses are sitting empty. No students are registered for fall because they know that their efforts will be useless and they have a better chance at getting their nursing licences in other provinces, and they do. This process must be re-evaluated to make it more fair and affordable.

Will the minister commit today to working with the College of Registered Nurses to modernize the process to create a fair and affordable process for—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable member's time is up. [*interjection*]

Order. Order.

Mrs. Stefanson: As I mentioned 'previoly'—previously, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that yes, we will work with the college of nurses. In fact, we are working with them, again, to clean up the mess of the previous NDP government.

We'll continue to work with Shared Health, we'll continue to work with RHAs, post-secondary institutions, nurses and others to ensure that we help fix this issue.

Education Assistants Layoff Concerns

Mr. Nello Altomare (Transcona): Twice this week, I asked the minister to protect the jobs of educational assistants. Last year, they were laid off by the thousands.

On Tuesday, he suggested that EAs would still be there serving families. Now, we've gotten word that layoffs are already beginning, including 70 at Seven Oaks starting May 21st.

Will the minister direct the school division and protect the jobs of critical education workers in the province?

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Education): I do thank the member opposite for that question.

It's very unfortunate that that particular school division, through their trustees, has decided to lay these individuals off.

Now, clearly, we're trying to make accommodations for critical workers in schools—or, the students of—or the kids, the children of critical-care workers. We're trying to allow any special needs students to use those facilities as well.

It's just unfortunate the school 'trustees' would decide to lay these people off at this time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable member for Transcona, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Altomare: We're very concerned that this is just the beginning. The minister laid off thousands of critical education workers last year in the second wave. The minister said that EAs should be there to support, and he promised schools should keep their EAs, but we're hearing that they've already started losing their jobs, including the 70 that I just itemized earlier.

Will he step in and direct school divisions not to lay off EAs, and will he do that today?

Mr. Cullen: Well, I wonder which way the member wants it. I mean, he's talking about local choice and local voice. Now he wants us to go in there and direct school divisions what to do.

The reality here, Mr. Speaker: we've set aside, last year's budget, \$185 million for COVID response. We've invested over \$50 million in staffing. That's 3,500 positions that we have paid for in school divisions.

* (14:10)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable member for Transcona, on a final supplementary question.

School Division Collective Bargaining Request to Withdraw Wage Freeze Mandate

Mr. Nello Altomare (Transcona): For years, this Pallister government has forced unconstitutional wage freezes on thousands of Manitoba teachers and school staff. That is wrong and it needs to stop.

Now the government is threatening school divisions and trying to force them not to bargain with teachers in the three largest school divisions in our province: River East Transcona, Winnipeg and Louis Riel.

It's time for this government to stop interfering in this.

Will the minister withdraw the unconstitutional wage freeze mandate and will he ensure a fair deal for teachers in the three largest school divisions in our province? *[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Education): It's just I'm having a hard time rationalizing where the member's coming from. You know, there's 37 school divisions. They're out there in the middle of arbitration. In fact, most of them have already settled the arbitration process. I mean, we're not interfering with that. We're allowing them to do the collective bargaining process. I don't know, now he wants us to go and intervene in that process?

I'm not sure where the member's coming from. *[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Harassment and Assault in Labour Movement Request to Call Independent Inquiry

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): A week ago, I wrote to the Premier and Leader of the Opposition asking for an all-party agreement to call an inquiry into allegations of harassment and even sexual assault being covered up in the labour movement.

There have been multiple allegations made over several years, and since we made our call, a number of women have reached out to us with their own stories, overwhelmed with emotion that they might have been—finally been believed, and they might have an opportunity for justice to be done.

For speaking up, they've faced retaliation and financial ruin. They do not have resources to hire a lawyer to fight for themselves. Only an independent judicial inquiry can provide the venue for investigation and justice that they seek.

Will the Premier and Justice Minister call an independent judicial inquiry or will these women have to continue to suffer in silence?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): As a government, we've been very adamant that we need to take action to address issues of not only workplace harassment but harassment in general. We've initiated some of the strongest such actions and consequences, policies and administrative practices to do that. We would like to continue to see support from all parties in that respect.

Disappointed, of course, in the actions of the opposition when they disrespected the findings of an independent arm's-length analysis of an harassment claim by one of their members but, nonetheless, would hope that going forward, we could work together to see these issues of unsafe work environments addressed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable member for St. Boniface, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Lamont: There was a common thread to the stories we heard: that they loved their jobs, believed in their work and their cause, but when they did the right thing, going through proper channels to report harassment or even a crime, they faced retaliation, threats, blacklisting and job losses.

Will this government call an inquiry to empower and protect women in the labour movement and make them safe?

Mr. Pallister: I, again, would say to all members of the Chamber that these issues must be addressed, and they must be addressed fully.

We have taken the actions, as a government, to move forward on anti-harassment policies that we believe can work, if effectively supported by all parties on an ongoing basis, to protect people in the workplace. We will not be satisfied, on this side of the House, until every parent, every spouse, every family member knows that their daughter or son is safe in the work environment of government.

And the member has raised the issue of concerns raised by people in the labour movement. I know those have been discarded when people have gone to the Opposition Leader. I know that he has refused to address these. I know also that the NDP does not have a policy to address harassment, even after it was raised repeatedly as a concern by staff within their own organization. *[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Pallister: And I would encourage them, and I would encourage all members to work together—*[interjection]*—to work together, as the Concordia member is now heckling. *[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Pallister: He is choosing to heckle rather than listen. I am inviting him and all of our colleagues in the House to stand together and make the workplace safer for all. *[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

I'm standing here. When I'm standing, you're supposed to be quiet. All of you.

Harassment and Assault in Labour Movement Request to Call Independent Inquiry

Ms. Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): I've had a few ongoing conversations with women who have reached out to me over the last couple of weeks about their own personal experiences of harassment. We need to act on this now. We need to stand in solidarity and show support for all women who want to be able to come forward now and for our future.

The Premier just said he won't be satisfied until we act on this, so stand in solidarity with women who have been impacted by harassment and call for an inquiry immediately.

Will this government call for that inquiry?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): I do appreciate the members raising this issue, and it is a critically important issue. They're equating the solution with one thing: an inquiry. We think that support for the policies we have developed, from all parties, would be the first step in the direction of making a positive change.

We understand that women have been harassed in the workplace, and men. And so as a government we have dedicated ourselves, not only with policies but with transparent reporting mechanisms, to make sure that these things are brought to light and addressed.

No one should have to endure a culture of suck it up. No one should have to be part of a process whereby their concerns are ignored on an ongoing basis or they're told to be quiet, regardless of the position of the person. This is why I react when the members opposite invoke parliamentary privilege as an entitlement to harass. It is not, nor should it ever be, an entitlement—[interjection]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Pallister: —to harass.

And the members opposite, who have publicly spoken out against harassment—such as the member for St. Johns (Ms. Fontaine)—[interjection]—such as the member for St. Johns, who claims to be a supporter of the #MeToo movement, claims that she is for a better, safer workplace—then act like it. [interjection]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Provincial Water Management Announcement of New Strategy

Mr. Rick Wowchuk (Swan River): Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, our government recently announced a \$1-million investment—[interjection]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Wowchuk: —to fund activities, projects and studies that will support the development—[interjection]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Wowchuk: —and implementation of Manitoba's—[interjection]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Wowchuk: —new provincial water—[interjection]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I'm standing. [interjection]

Stop the clock. Stop the—turn off the audio. This is getting out of hand here. This—we're supposed to have a respectful workplace here, too, here. I'm serious here. And the thing is, what we're—how we're conducting ourselves is very shameful.

Mr. Wowchuk: Our government recently announced a \$1-million investment to fund activities, projects and studies that will support the development and implementation of Manitoba's new provincial 'waterment'—or, water management strategy.

Can the Minister of Agriculture and Resource Development inform the House what the significance of this investment is to our province?

Hon. Blaine Pedersen (Minister of Agriculture and Resource Development): I thank my colleague for that question.

Water is a key resource for all Manitobans. We need to manage this precious resource sustainably as a key resource for the betterment of all Manitobans, our ecosystems and the economy, while considering the impacts of a changing climate and growing economic and social needs.

This new water management strategy will focus on conservation of wetlands, enhance resiliency, improving water quality, managing nutrients, protecting biodiversity and sustaining economic development. And I'd like to thank the oversight committee led by EMILI for leading this important work for managing this critical resource for generations to come for all Manitobans.

Thank you. *[interjection]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The clock is running.

**CancerCare Manitoba
Services in North Winnipeg**

MLA Uzoma Asagwara (Union Station): Last fall, the Pallister government announced the closure of outpatient CancerCare treatment in North Winnipeg at Concordia and Seven Oaks hospital. It's a cut that has disrupted many people's lives. Unfortunately, this cut has impacts beyond Winnipeg.

* (14:20)

We've now learned that CancerCare in Selkirk will not be accepting new patients for most of this month. The facility says it's over capacity and it physically does not have the chairs to accommodate any more patients. It's another cut to our health-care system that's having real impacts on so many Manitobans.

Why did this government close CancerCare services in north Winnipeg?

Hon. Heather Stefanson (Minister of Health and Seniors Care): In fact, the member is just wrong. We're investing more than \$25 million more this year in CancerCare. In Manitoba, we recognize that there is much work that needs to be done. We're in the middle of a pandemic. We're trying to deal with some of the challenges around that, but we'll continue to advocate and work with those who need that much-necessary cancer treatment in the province of Manitoba.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable member for Union Station, on a supplementary question.

MLA Asagwara: The closure of outpatient CancerCare services at Concordia and Seven Oaks is putting too heavy a load on the remaining facilities. Selkirk is just packed. There's physically not enough chairs to accommodate patients, and the pharmacy determined that the volumes are becoming unsafe.

So they've halted new patients for most of this month, and that means that folks are going have to drive much further when they're already struggling with challenges like battling cancer.

CancerCare's motto is close-is care close to home. Under this Pallister government, it's highway medicine and care wherever you can find it.

Why-why-is this government undermining CancerCare in Manitoba?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): This anniversary of my sister's passing due to cancer, I can say quite-with great confidence, we are not. And I can also say this is the same group of people that accused us of cutting cancer drugs to Manitobans, they were so desperate to make a political point.

I'd like to inform members of the House of some good news, if I could. The member for Brandon West, the Minister of Central Services (Mr. Helwer), announced earlier today that we are going to be expanding Internet services to 125,000 underserved and unserved households in rural and northern Manitoba over the next few years. I thought that it would be good to share that news with members of the House because this is the great opportunity to equalize opportunity for rural and northern children and communities, business development and opportunities for jobs to be enhanced.

I thought it was some good news that I'd like to share with the members during this global pandemic.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Time for question period has expired.

PETITIONS

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The honourable member for Transcona (Mr. Altomare), do you have a petition? No?

The honourable member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara)? No petition?

The honourable member for Keewatinook?

Mr. Ian Bushie (Keewatinook): No petition.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No?

Personal-Care Homes-Quality of Care

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): Mr. Speaker, I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly.

The background to this petition is as follows:

(1) Manitoba elders and seniors built this country and province and should receive the highest level of support, having earned the right to be treated with due respect, dignity, understanding and compassion as a fundamental human right.

Residents of personal-care homes deserve to have the best possible quality of life in their last few days, weeks, months or years. Yet family members are regularly left angry, frustrated, disappointed and shocked

at the care their loved ones receive in Manitoba's personal-care homes.

Seniors who reside in personal-care homes have the right to visitation by family members, especially those who provide day-to-day assistance in augmenting the care of their loved ones as designated family caregivers. These individuals are essential partners in care, actively and regularly participating in providing care, and may support feeding, mobility, personal hygiene, cognitive stimulation, communication, meaningful connection, relational continuity and assistance in decision-making.

Legal representation, such as lawyers, powers of attorney and health-care proxies, should always be allowed unlimited and unobstructed access to the residents for whom they are responsible, as they depend on their designated legal representative to ensure proper and adequate care and act as legal designate for care decisions on their behalf.

Most personal-care homes do not have enough health-care aides to adequately provide the aforementioned basic care for seniors with high and complex levels of physical and mental issues, such as those with dementia coupled with multiple chronic conditions. Residents often require assistance in communicating their needs to overworked health-care aides, and most often this is accomplished with the assistance of designated family caregivers.

Because of the insufficient number of health-care aides, especially full-time staff, available to personal-care homes, residents often lack the most basic care, such as feeding, toileting, hydration, dental care, personal grooming, exercise and socialization.

The lack of such basic care often leads to health issues such as periodontal disease, dehydration, urinary tract infection, sepsis, pressure ulcers, bedsores and more, which often lead to hospitalization when left unreported.

Family members who advocate for improvements of such basic care can be dismissed or are met with resistance because there is not enough staff or funding to provide proper essential care.

Family members who repeatedly put significant pressure on personal-care-home staff and management for the required basic care, according to the personal-care-home's own published standards, are often labelled as troublemakers and barred from entering into the home and/or contact with their loved ones. Care home management will utilize the 'preddy'

trespassers act to justify their actions rather than improve the level of care.

Under such circumstances, the additional stress and worry serves to increase the difficulty in the relationship between the resident, the family member and the personal-care home, resulting in increased tensions and fear of reprisals. Concerns related to the above situation escalate when the barred family member receives information from their loved ones, basic needs are not being met, further 'exacerbating' the issue.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge the provincial government to establish an independent, nonpartisan seniors' advocate to ensure that care standards are being met in all Manitoba personal-care homes and to resolve disputes before harm comes to residents of personal-care homes;

To urge the provincial government to ensure residents of personal-care homes receive adequate, hands-on care to provide for their basic needs and ongoing physical care based on their individual requirements;

To urge the provincial government to ensure that the mental health needs of communication and socialization of personal-care-home residents are met through a combination of facilitated programs, sufficient staff on hand to provide these services and adequate access to family members, designated family caregivers and other visitors under all reasonable circumstances;

To urge the provincial government to enforce mechanisms that mandate operators to proactively and collaboratively work with designated family caregivers who augment care by ensuring they are allowed access to their loved ones under all reasonable circumstances to provide active care and support to the resident's emotional well-being, health and quality of life.

Signed by Kaitlyn Coates, Matt [phonetic] Coates, Byrna McDermid and many other Manitobans.

Merci. Miigwech. Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: In accordance to rule 133-6, when petitions are read they are deemed to be received by the House.

Diagnostic Testing Accessibility

Mr. Jim Maloway (Elmwood): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly.

The background of this petition is as follows:

(1) Until recently, diagnostic medical tests, including for blood and fluid samples, were available and accessible in most medical clinics.

(2) Dynacare blood test labs have consolidated their blood and fluid testing services by closing 25 of its labs.

(3) The provincial government has cut diagnostic testing at many clinic sites, and residents now have to travel to different locations to get their testing done, even for a simple blood test or urine sample.

(4) Further, travel challenges for vulnerable and elderly residents of northeast Winnipeg may result in fewer tests being done or delays in testing, with the attendant effects of increased health-care costs and poorer individual patient outcomes.

(5) COVID-19 emergency rules have resulted in long outdoor lineups, putting vulnerable residents at further risk in extreme weather, be it hot or cold. Moreover, these long lineups have resulted in longer wait times for services and poorer service in general.

(6) Manitoba residents value the convenience and efficiency of the health-care system when they are able to give their samples at the time of the doctor visit.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge the provincial government to immediately demand Dynacare maintain all of the phlebotomy, blood sample sites existing prior to the COVID-19 public health emergency, and allow all Manitobans to get their blood and urine tests done when visiting their doctor, thereby facilitating local access to blood testing services.

This petition is signed by many Manitobans.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Any further petitions?

Grievances?

ORDERS OF THE DAY

(Continued)

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Government House Leader): Could you please resolve into Committee of Supply.

* (14:30)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It has been announced that we're going to be resolving into the Committee of Supply.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, please take the Chair.

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY (Concurrent Sections)

ROOM 254

* (14:50)

EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

Mr. Chairperson (Dennis Smook): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This session of the Committee of Supply will now consider the Estimates of Executive Council.

Does the honourable First Minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): No.

Mr. Chairperson: No. We thank the minister for that.

Does the official—the Leader of the Official Opposition have an opening statement?

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Yes.

Thanks in advance to the staff who are joining us here today, both in terms of those with Executive Council and those who work for the Legislative Assembly, clerks and Hansard and security staff. Also thank the First Minister in advance for the time we're going to spend here in Estimates.

* (15:00)

I just want to note that, you know, there's a lot of speculation and whatnot, and I'm not going to ask the Premier to comment on it, but it is significant to me that perhaps it's the last time to spend in Estimates together, depending on what choice he makes later on in the year. Lots of media speculation he may be moving on, so I just wanted to put it on the record that if this is, in fact, the last opportunity we can get to sit across the Estimates table, that it's certainly been interesting to participate in this process over the years; and likewise with question period, et cetera.

So I know that there's a lot going on in the government today with COVID pandemic response, likely reopening plans in the near future—other, I guess, aspects of, you know, the economic recovery too. And that's in addition to all the normal operation of government.

So, certainly a lot to dive into here. You know, just I guess by way of giving a heads-up to the First Minister and some staff, just so they kind of know where I'd like to kind of discuss this afternoon, more so interested in some of that pandemic response; the stuff that's sort of, kind of leading the news these days, and that way we just kind of start with some of those points there.

So, again, we know that it's been—it's a very challenging time, a very taxing time for people in Manitoba, and there's been a lot going on when it comes to the pandemic—560 cases today, I believe, and without adjusting, as has had happened on some other dates, that is, I believe, the highest single day we've had prior to those adjustments. And so the third wave definitely not something to be ignored; very, very serious, and certainly is going to mean continued diligence in terms of the hospitalizations, the ICUs and the other impacts of the pandemic response.

Beyond that, we also know that there's needs in the hospitals, the rest of the health-care system, long-term care; and so these are, of course, some issues that we're very keen to look into. But, again, with a particular focus on Executive Council, you know, like to understand how the processes are working, in terms of co-ordinating that response, how is the decision making being carried out, how are these decisions being delegated down through the organization, et cetera.

So I think with those comments out of the way, just want to again start our Estimates in a good way and just put a few thoughts on the record at that high level.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the Leader of the Official Opposition (Mr. Kinew) for those remarks.

Under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is traditionally the last item considered for a department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall defer consideration of line item 2.1.(a) and proceed with consideration of the remaining items referenced in resolution 2.1.

Given that the Estimates of Executive Council consist of only one resolution, the discussion will proceed in a global manner.

I would like to remind the participants that when you have one minute remaining in your question or answer, I will flash the sign, because before I could make eye contact but because of the distance and I would also like a clear indication as to when you are ready to speak because I don't want to signal the

recorder to put, you know, the microphones on if you're not ready because then they go on and you may not be ready. So I'll ask for a clear signal as to when, also because of the distance that we are here.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Kinew: Thank you for your instruction there, Mr. Chair, and we'll do our best to abide by all of that which you just shared.

So, for me, I think one of the significant things, both as a parent first and foremost but also as a politician, this week has been the switch to remote learning for schools. It affects a lot of families here in Winnipeg. It's affecting a lot of families in Brandon. We've definitely heard from a lot of folks about that. We've also heard from some folks unaffected, if you will: people outside of those two regions but still in Manitoba, who have questions about their schools, as well.

So, we understand that there was a hint at this made by Dr. Roussin in his evening press conference on Friday. There was some other conversation, perhaps some other commentary at other press conferences, but I think the big thing that stands out is Dr. Roussin's hint on Friday night.

The actual announcement about the switch to remote learning—it followed on Sunday, early afternoon, and then the switch actually took effect Wednesday. And so, on the one hand not a lot of notice to parents, but on the other hand seemingly a delay there on the part of the government announcing the switch to remote learning.

So, I want to ask the Premier (Mr. Pallister) if the delay in making the announcement was caused by Cabinet infighting over whether or not to announce the switch to remote learning.

Mr. Pallister: No. But the member has just alluded to notice being given, and that's important to give school staff, officials, parents time to adjust and adapt. The announcement had been made by Dr. Roussin on the Friday and incorporated on Monday. They would have had three days' notice; the announcement was made on Sunday and three days' notice was given then instead.

There's ongoing discussion around all issues throughout this pandemic, there are co-ordinating committee participants who engage in regular discussion on a wide array of issues, and clearly the issue of closing schools is a major issue of importance to all Manitobans.

And I want to say to the member, too, and the—in the spirit of co-operation, that I know there may be some speculation also about whether he will be staying on as Leader of the NDP, and so I want to say to him in equal fraternity that I've enjoyed our engagements together here, and many times in the House. And so I wish him all the best in the—in his future endeavours as well.

Mr. Kinew: The issue of notice is significant because, for example, many high school students in Winnipeg only attend school every third day, which means that many of those students wouldn't have had the opportunity to see their teachers before they had to switch to remote learning.

So, the decision and the notice period was insufficient, and I would note that the Minister of Education (Mr. Cullen) said in the House this week that the government knew for a week that schools had to close.

So, when exactly was the decision taken that schools would have to switch to remote in Winnipeg and Brandon?

Mr. Pallister: I don't think the member's accurate in his representation of what the minister said, and so I would put that on the record, Mr. Chair.

I would also say that, throughout this pandemic, we have followed public health advice. And, obviously, in the issue of schools there's interface on an ongoing basis with educational leaders throughout our province—not a decision to undertake without that kind of due consideration. Any closure of a school has impacts that are indisputable. Non-closure of schools so—also has an impact.

We saw an increased number of cases over the last two or three weeks within our schools, within—among staff and students, and so it was felt that it was the appropriate action to take in those areas the member referred to earlier in Winnipeg and Brandon.

We had, previous to that time, worked with educational authorities throughout the province on the closure of some schools where there had been outbreaks, numerous—too numerous. I mean, any outbreak, any case of COVID is too many, but when there are a significant number of cases within a school community or they're going—they're—appear to be transmitting among students within the school I think that would be—I don't want to misrepresent the scientists on this, but I think that's generally the rationale for

when it gets to a certain point, moving to remote learning situation for at least a time that was undertaken in several schools as well prior to this time.

So each one of these cases is, as the member quite readily points out, important, and important to deliberate upon and to do so co-operatively, so that's the approach we've taken throughout this pandemic.

Mr. Kinew: So, the Minister of Education said, and Hansard shows this, that they knew schools would have to close for a week. The Premier (Mr. Pallister) now says that they were watching cases rise over the last two to three weeks.

So, I would like to know when was the actual decision made to switch those schools to remote learning?

* (15:10)

Mr. Pallister: I don't think the member has a gotcha moment. There were hundreds of cases over the last two weeks, and that's a reality. The situation was clearly escalating, as it has throughout other provinces. The decisions around school closures are major impact. One has to weigh, obviously, the safety of staff and students, but, at the same time, the recognition has to be there that children learn far better in schools, and so I think the consensus view would be to—as much as possible—try to keep the schools open. Manitoba has had, in partnership with our school officials, great success in doing that up until these recent days.

That's similar in terms of the numbers of COVID cases lower in Manitoba than in most other jurisdictions outside of I would say New Brunswick, PEI, Newfoundland—two of the three an island. We've, as people in Manitoba—and I give the people of Manitoba the credit for this, and following health orders, which is important to do—Manitobans have done an impeccable job of holding back the third wave but we're not an island here in Manitoba. And cases have started to rise, no later than other jurisdictions. I would note, for example, by comparison, Saskatchewan, up until the numbers—last numbers I've seen were, I believe, Monday, up to date Monday—had almost 10,000 more COVID cases than Manitoba has had year-to-date.

It's not good to have any COVID cases and we, yesterday, marked—the Opposition Leader and I both marked a sad occasion in the House, and that was the reaching of a threshold: 1,000 Manitobans who've lost their lives. We know that this pandemic has had ravaging effects on families, on businesses, on communities and it's going to continue to, but we need to

stay focused on doing the right thing at the right time and we've done our best to do that and it's the case with schools; it's the case with every issue we've undertaken.

Mr. Kinew: So, how many days before Sunday's announcement was the decision taken to switch schools in Winnipeg and Brandon to remote learning?

Mr. Pallister: The dialogue has been ongoing around whether or not to close schools whether individually or collectively throughout the pandemic. This issue has never been off the table. Regardless of the fact that early on we had no cases, as we know, throughout most of last year, getting into September then it began to rise. The dialogue was always there with school officials on an ongoing basis.

We proceeded with school closures out of an abundance of caution early on as—I won't have—I can get the dates for the member if he'd like—I think it was early on, perhaps as early as March of last year. With caution we moved right to remote learning, proceeded to supply significant investments. We've had the Safe Schools funding, \$160 million to help with COVID-related costs coming up in this fiscal year—that's not insignificant. The funding issues arise in part because, of course, there are additional transitional investments that have to be made to help our educators and in fact to assist them in providing and revising their techniques of educating their children that are in their care. We invested over \$4 million in a virtual learning strategy. I've had some interface with teachers—I have a few teachers in my circle; I suppose every member of the Legislature does—but they have told me they've learned a lot through this process and a lot they've learned the hard way.

Some of the good things that have happened though, as a consequence—if you can take this forward—are increased use of technology in, for example, being able to provide visual lessons to students who are away ill. Some of these things can be—will be able to be used by educators going forward after we get this COVID thing dealt with, to assist in helping with additional instruction when necessary. Some students have challenges in terms of regular attendance. This is an opportunity to provide them with more learning materials and ongoing reinforcement using technology.

So I'm hearing from educators that they actually are excited to take the lessons of the pandemic and use them to assist them in their careers as they move forward to use what they can to assist their students. Sometimes it is out of these challenging times that we

come up with skills and adapt as people to assist ourselves with those hard lessons, with those challenges, to assist ourselves in doing a better job going forward. And again, this is one of the by-products that I think educators are saying they are hoping to see happen as a consequence of this.

I—and I know the member will echo this, but I have tremendous respect for the educators and staff of our schools who have been faced with such a challenge through this pandemic. I only had a brief time as a teacher, but I enjoyed it and I found it to be motivational and rewarding. I was able to help some young people who needed the help.

And I can say that one of the challenging times we faced in our school—this is in a small community—well, I shouldn't say too small because I see the member for that area may be with us, but about 1,000 people, was when we had a flood and we had to close the school for a month. And this is—remember, this is a number of years ago so the member will make a joke about my age, but the fact is nonetheless that we didn't have the Internet, you know, we didn't have Skype, we didn't have any of these resources, and we learned a lot through that process beyond the Gestetner about how to use our—what technology we had. In a lot of cases it was just the phone to work to assist our kids in our care.

And I know that teachers are adaptable and resolute in their jobs, and so I thank them and congratulate them, and the staff, of course, at the schools that have been through a really challenging time throughout this COVID pandemic.

Mr. Chairperson: There's a member of the opposition staff that wishes to sit up front here. We would invite her up here. No, okay.

Mr. Kinew: Will the First Minister undertake to tell us how many days ahead of this past Sunday's announcement the decision was taken to move schools in Winnipeg and Brandon to remote learning?

Mr. Pallister: Sure. So, as I mentioned to the member earlier, the discussions around school closures are serious, they're undertaken, in theory, on a regular basis and then applied only when necessary and to protect the safety and well-being of students and staff. As the case numbers rise, clearly that raises the importance of—or the possibility of a closure being invoked, but there are other measures in the interim period that can also be taken of course, like classes themselves being moved to remote learning as

opposed to whole schools, and things like that. Interim steps.

On the issue of the closures, discussions were ongoing. Dr. Roussin, as the member alluded to announce that school closures was under discussion on the Friday announcement when he let the details come out on the new restrictions. I had announced earlier in the day that Dr. Roussin would be announcing new restrictions. Dr. Roussin then announced those restrictions following his ability to get out of court, which was—impeded his ability to join me earlier in the day, which the member and I might agree on what we think about that court challenge, but we—I would hope we would. In any case, it's a right of people to go to court if they wish and we understand that, accept that.

Saturday, the discussions proceeded further. I am told the decision was finalized on the Saturday by my clerk, and it was finalized on the Saturday and announced on the Sunday. So that addresses the timing issue the member was asking.

Mr. Kinew: So, returning to the impact on, you know, families and teachers and others, the children themselves, teenagers themselves who have to respond to this, why was the decision made on the Wednesday as opposed to Tuesday or as opposed to Thursday? What was the thought process in terms of settling on a two days' notice period? Again, laying out for some high school students three days' notice would allow them to see the teachers in person, I'm sure we could come up with other scenarios where maybe the two-day notice period would have been better.

So, can the Premier (Mr. Pallister) explain why the decision was made to come out on Sunday and then close the schools, or switch to remote on Wednesday?

* (15:20)

Mr. Pallister: Yes, a fair question. You know, it's a difficult one to—not just for schools but for other restrictions, right? The restrictions that we've introduced have been some of the—some say too severe, some say not severe enough, some say too soon, some say too late.

Nonetheless, overall, according to an Oxford university study—was—granted, that was done two months ago—we have had the toughest restrictions in our province of any province outside of the Atlantic bubble. We've maintained travel restrictions, we've done a variety of things. What we've tried to do is not yo-yo; we've tried to avoid that.

But this third wave is here now, and so we introduced some tough restrictions three weeks ago, strengthened them again two weeks ago, and then really strengthened them last week. It is our hope that the consequence of the restrictions, in particular on home gatherings, if I can call them that—and I make it—the member will excuse me if I don't use the right scientific terms I hope; I'll try to communicate as a layperson what our health experts are telling us—but I understand that the gatherings outside are safer than inside, but that either way gatherings in dwellings and gatherings in domestic circumstances, even outside, can lead to transmission and certainly lead to a greater possibility of it.

And so, we introduced some strong restrictions to limit that about two and a half weeks ago and, again, said no to that particular issue entirely here in this past week, and also limited the amount of interactions on—allowed in businesses by reducing that, and capped the amount of people that could be at various gatherings in public spaces and now have reduced that very, very significantly too.

And, again, these measures are—have been more restrictive than many other provinces. BC, for example, Premier Horgan, who—we've enjoyed working together. I can say this is not said as in any way as a criticism of his government—but they made the decision not to restrict retail except to encourage social distancing and that's what they've stayed with. They had much larger impacts in the third wave for a number of weeks before it came to Manitoba. We had restrictions in place on retail, limiting capacity to 50 per cent, then took it down to 33 and a third, then took it down to 25 and now 10.

The reason I give this preamble: the member is to say on each of those as well as with this, we considered the timing and the advance notice issues very seriously. Because there's an impact for families. The education experts in our government told us that we needed a—48 hours to give a window so students would be able to gather up materials, textbooks, the like, from their schools.

And I should also mention we've also made the decision to allow for the children of essential workers—front-line workers, for example—to be able to have their children continue in the school if that was necessary to allow workers to be in the workplace. And numerous other aspects of this decision that were undertaken were undertaken with great seriousness and consideration for the impacts they would have.

So giving notice in advance is a point the member has made; it's an important one. We tried not to do anything that would add to the already stressful times that Manitobans are experiencing, but we know that these restrictions and 'stewl' 'colsuers' are hard on people; we also know why they're necessary. In this time of the onslaught of these variants in particular are multiplying the ability of COVID, we have to multiply our efforts to fight against COVID.

Mr. Kinew: So a number of scenarios are brought forward to the Premier (Mr. Pallister): close schools in Winnipeg and Brandon, close schools across southern Manitoba.

Why was the decision taken to close schools in Winnipeg and Brandon as opposed to the other scenarios?

Mr. Pallister: I just—I'd just appreciate some clarification. Is the member asking why we didn't close schools other than Winnipeg and Brandon, or is he suggesting we shouldn't have closed the schools in Winnipeg and Brandon? And I'm just not quite clear on that.

Mr. Chairperson: Could the Leader of the Official Opposition (Mr. Kinew) clarify that, please?

Mr. Kinew: Why did the Premier choose the scenario that we were pursuing this week as opposed to other scenarios that were presented to him?

Again, there's a few scenarios presented to the First Minister: close all schools in southern Manitoba, close schools in Winnipeg and Brandon. Why this course of action?

Mr. Pallister: This was the course of action recommended to us by educational leaders in our province.

Mr. Kinew: And which educational leaders were those?

Mr. Pallister: Well, members of the health-care team consult regularly with individuals. You want a list of individual names? I could ask the member if he wants a list of individual names. I'd be happy to—I don't have them with me but I'd be happy to pull them together.

And I should mention, as the member knows, that I have always produced materials when I undertake to produce them for the member. And so I will continue to do that.

Mr. Kinew: I will undertake that undertaking. Sure. Yes.

Mr. Pallister: So I'm glad that the member is—I wasn't aware the member was an undertaker until now but I'm pleased that he's decided to take that on.

The reality of this situation is that we do owe a real debt of gratitude to our advisory team. We have, each of us—the Opposition Leader and I have sincerely thanked our front-line workers on numerous occasions and continue to do that, but I think it's fair to say that our folks in the civil service are throughout, whether within core government or in our Crowns or in the so-called MUSH sector deserve a real pat on the back, as well. Hasn't been an easy time for anybody. Our municipal officials have faced some tremendous challenges. At the universities, we know that the administration has faced incredible challenge to staff there, as well.

And so it's not meant to leave anyone out, to say that it's—you know, COVID has been an equal opportunity stress maker for a lot of people throughout our province. And we—I know that the member agrees. And we appreciate the work of those folks.

Mr. Kinew: So when did this recommendation come forward to the First Minister?

Mr. Pallister: Recommendations, I said earlier, came to our co-ordinating committee on the Saturday and the recommendation was adopted and then made public on Sunday.

Mr. Kinew: And why weren't school leaders and educators notified of the decision? The fact that it happened on a Sunday, parents left in the lurch. They want answers. They can't call the school on a Sunday. Why was the decision made without notifying folks in advance?

Mr. Pallister: Yes, I don't know if there's—the member's implying there's a magic day when it's stress-free to close a school and, of course, that's not true. It's—there isn't such a day.

Educational leaders throughout the province were notified when the decision was taken. They knew before it was announced publicly, I understand, so that the information was out there to them and then, of course, it's—becomes a regional responsibility in part, in tandem with Dr. Roussin's announcement—public announcement and the Minister of Education's (Mr. Cullen) announcement to get that word out and give families the time to prepare.

Mr. Kinew: So, if the Premier is to believe educational leaders recommended this, the decision came forward on Friday. Why not notice—notify them

Friday that this was an act of consideration, that this was likely to happen?

Mr. Pallister: I can only say there's ongoing interaction and communication between the educational leaders throughout our province and the co-ordinating committee.

That dialogue isn't on an ongoing basis. The decision, as I said twice before, wasn't made until the Saturday and then was made public on the Sunday.

Mr. Kinew: So what information came available on the Saturday that meant that that decision had to be taken then instead of earlier?

Mr. Pallister: I can get something for the member in writing about the criterial considerations that the committee looks at in respect of this. I'm a layperson. I can only tell them that I would assume that because of increasing presence of COVID within classes, that there would be a clear indication that some further action would need to be taken.

* (15:30)

Mr. Kinew: If the Premier (Mr. Pallister) could provide the criteria, but then also what the information was that became available on Saturday, as opposed to Friday or earlier in the week. Like, what new piece of information came out on Saturday that led to a decision that couldn't have been taken earlier?

Mr. Pallister: I've already undertaken to provide the criterial information to the member. I can only say that I don't believe there is a precedent for this situation, at least in modern times. I'm looking at a portrait of a former premier, the Honourable T.C. Norris who, were he alive, might have been a valuable source of some advice to our government because he was the premier during the Spanish flu epidemic. He and maybe his compatriots could have helped us, were they still with us.

We've done our best to learn in what is virtually an unprecedented situation, as every government has, and have certainly taken action with consultative work with our experts that can always be criticized. And it is the job of the member opposite, to some degree, to cast doubt on the decisions that are taken. I can only say that they're not taken lightly, they're taken with due consideration, they're taken with an abundance of caution and they are without precedent in the history of our province, at least in modern times.

Mr. Kinew: There was a pandemic playbook created coming out of H1N1 in 2009. It included an assessment of the health-care system and the capacity—

revisiting of the ICU capacity within that health-care system specifically, the purchase of a stockpile of masks, et cetera.

So I don't think it is accurate to say that it's completely without precedent. Perhaps the scale of the public health restrictions, the scale of COVID, is greater than H1N1 was—definitely would grant that—but I don't think we're in a situation where there hasn't been expert advice provided to this government and to previous ones.

But again, you know, I think Manitobans are just wondering, why was this decision so last minute, you know? What was going on within government that led to this decision being forestalled for so long? The case counts were increasing, publicly released data—though it lags considerably what is available to the government—was certainly moving in that decision, and, you know, the Premier continues to cite consultation.

Every educator we talk to said they were never consulted. Teachers' societies putting out press releases. They have no idea what's going on in the machinations of government. Who are these folks that the government is talking to? What is going on around their Cabinet table? What sort of infighting and wrangling over different scenarios presented to them led to the delay in the announcement that affected so many Manitoba families this week?

Mr. Pallister: It's a tangled web the member is trying to weave. I'd like him to go on record and put a date down that he wanted the schools closed before we go any further on this discussion. Before he disparages any further the input we've received from educational and health-care experts, I would like him to put on record when he thinks the schools should have been closed.

If he'll do that, then we can go forward with the discussion and it will have some significant advances. If he won't, then he's simply casting aspersions that I don't think are justified.

Mr. Kinew: There's an asymmetry in the information that is available to myself and to the public and the information that the Premier has available to him at his fingertips on an ongoing basis. Provide the modelling data effective as of today. Undertake to do that. Provide the projections for case counts effective today. Provide information on ICU projections effective today.

Share that information with myself and the people of Manitoba, and I will gladly engage in a free and

frank discussion. Can the Premier (Mr. Pallister) undertake to do that?

Mr. Pallister: I'm not aware of any other premier that has undertaken to offer briefings to opposition leaders. Maybe the member would like to declare for the record when his last briefing took place?

Mr. Kinew: So will the Premier undertake to give us that information generated today, later today? The reason why I phrase it that way is because, of course, there's a danger that we get projection data, you know, three months from now or whenever the undertakings are returned to, and it's not relevant to the public conversation anymore.

So would the Premier undertake to give us a projection—data based on modelling when it comes to ICUs and case counts—later today that he has access to?

Mr. Pallister: I'd invite the member to put on the record when his last briefing was.

I arrange briefings for him and the non-third party leader to be able to get information. I did this in spite of the fact that on previous—on a previous briefing session that I offered to these individuals and their critics, apparently someone decided they'd take video of Dr. Roussin and Lanette Siragusa—I don't know who else was there on behalf of public health—and released that to the media.

That wasn't a thing that was done with good faith. Nonetheless, I continued to try to offer information to the member on a timely basis.

When was the last briefing that he was given? If he'd put that on the record, then perhaps we can have a further discussion about briefing material.

Mr. Kinew: Why does the Premier refuse to release information to Manitobans that they have paid for that has been generated in their interest?

Other provinces have done it. In Ontario, it led to compliance with public health orders and helped them in their fight against the third wave. British Columbia has released a lot of this information as well. It seems as though that would help in the current moment here in Manitoba.

So why hide that data from Manitobans?

Mr. Pallister: The member's not wanting to reveal when he had his most recent briefing. He's clearly not wanting to give support to the thesis that we are offering information to him. And it's unfortunate he

wouldn't simply put on the record that he had a briefing this week—a full briefing, that Dr. Roussin was available to him. But he doesn't want to say that because it doesn't support his imaginary thesis.

As far as comments about information, I have been advocating for more information, not less, to be made available, but I do also have tremendous respect for our public health experts in terms of the decisions they make around releasing information.

I can also say that he's blowing smoke when it comes to BC. If he read *The Globe and Mail* this week, he'd see an analysis by a noted columnist in that paper—an award-winning paper, I might add. I should commend the national journalistic awards this past weekend who cited, I believe, a dozen various reporters and journalists at *The Globe and Mail* receiving awards. And congratulations to them.

Anyway, this columnist in *The Globe and Mail* cited the fact that BC was lagging in terms of making information available. And so this is not true, what he's just asserted—that British Columbia is somehow doing a better job than us at releasing information—at least, according to a well-informed columnist in *The Globe and Mail*.

I can only say that the information has—that he's asked for has been released on a regular basis, that I understand there is a plan by the health officials to release even more information tomorrow, that that information will be made public as it should be, and that I'm glad of that. And I'd like the member to acknowledge that I have endeavoured to make sure that he got an—updated information as well, because I have and he knows that.

Mr. Kinew: BC's data set, which is published on an ongoing basis, includes information about school transmission. It breaks down where cases are coming in terms of geographic region, in terms of occupation, in terms of workplaces, other sectors. Ontario released projections based on their modelling.

This information has never been released proactively in Manitoba. It's only been released after the fact in Manitoba. Manitobans have a right to know this information.

Why isn't it released publicly?

Mr. Pallister: Well, it's fair—I think it's fair to say that the member doesn't have enough information. It's also fair for him to admit that he's been given the opportunity to get it and to be briefed on it and to question

senior health leaders on their decisions in respect of releasing information.

I have honestly told the member that I have encouraged more information, not less, to be out there. I know that there are legitimate concerns from our health-care leaders in respect of the potential damage that that might do in some cases. For example, I know that there was some information out early in respect of truckers and then as a consequence, a number of truck drivers were victimized and vilified in a variety of venues across the province. And that was disappointing; it should've been disappointing to all of us. So they saw what happened when people were identified in certain categories or in a certain manner as being exposed to COVID.

I think there's—I, personally, think it would be better to have more information out than less, but I stand by the decisions of our health-care leaders in respect of when and how they release that information.

* (15:40)

Mr. Kinew: Was there agreement at the Cabinet table on the decision to close schools in Winnipeg and Brandon and switch them to remote learning?

Mr. Pallister: I'm accountable for the decisions that are taken and I'll continue to be, and so there sometimes is time for full Cabinet deliberation and sometimes there is not time. The nature of the decisions that have been taken throughout this pandemic is that they've followed a variety of different—I can't tell the member there's one formatted discussion process that happens for every single decision.

There have been decisions taken, I would say, into the thousands now, and so this fell into the category of a decision where there was an opportunity for what is called a round-robin approval, or a discussion, but not an actual meeting of Cabinet.

Mr. Kinew: Well, I appreciate that insight that, you know, the Premier (Mr. Pallister) offers there. I think it's significant that the Premier puts on the record that the public health decisions are made at the Cabinet level and, you know, eventually fall to him.

You know, we've often heard him, throughout the pandemic, say it's up to Dr. Roussin. But he admits here this afternoon that it's in fact him and the Cabinet that makes the decisions, which I think is significant because, again, there's often questions, you know, on multiple sides, coming from multiple directions when

these things happen. But I do think it's important for the Premier to state clearly that it is him and the Cabinet that eventually makes these decisions. And so, you know, that's certainly an important point in public accountability.

So in terms of this decision-making process, and I acknowledge the term round robin, so I don't want to necessarily, you know, misinterpret that, but just—at what point did it become clear to the Premier that this was the important decision to take, to move the schools to the remote learning, you know? And what was it that swayed him? You know, what was that piece of information, what was that argument that he heard that made him decide, yes, I'm going to go ahead with this particular course of action?

Mr. Pallister: Yes, I wouldn't want the member to misunderstand, as he just did demonstrate he has, what I said. I said I was accountable for the decisions—glad to be—that our government is ready to embrace the accountability. I did not say we make all the decisions. He repeated that three times. But I welcome the accountability. I respect our public health leaders. I respect our vaccine team very much, and they are very influential in respect of the decisions we take. They have led the decision-making process.

So I wouldn't want him to misrepresent or misunderstand what I just said, because it could be misconstrued, therefore, that we were—by what he just said—that somehow I or my Cabinet was overruling willy-nilly the recommendations of various health officials, and that's not the case at all. That hasn't been the case throughout the pandemic. We've seen that accusation made in other provinces, primarily for political purposes, I think. Nonetheless, it's not an accusation which would bear fruit here in Manitoba.

Mr. Kinew: But, just for clarity's sake, who does make the decision on a public health order?

Mr. Pallister: I explained the process as best I can to the member. I've said that I'm accountable for all decisions. I've also said that the health-care leaders of our province are the principal decision-makers in terms of the recommendations that are made.

Mr. Kinew: And so, is the Premier asserting that he has never overruled public health advice when it comes to a public health order?

Mr. Pallister: I am so asserting.

Mr. Kinew: So when was the advice given to make the announcement on Friday evening? When was the

advice given that that was what was necessary, in terms of new public health orders?

Mr. Pallister: As I said three times before, the decision wasn't taken until Saturday, not Friday.

Mr. Kinew: See, this is what happens when the Premier (Mr. Pallister) doesn't show up for the announcements on public health: he neglects that there was an announcement of new restrictions on Friday night.

When was the decision taken about those restrictions? When was the advice given to him that those restrictions were necessary?

Mr. Pallister: If the member wants to get into personal innuendo, I can get into facts instead. Does the member want to talk about absence from this place or from work? Because if he does, I can go into that in some detail with him, if that's where he wants to go.

I've done over a 130 announcements, good and bad. I've been available to the media; they can ask me any question they want. My accountability is well known. He can't even ask—answer a simple question about whether he paid his taxes for 10 years before he got into politics. So if you want to deal with innuendo, keep doing it. I've got facts. We can go down that road if that's where the member wants to go.

Mr. Kinew: Clearly touched a nerve there, Mr. Chair, by reminding the Premier of his absence on Friday night. So I repeat the question: When was the decision taken on those public health orders? When was the advice given to him?

Mr. Pallister: I repeat my answer and it is the fifth time, and I'll repeat it again. The decision was taken on Saturday, and the announcement was made by the Education Minister and Dr. Roussin on the Sunday.

On the Friday prior, I made the announcement that public health orders were going to be changed, new restrictions were coming in on Friday morning, at approximately 11:10. Dr. Roussin was unavailable. I prefer that Dr. Roussin make the announcements about public health orders because I believe, quite frankly, that that is the right course of action. We want to encourage people to follow public health orders, and I think it's better to have the senior medical people make those announcements.

I am happy to be accountable for the decisions and recommendations that are made, but we have—and very consciously—trying to make sure that we have as many people follow those public health orders as possible. The member understands the importance of

following public health orders, I hope, even though he hasn't always demonstrated that understanding in his behaviour. But the fact remains that Dr. Roussin was unavailable on Friday morning to do the restrictions, I announced they were coming, he came after court—that's, I believe, 6 o'clock—and announced the restrictions.

The decision hadn't at that time been taken on the schools; there was further discussion on that undertaken, and in the next 12–16, 18, 18, 14, I don't know what number of hours—the decision was taken afternoon? Morning or afternoon of Saturday—*[interjection]* In the morning on Saturday the decision was taken, school officials were notified, they—then was publicly announced on the Sunday by the Education Minister and Dr. Roussin.

Mr. Kinew: Nobody buys that.

Like, I understand why the Premier is trying to rewrite history—offer his revisionist take here—because obviously was unpopular that he skipped the Friday night announcement. So for him to now advance this argument that, you know, dropping a hint in the morning is somehow him making an announcement on public health orders, may kind of meet his own personal needs, but I don't think anyone outside of the Executive Council is going to buy that.

Again, the flaw in that argument is why not come at 6 p.m. and make the announcement with Dr. Roussin? Why skip that announcement? It's an important moment for Manitobans, why not use the Office of the Premier to persuade them about the severity of the moment, about the urgency around public health orders? Why not use the role to elevate the announcement? Seems like a pretty straightforward use of the Office of the Premier—a pretty important one—and yet the Premier wasn't there. Why wasn't he?

Mr. Pallister: I appreciate that the member wants to give me advice on a variety of things. I announced on the Friday morning our enforcement—stepped-up enforcement measures. I also made the announcement about our increased penalties for violators of public health orders—I know he's sensitive to that because he himself violated the public health orders. I understand he was given a warning, I understand also his colleague from St. Johns suggested we should throw the book at somebody else; I think she was probably implying we should have thrown the book at him as well.

* (15:50)

That being said, I understand his reluctance to accept accountability because I understand him. But I don't understand why he would suggest somehow that he should be lecturing me on setting an example when he himself refuses to do so.

Mr. Kinew: Where was he that he couldn't be there at Manitobans' moment of greatest need?

Mr. Pallister: Where was the member opposite for the bulk of last summer into the fall?

Mr. Kinew: I was in the media in most days, so, do your oppo correctly and you'll find an answer to that question. We were advocating for paid sick leave prior to the Premier (Mr. Pallister) glomming on to that issue.

We were talking about the release of data, which is something that we continue to push for at this late date, and I think, you know, we really started to pick up on the dissatisfaction of Manitobans when we suggested that the government should provide COVID updates on the weekends, too, since COVID doesn't take Saturday and Sunday off.

So, where was the Premier this past Friday that he couldn't be there for the announcement with Dr. Roussin, and why not use the Office of the Premier to help persuade Manitobans about the importance of that moment?

Mr. Pallister: I think we touched a nerve with the member opposite because, of course, he doesn't want to share with Manitobans where he was for the bulk of last summer and into the fall. He also doesn't want to share with Manitobans whether, in fact, he revealed his past record, his criminal record, prior to the 2016 campaign. Did he hide from the NDP his criminal record when he was being interviewed as a candidate, for example?

So, you know, no—well, I—you know, it's funny. The member can dish it out, but he can't take it. He uses innuendo but he doesn't like facts. It's a simple question: did the member hide his criminal record from the NDP when he was being interviewed as a candidate? Every candidate is interviewed by a political party. Any reputable political party would ask questions about the candidate to know what their background was.

Did he hide his criminal record from the NDP prior to running in 2016? He ran against two women of colour in Fort Rouge—two women of colour. There is zero reference in his book. His book, the reason I hide, contains no reference. *[interjection]*

He can laugh it off, he can—*[interjection]* See, he's trying—

Mr. Chairperson: Order. Order, please, gentlemen. Let's try to keep whoever has the floor, let them speak.

Mr. Pallister: You know, the member wants to dish it out, but he can't take it here, okay?

So, the member claims that he was accountable in his book. I've read his book. I've never seen me and I used quite so frequently, but I do know that in his book he references one criminal incident and misrepresents what actually happened.

It is most certainly true. In fact, there is only one incident—and if he wants me to get into all of the various things that were omitted from the book, I can. I didn't come here wanting to do that, but if the member—I did not come here wanting to do that, but if the member wants to launch into personal attack, if that's what he's choosing to do—he has innuendo; I have facts.

So he can keep going down this road if he wishes, but I want him to know that it was not my intention coming here today to do that. It was my intention to do my best to answer his questions, and if he wishes to go on personal attack with innuendo, with false accusation, I will go on facts—*[interjection]*—well, the member—*[interjection]*

Mr. Chairperson: Order, please.

I would like a little bit of respect here for the Chair so I can hear what's going on. I appreciate that everybody has—will have the ability to have the floor.

The Leader of the Official Opposition (Mr. Kinew).

Mr. Kinew: Yes, thanks. Let's please continue down this road. Again, the question is, where was he? Where was he on Friday night that he couldn't be there at the announcement?

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable First Minister—oh, sorry—Leader of the Official Opposition.

Mr. Kinew: So yes, let's continue down this road. So, again, why was the Premier not present at the Friday announcement about public health orders? Where was the Premier that he couldn't be there to use his office to help convince Manitobans about the importance of this moment?

Mr. Pallister: So I'm not going to give the member a promotion and put him in charge of my life. I am going to leave that to my wife and my friends and

people I respect. I'm not going to give him that privilege.

But I am going to tell him that if he keeps going down this road, I'm going to ask him more questions which he has not answered, and I've asked him one. I've asked him one question. Now, he's failed to answer that question, which proves to me he's not interested in being accountable at all.

If you—the fact of the matter is it's a relevant question because every candidate in every election should be accountable for presenting their real record to the electors, and every party should be accountable to making sure their candidates have done that. And so I'm just curious, that's all I'm asking, because he did run against two fine people who did put their record out there, an honest record, and he did not do that.

And so I'm simply asking did he fail to provide his information to the NDP before he ran, or did he provide it and somehow they decided not to release it? Like, it's one or the other of those things.

As far as my time is concerned, I can only say to the member that on Friday I did an announcement of some significance, I think, to Manitobans, which was to make sure that people follow the public health orders by adding deterrents and penalties, strengthening what were already, I think, very strong measures that we've taken to make sure that Manitobans follow those orders.

The two major areas of focus that, if we followed them as people—and we have in the past in the vast majority—that we need to take to shorten this third wave and they are to follow public health orders and to get vaccinated. And if we can all encourage people to do those two things then we have a good chance, I think, to decrease the time period it will take to get our lives back. And if we fail to do that, then we are going to guarantee that the suffering we're seeing now will continue and persist.

And so Friday, in a significant announcement, I think, we strengthened the penalties—doubled the penalties, in fact, for repeat offenders who would violate. So when, for example, there was no penalty—there was a warning for the member opposite when he engaged in breaking the health rules, so I don't know how you double that penalty. Give him two warnings. I don't think that's going to help. But for people who received a fine for a violation of the public health orders, they were told on Friday last, in that press conference, that fine will now double. We hope that that works to assist in deterring that behaviour.

We've also issued more tickets for our size than any other province, and we are—we've upgraded the number of people who are involved in enforcement, and I thank all of those who are. These aren't easy jobs, you know, it's not easy to go and give someone a fine. Talk to anybody in the city police or in the RCMP. They know it's a difficult thing to do to enforce the laws.

And for many of our folks, they haven't had to do this kind of work before. They've maybe inspected a boiler and given a warning. It's not quite the same thing to go out and tell a person who's organizing a group gathering that they shouldn't do that. It's difficult.

And also I know from some of our dialogue with the police services that it's also a difficult call on whether you wade into the middle of a public protest and start handing out tickets right in the middle of it because you might accelerate the risks to others in the area and that type of thing. So I know that our officials have told me that there have been other measures they've taken.

For example, at the protest down at The Forks a couple of weeks ago, I think there had been 20-some tickets already issued but only two at the time, if I remember—I'm going—the member will excuse me, I'll get the details if he wishes, but I think it's about that number. That—they didn't give out a lot of tickets at the time and so some might argue, well, they aren't really deterring it if they're not, you know, given a ticket right then.

But I think the reluctance on the part, I think, in that case was Winnipeg police were principally the ones doing the enforcement. They were concerned that if they waded into the crowd and started with the tickets that there'd be—it might provoke some violent response. So that was the, yes, that was the concern.

Anyway, the point is it wasn't a small announcement on Friday. It was an important announcement; undertook to do it, and Dr. Roussin did go ahead and announce the restrictions later in the day. I've been part of all but, I think, two of those announcements throughout the entire pandemic. That's—there's full-some responses I can hope the member would like to—

* (16:00)

Mr. Chairperson: The First Minister's time has expired.

Mr. Kinew: So, the facts are this: the Premier (Mr. Pallister) was not at the Friday night

announcement, which was significant because, again, it affects the rights of Manitobans.

It's also significant because the announcement on Friday night included a question-and-answer period which Dr. Roussin was left alone to respond to questions, whether they were clarification questions or accountability questions.

Earlier this afternoon, the Premier (Mr. Pallister) said that he is accountable for the public health orders, so why was the Premier not there when the public health orders were announced so that he could be asked to account for them, so that he could be asked to answer accountability questions?

Where was he and why wasn't he there to be accountable for the public health orders that he's acknowledged today he should be held accountable for?

Mr. Pallister: Again, why did the member hide his criminal record prior to the 2016 campaign? His issues of accountability the member's raising are coming from a glass house and the member's throwing stones at me but it—he's in a dangerous predicament because the fact of the matter is I've done over 125 press conferences, been available to answer all questions from the media and make myself available on an ongoing basis, but I most certainly would, if there were questions about my record, I would answer them and I have.

But the member appears unwilling to put the same standard on himself, yet he is trying to attack me today. I don't think that's entirely fair. I think it's probably a little unfair.

So again, I ask the member: did he hide his criminal record from the NDP when he was auditioning to be a candidate in the 2016 election or not? If he didn't, he should say so. And if he did, he should say that now.

Mr. Kinew: So, this afternoon, the Premier says he's accountable for the public health orders, and yet he refuses to show up to answer questions about them. And now he refuses to answer the question asked several times about why he simply didn't show up.

The thesis that a lot of Manitobans are circulating right now about why he doesn't show up is he only likes to be there for the good news announcements and he never wants to show up for the bad news announcements. So I'd like to flesh that out a little bit more.

A few weeks prior, there was a reference in a public health press conference to stronger restrictions coming later that week on a Friday. Instead, Friday

came and went without an announcement of new public health restrictions. Instead, we saw that the Premier visited his hometown of Portage la Prairie.

So did the Premier skip town because he didn't want to have to make a bad news announcement on that Friday?

Mr. Pallister: You know, the member's hidden his record from his own party, apparently. If he hadn't, he'd say so. His own colleagues have to ask the question, what else has he hidden?

I've been out there throughout this entire pandemic. Press—you don't dodge anything at a press conference; the member knows that. The media can ask any question they want and there's no such thing as an easy press conference and a hard press conference; they're all accountability sessions and I've done over 125 of them so far.

So all I can say to the member is he's wrong on this thesis. The fact of the matter is I made an announcement not only about warnings—and I should mention that May 3rd to 9th—97 warnings, 50 \$1,296 tickets, nine \$298 tickets, one \$5,000 ticket. That's enforcement; that's what we're doing. We take very seriously these health orders that the member apparently does not take seriously, and that is unfortunate as well.

I can also share with the member that our law enforcement officials have given per capita more tickets than most of the other provinces studied in this report that I have. I can share with the member; it's not a secret report, about triple the rate of most other provinces studied. I want to be sure that we were doing the right things in terms of enforcement, so—because I understand that it isn't just health restrictions, it's the willingness of people to follow them that matters. That's why I did the announcement on Friday morning concerning enforcement, because enforcement matters. As much as the member may not believe it, it does help. And it is helping now and I thank the people that are doing it.

I also announced, in that press conference, something else that I think that is pretty significant and important, which is something that this government has fought for from the get-go, and that the NDP were silent on, contrary—for a long time—contrary to what the member put on the record earlier, and that is paid sick leave. And we made an announcement about a program for paid sick leave that we consider to be the strongest such program in the country right now.

Now, it may be that other provinces will follow our lead. I know that some others may be talking about doing something else. BC just came out with a good program. I applaud Premier Horgan for his leadership in advancing paid sick leave. I did my best to help him. We, together, lobbied other premiers to join in calling on the federal government to introduce a national pandemic paid sick leave program. We did that sincerely together with the hopes that they would.

The federal program has some flaws in it. Premier Horgan announced that, I think, day before yesterday when he announced his own plan. These flaws are not limited to but include no specificity as far—or clarity as far as whether a person could go and get a vaccine and actually have that leave paid to get that vaccine. We've asked, and I hope that the Opposition Leader will support this, that we have that legislated.

We've also increased the amount—or, introduced an amount of pay that people can get for a variety of reasons. And it doesn't—the problem with the federal program is it isn't clear on this. It's confusing. As members know, if they've talked to their constituents, there are a lot more questions than answers about the qualification aspects of the federal plan.

What it does, long term, is, I think, a sincere effort, and I thank the federal government for this. On a variety of fronts they've been open, for the most part, co-operative in terms of a variety of endeavours we've pursued together or separately, in communicating. But on this one, they undertook to do something they did not end up doing. And that's unfortunate, because the premiers were united in supporting this. I was really pleased when the Opposition Leader stood up and supported this effort as he did on behalf of his party. I think it was an important thing to do.

I was very pleased when the opposition joined with us in calling for stronger support for health-care transfers as well and I thank the Opposition Leader for that. Right across the country, with the exception of our third party here in Manitoba—for some unknown reason—this is an issue we all agree on. We all agree on this need. And it's an imperative, because health-care needs are rising and the need for supports is growing.

So, on that—

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable First Minister's time has expired.

Mr. Kinew: So, again, the—you know, the fact remains that the Premier (Mr. Pallister) doesn't want to account for his whereabouts during these

significant announcements. So I'd like to ask a question about the Sunday announcement.

Why wasn't the Premier present for the announcement when it was said that schools would go remote?

Mr. Pallister: I'm not prepared to tell the Opposition Leader, frankly, or anybody but my wife where I am on a regular basis. Manitobans know that I have been here throughout this pandemic; I've been available all the time and I'll continue to be. And so I think that's the effort that I've continued to demonstrate and will continue to demonstrate.

As far as the member's concerned, he can't even confront the issue of whether he hid his criminal record from his party prior the '17 leadership campaign. So I don't know if he disclosed it to the NDP when he was running. If he didn't, did he disclose it before he decided he was going to run for leader? That's, I think, another fair question he needs to answer.

Mr. Kinew: I know the question's ringing in his head: Where was he? Where was he? Where was he?

* (16:10)

But the question, actually, was why. Why wasn't he there? Why wasn't he there on Sunday? A lot of families had their Mother's Day plans interrupted. A lot of people put those on hold to try and put child care, education, work plans into place for just a few days later. It seems like a reasonable question that the person who leads the province could be there to help explain, offer advice and, yes, based on his answers earlier this afternoon, even be held accountable to answering some questions.

So since the Premier invites the question, I'll ask it: Where was he on Sunday, during the announcement, when Manitobans learned that schools in Winnipeg and Brandon would go remote?

Mr. Chairperson: I would like to remind the members that when addressing somebody in the Chamber, they should be addressed by their title or by their constituency. Like, as you and him and he, I don't know if that's proper etiquette in here or not, but.

Mr. Pallister: Mr. Chair, you're really glad that you have that job right now, don't you? You're happy about that, yes. Not an—thank you for taking on the job of chairing committees. It's not an easy job. I don't think the member was trying to—I'm not questioning your admonition. I don't think he was trying to address me directly.

His—interesting his tactics, though, because that's all this is, as anybody who's watching knows, including his colleagues. It's an attempt to distract.

So, the question of availability. I've been putting in 60,70, 80-hour weeks for the last 16 months. I'm not going to stop. This pandemic is all I think about, quite frankly. And as far as his previous attacks, I think it was a couple of weeks ago, he alluded in the House to the fact that—something like I make all the decisions and nobody in my Cabinet has any say, or something to that effect.

So he wants it both ways. He wants me to be the dictator and control freak on the one hand, and on the other hand he wants me to, you know, not be there and have somebody else doing it. Well, in this case we made sure that our Education Minister, who is accountable and responsible for his department, was there, made that announcement; I thought did a good job of doing his job and I applaud him for doing that.

So, again, you know, we—I made major announcements on the Friday that I think were important in respect of supporting public health rules which were strengthened by Dr. Roussin's announcement later in the day.

It's important to have both, you know. It's not enough to have rules. People have to follow them. The member needs to understand that—everybody. There isn't a separate group of people that doesn't have to follow them. There isn't somebody in an elevated position that's above those rules, and so when I let my mask slip down at the Toronto airport, I apologized immediately and I'd encourage the member to take ownership of the fact that he did organize a rally, maskless. Too many people broke the health rules and he has yet to apologize for that.

Now, you know, I can tell that the member's defensive about this and that perhaps he would argue it wasn't his fault; it was the IBEW guys that showed up, not him. But he was there and he asked them to show up, so I think he was accountable at a pivotal time, when we were trying to make sure that people were following health orders and we were seeing increasing challenges. Our enforcement officials were telling us that people were challenging them, berating them—I think in a couple of cases, physically involved with them and this is not on.

So when I go out to make an announcement on enforcement, it's not a small thing; it's an important thing, and when I go out to make an announcement about Canada's leading sick leave program, that's not

a small thing; that's an important thing. And these things all fit together.

And so I respect the fact that he thinks that this is a political gotcha moment and that he can nail me for not being at two announcements, but he forgets to mention that I'd been at it—125-plus. So, I think, on balance, it would be fair to say that I've been pretty accessible to the media and to answer any questions that they may have throughout this pandemic and I plan on continuing to do that very thing.

Mr. Kinew: So again, where was the Premier (Mr. Pallister) on Sunday? It's a very important announcement. It affects so many families across the province. Where was he that he couldn't help Manitobans understand what was happening?

Mr. Pallister: Again, I've told him before and I'll tell him again. I'm accountable to my wife for my everyday activities and my whereabouts; I'm not accountable to him. I can only tell him that I worked a good part of that day and I continue to work and I will work on this pandemic—not exclusively on this pandemic but on a number of other fronts as well.

I did convey to him—for example, last Friday—that following a call with Chrystia Freeland—I can use her name here, Mr. Chair? Okay—with the Finance Minister—and again, I endeavour to communicate with the member openly about issues.

On the sick leave, I communicated with him and I have continued to urge the federal government to step up their sick leave plan. I communicated with him that we had communicated our frustration with the qualification period issue. The federal government has made it very—and I didn't elaborate on this but I should. Here's what the federal government did—and on this I can draw a little bit on my insurance background. There's a thing called a deductible period sometimes; the people understand, I think—I'll use disability insurance for an example—where you self-insure for a period of time and then the insurance company starts to pay for your disability if you're sick or you're hurt or whatever. Not to get into the weeds too much, I hope, but just to say, if that deductibility period where you're self-insuring is a longer period, then the insurance is a lot cheaper because the insurance company isn't taking on the risk.

That's what the federal government did to us, on sick leave—[interjection] exactly. They made it harder for people to get it in the first week; they made it harder. Because they put in a clause that said you can collect only if you miss up to 50 per cent of your

scheduled work week. Well, how the heck does a person know that? I mean come on. And I really took offence to that and I shared with the member and I hope he would admit this that we talked about that. And it was really frustrating to me and other premiers too that they would put in this clause when the very idea of a sick-leave program is to discourage people from having to go to work by making sure that they have confidence that they're getting some—you know, they're not sacrificing a paycheque; that means a lot.

I've lived a good part of my life in a household where that mattered a heck of a lot, and when the federal government came out with this plan and I saw this qualification deductible period in there, I was not happy. What they did was they cheaped the plan.

An Honourable Member: That was the thing in the hallway you were talking about?

Mr. Pallister: Yes, yes, when we talked about it. What the federal government did there wasn't—they've done a lot of good things, and I have a lot of time for Chrystia Freeland, and I do not want this to me misconstrued as a whack at her; it's not—but they could have made that plan so much better and that's what they undertook to do.

You know, the federal government told us months ago that this—that plan would have a budget of about \$5 billion, right?—the sick leave plan. Do you know what the budget allocation is in the recent federal budget? Less than \$1 billion. And part of that reason is they made it harder for you to qualify for it in the first week.

So this is the issue. I shared with the member and I continue to say that the federal government should have designed that plan so it was more accessible to Canadians. They failed to do it. The premiers now have to act in response to fill that gap. We've taken that action. Premier Horgan took action this week; we took action last Friday. This wasn't a small announcement and that's I guess what I'm trying to get across to the member.

I take this very seriously. That sick leave issue is one we pushed very, very hard on. And I appreciate the member's support on it very much, because it is an important issue. And it could be argued we should have done it ourselves earlier, but we had it undertaken by the federal government that they were going to design a plan. When they came out with it—just about three weeks ago now—it had this flaw and we thought, well, let's keep going at them on it and maybe they'll change their minds.

We successfully got them to change their minds earlier on a couple of things. I'll mention one, which was—the member will remember this—the wage subsidy program. Remember when they first came out with a wage subsidy program, the feds said that—*[interjection]*

Okay, I'll go quick, Mr. Chair—just the feds said that this would be they'd cover 10 per cent of wages, remember this, they'd cover 10 per cent of wages? Well, I and I think Premier Kenney also spoke up on this, said: You won't have to worry about administration costs on that plan; you won't have anybody applying. And they—to their credit—they changed their mind and they boosted the payment amount to 75 per cent.

Now, there's lots of problems with the wage subsidy program—it's being well-reported now in The Globe and Mail and places like this, but the fact is at least it's workable for businesses that need it. But the sick leave program—maybe in the longer term if you have to be off for three weeks, four weeks, can work—but in that first week, that critical week, not so much. That's why we designed our plan to fill that gap.

* (16:20)

Mr. Kinew: So, again, a final time for the purposes here this afternoon, with respect to the school announcement, where was the Premier (Mr. Pallister) on Sunday that he couldn't attend it and help explain to Manitobans why it was happening?

Mr. Pallister: Again, I will just simply say to the member that I believe that having the Education Minister involved with Dr. Roussin in that announcement was the right thing to do.

I took a lot of criticism about three years ago from, particularly, I think, the Winnipeg Free Press, when I chose not to go to the international Normandy—I don't know what to call it—

An Honourable Member: D-Day gathering.

Mr. Pallister: —D-Day gathering. I went to eight other events. I went to more than every other premier combined, okay? But I got criticized for not going to that event because I chose to have a veteran from our caucus go instead.

I believe that was the right thing to do and I believe having the Education Minister there for that announcement on Sunday was the right thing to do, too.

Mr. Kinew: So again, you know, the trend, the theme is that the Premier (Mr. Pallister) is not there on the difficult days. Last Friday, new public health restrictions are announced in the evening: he's not there. Sunday: he's not there. We can go back over the past year and change that the pandemic has been in effect and this a reoccurring phenomenon.

We know that in May 4th, 2020, there was an announcement made by government that they planned to cut \$860 million from Crowns, schools, post-secondaries. You know, the PCs, I guess, got excited in all their talk about government 2.0, but the part that they overlooked was having the leader of the province come out and explain to Manitobans why there should be the single greatest one-day cut in our province's history.

So again, May 4th, 2020: where was the Premier that he couldn't be present at that announcement?

Mr. Pallister: Two things: first of all, the member's imagining an announcement that never happened and never took place. Secondly, that was the week my sister passed.

Mr. Kinew: I withdraw. If there's a legitimate reason: absolutely understandable.

In August of 2020, on August 21st, there was a spike of cases in Prairie Mountain Health that led to health restrictions being announced. The Premier was not present at that announcement.

Where was he on August 21st that he couldn't be there for that announcement to help people in Brandon and across the rest of Prairie Mountain understand what was happening?

Mr. Pallister: Member can do his research and find out if any premier has been more available than me. Until he does that, he'd best not talk about where I wasn't. He should talk about where I was instead.

And where I have been throughout this pandemic is at work, and where I've been every weekend since last February is at work. And where I'm going to continue to be throughout this pandemic is working on behalf of Manitobans in every way, shape and form that I can to address the issues this pandemic creates.

I have not taken time off. I have not been away. I have not been in my cabin in northwestern Ontario. Okay, one time, one two-day period with my wife at that cabin: that's it. Maybe the member would like to share his schedule with the committee and we can compare notes, okay.

In the meantime, I'm going to stay focused on the job. I got a lot of other things to do. If the member wants to keep going on this innuendo stuff, we can keep going on it. If he wants to ask questions about any department of government, I'll do my best to answer him, as I always do.

But there's a pandemic on right now and I think rather than trying to score political points with innuendo, we should get to some serious questions about some serious issues.

Mr. Kinew: This afternoon, the Premier has stated he is accountable for public health restrictions. Public health restrictions were announced for Prairie Mountain on August 21st, 2020. The Premier was not there to answer or to offer that accountability.

Where was he? Why wasn't he there to help people across Westman-Parkland region understand that announcement?

Mr. Pallister: I'll double-check my schedule, but I think I was actually in Brandon and I did interviews in the media that day. We can double-check if the member would like.

So, on the issues of accountability, I did media interviews in Brandon, I believe. We can double-check, I think, that week, but I'm happy to tell the member that I've been accountable throughout this entire pandemic and that his thesis that I somehow am not here in difficult days doesn't bear up to scrutiny because I can tell him that every day in this pandemic has been a difficult day and I've been here, and I'm not sure he has.

Mr. Kinew: In a similar vein to prove the thesis that the Premier doesn't show up for the difficult moments: on September 25th, it was announced that COVID cases in Manitoba and in the Capital Region were leading Winnipeg to be moved to code orange. It was also significant because that's the date that a mask mandate came in for that region—Premier was not available that day to explain the restrictions that he says he is accountable for.

Where was the Premier on September 25th that he wouldn't make that announcement?

Mr. Pallister: As I said to the member earlier, I don't ever stop thinking about this pandemic, so he can be sure that I was working. I can also tell him that if he cared to talk to Ed Schreyer or Gary Doer or Greg Selinger, who I should note was just honoured with an appointment to the Order of Manitoba—congratulations to Mr. Selinger and others—if he would care

to talk to any of them, he may find that there are many duties to the—premiers' responsibilities are many, and I can assure him that I wasn't at my cabin in north-western Ontario fixing it up or anything like that. I was on the job.

So, I don't know. The member wants to keep going on this stuff, but he won't tell anybody whether he hid his record from the NDP or not prior to the 2016 election. I think that's a pertinent thing to come clean on, and it is a simple question. Did he hide his record from the NDP when he was interviewed as a candidate in '16?

I mean, people had to run against him, right? Rana Bokhari, right, ran against him, put a record out there. She was the leader of the Liberal Party at that time. She was subjected to a lot of criticism, and I remember the NDP ridiculing her, yes.

Present member for Southdale (Ms. Gordon), who was running in that riding, a woman who's faced considerable challenges in her life, risen to those challenges, worked her tail off, put her record out there—honest person. She put her record out there. Rana Bokhari put her record out there. The member opposite hid his record, got elected, thinks that's a win. I don't think so.

So somebody covered up his record, because it wasn't out there. So was it him, or was it his party? Which one? Simple question.

Mr. Kinew: September 25th, the Capital Region of Manitoba was moved to code orange, a significant escalation in public health restrictions, a move that impacted a large number of Manitobans, and the Premier (Mr. Pallister) was not present.

Short time later, unfortunately, the decision was made to move the Winnipeg health region to code red. Thousands of businesses were forced to close. They were forced to reduce their capacity. Again, this was a significant moment, and then the Premier states this afternoon that he is supposed to be accountable for public health decisions—public health restrictions—yet again, he was not there for the code red announcement.

Where was he? Why was he not present for the announcement that Winnipeg would be moving to code red?

* (16:30)

Mr. Pallister: I can only say to the member, and I have repeatedly said to him: I'm on the job all the time, I've been available to media through the mechanisms

we use on a regular basis, I think, all but two weeks since February of last year. And one of those weeks I was in Ottawa meeting with federal officials lobbying for a variety of Manitoba-centric issues.

I can also tell him that, as a government, we have taken not dozens, not hundreds but probably thousands of issues of critical importance to Manitobans through this pandemic, and that I have a Cabinet that I trust and that I respect who is diligent and hard-working and who makes every effort to fulfill the responsibilities of their duties. We make those duties clear. It's the first government of Manitoba history to actually put out our mandate letters so the public can see them, the opposition can see them, anybody can see them. And so I expect my Cabinet members to pursue, and they are pursuing with diligence, their responsibilities. So, it's a team of people.

Now, the member may think it's just about him; it's not. And he may think it's just about me; I don't think that. I come from a team background and I think there's a team that should be given the opportunity to work and they do and they work hard.

And so, you know, I can only say to the member: that dog don't hunt. And he can keep going on this all day if he wants, but I got of other more important things to do.

So if he'd like to get to some issues, I'm more than happy to address any issue he'd like to raise but if he wants to keep talking about where I was on a given day, I can only tell him what I've told him several times: I'm working.

Mr. Kinew: The code red announcement that I'm talking about is significant because we remain under code red to this day. This was a significant moment in the pandemic period and the decision is one that the Premier says that he should be held accountable for.

One of the moments for accountability—and again, let's remind ourselves: accountability doesn't necessarily mean it's a tough question, it just means explaining what's going on.

So, given that that was such a pivotal moment in the pandemic for Winnipeggers, for people in the region, Manitobans have a right to know why the Premier wasn't there.

Where was he? What was he doing that was so important that he couldn't be there for the move to code red for Winnipeg?

Mr. Pallister: I was working.

Accountability that the member speaks of extends to him as well. He needs to be accountable. Why did he keep his record secret from the NDP when he decided to stand as a candidate in 2016? He's accountable to answer that question too. He hasn't, he won't because he thinks that accountability only works when he raises it as an issue to hit me with.

I'm happy to be accountable. I've told him I've answered his questions. I'll keep answering them. I'm working every day. I keep it, I keep it going.

The member wants to share his schedule and try to compare notes, I'm happy to have him do it. If he wants to share the facts about his non-disclosure of his record to his party, he should share those. He shouldn't continue to cover them up—because that's deceit. It's deceitful.

How would you feel, Mr. Chair, if you had contested Fort Rouge, put your record out there, worked your tail off? You know how hard it is. Campaigns are hard. COVID's harder. Campaigns are hard work. You go out and you work your tail off, you know that. Walking, knocking, encouraging people, helping them, trying to get some volunteers together. All that work was done by Rana Bokhari, tossed away by this member opposite because, well, he didn't think it was important to put his record out there—his truthful record.

The present member for Southdale (Ms. Gordon), same thing. Family comes here with nothing, makes something of her life, invests of herself, gives of herself, works her tail off, pursues her education, becomes a professional, decides that she wants to get into public service, puts her record out there on the line, lays it out and then goes out in an area—not a traditional strong area for Conservatives to get a lot of support—she went out there and worked her tail off. Honest woman.

The member didn't choose to put his record out there. He chose not to. That's a conscious choice he made. He thinks he won, but did he win with dignity? That's a question only he can answer. I have my views, but that's a chance for him to reflect. And he should reflect on it. Because everybody—I hope everybody gives the gentleman opposite the chance to prove he's a new man. That's what I'd like to see him do now. I'd like to see him admit that was a mistake.

And if he did disclose his record and the NDP covered it up, he should say that. And I'd have a lot more respect for him if he'd do that than if he dodged the question and dodged the issue like he's doing right

now. Because I just don't think what he did to those two women was right, and I think there's people in the NDP that know it was wrong, too.

Mr. Kinew: The Premier (Mr. Pallister) says he will answer questions. Let's see if he will answer this question or whether he will dodge it.

Where was he when the announcement was made to move Winnipeg to code red? What was he doing that was so important that he couldn't explain to Manitobans and Winnipeggers in the Capital Region about why we had to move to a lockdown?

Mr. Pallister: So, again, the member wants me to explain to him every hour of every day where I was—that's what he was asking—when an important thing happened during the pandemic. I'm not prepared to do that. I've answered the questions that he has asked. I have told him—I've told him repeatedly that I'm working, and I am. And I'm not going to share. He can FIPPA my schedule, but just in the spirit of the same—because he's not answering the single questions I've asked—I'm not going to share my schedule with him. He can FIPPA it if he wants to get it and he'll find out where I was. But I was working. And he'll find that out when he FIPPAs.

Now, I can't FIPPA him and his party's interactions. I can't and I won't. I'm simply asking him a question. He decided to enter public life. He's got an accomplished record as a broadcaster. He's got lots of good stuff on his resume. But hiding the other stuff, you know, you don't get to pick and choose. That's fictional, right? You don't get to pick and choose. It's public life; you're accountable.

Now, the member hasn't been asked about this. The media expresses little interest in pursuing these issues. I do have an interest in pursuing these issues from a non-political standpoint. I have an interest, because I respect people that put their record out for public office. The member for Concordia (Mr. Wiebe) put his record out when he entered the public domain and he ran on that record and, to my knowledge, did not cover up anything about his past—anything.

Other members of the House as well were forthright. When they entered the realm of public life, they said: I want to put my name on that ballot. And I respect people that do that, regardless of political party. Always have, always will. But when you go and apply for a job in public service as an elected official, your record matters. And when you cover up that record, that speaks badly of you. And the member may not think so right now, but I hope he reflects on this

after. And I hope he realizes that I am actually doing him a favour by giving him the opportunity to be frank about these issues.

I'm giving him—no—it's—he can continue—this is a cancerous situation for the member. He does not understand. He has people in his own party who understand that this is the issue he must confront, and should he fail to do so, it will follow him around. And I'm giving him the opportunity—there's no election. There's no election for years to come. The member could clear the air and he should. And if he would do that, Manitobans are forgiving, supportive people. Simply say: I made a mistake in covering up my record, and here is my record and, you know, please, give me a chance. Manitobans will do that.

* (16:40)

But if the member keeps following this line—and I hope he reflects on this in years to come and looks back on this moment, because I want him to know sincerely that what I am suggesting he do is the right thing to do. And if he would do it, it would help him so much because people would give him the gift of forgiveness. He would have that in a second. He would have it from me. I think he'd have it from the lion's share of the people of the province of Manitoba if he'd just simply come clean and tell the truth about his record.

But he did not do that in the—unless he did. Maybe he did. I've tried to give him the chance to say that. Maybe he did. But I don't know that, because he's simply not addressing the issue. I think that's a shame. I genuinely think well of the member. Our interactions, I think for the most part—apart from question period which is bad theatre most of the time, and he knows that—our interactions have been, I think, have been sincere.

I'm sincere in saying this now. I think the member makes a mistake in continuing to cover up his record, and in failing to answer the question about whether he did or did not make that record available to the NDP, he's missing an opportunity to move forward. He's missing an opportunity to begin to heal. He should pursue this now because he's got lots of forgiveness in front of him if he does and, if he doesn't, it's just going to grow; the issue's going to grow.

Mr. Kinew: You know, when you run for public office you make a commitment to the people of Manitoba to be there for them not just on the good days but also on the bad. It's remarkable the lengths to which the Premier (Mr. Pallister) will go to evade

answering the question, where is he during those difficult moments?

The Premier tries to act like every single moment is created equal. We've gone through some of the more difficult moments of the pandemic. He was absent time and time again, doesn't want to answer the questions about where he was, what he was doing, why couldn't he account for the decisions that he says today he should be held accountable for.

I've asked about code red, code orange, Westman, asked about the recent announcements and so on and so forth. It's clearly a trend.

Manitobans across the province—in Winnipeg, Brandon, rural Manitoba, northern Manitoba—for all of us, we were moved by the situation at the Maples Personal Care Home. This is one of the more difficult moments of the pandemic.

In the aftermath of that decision, which only came to light because of a paramedic posting anonymously on social media, there were a number of press conferences and the Premier was not present.

Where was he and what was he doing that was so important he couldn't address the crisis that had unfolded at Maples Personal Care Home in November 2020?

Mr. Pallister: Every week with—I could stand corrected on this—I think, but two since February of last year I have made myself available to all media to ask me any question they wish, including questions on Maples.

The member wants me to be faulted for not being there on a day he picks, failing to credit me for the days that I've been there to make myself available to the media on a weekly basis from the beginning of this pandemic and prior. I'm not going to buy it and I don't think anybody else is going to buy it either.

The reality is that there've been, in terms of health orders, I believe, 15 different announcements; I think I have been at 12 or 13 of them this year.

So, look, when you're going out every week as I am and taking questions from the media regardless of what you choose to announce. I mean, we can announce things the media doesn't ask about, right? It's—that happens all the time.

The member knows, you know. He'd like to go out and spin a certain message some day and the media doesn't buy it, so they don't go with his story.

In our case, we make announcements, we hope the media treats us fairly and then they ask any question they want, any question at all. That's accountability. Accountability is making sure that you're available to answer questions from the media, and I have been and I will continue to. Accountability is also making sure that you put your honest record out there when you stand for public office.

Lack of accountability is when you hide your record. I ask the member again: Did he hide his criminal record from the NDP when he chose to try to enter public life before the 2016 election? Yes or no?

Mr. Kinew: The crisis at the Maples care home was significant. It's one that Manitobans wanted to discuss, have explained to them, ask who was accountable. There were a number of press conferences organized by the government, including on that weekend. The Premier (Mr. Pallister) was not present for any of them.

Where was he? What was he doing that was so important he couldn't talk to Manitobans and at least just speak to them at one of the darkest hours of the pandemic?

Mr. Pallister: Again, the member throwing stones from a glass house hasn't answered the simple question: Did he hide his criminal record from his own party prior to the 2016 election?

I'll ask him another question. Did he hide his criminal record from his party prior to deciding to enter the leadership campaign in 2017?

Mr. Kinew: Where was the Premier and what was he doing on the weekend the Maples Personal Care Home tragedy came to light that he couldn't speak to Manitobans and just help them understand what was going on?

Mr. Pallister: The member put out a book in 2015, where he only referenced one of his criminal charges and covered up all the rest.

Mr. Kinew: Where was the Premier on November 7th and November 8th of 2020, as the Maples Personal Care Home tragedy came to light? The government organized numerous availabilities with many people, none of whom were the Premier, none of whom were the leader of the province. What was he doing that was so important that he couldn't speak to Manitobans and offer some consolation during their time of need?

Mr. Pallister: Yes, two points: (1), the Health Minister had a news conference, I think on the day he's referencing. Our Health Minister's accountable and

responsible for health issues in our province, but I guarantee the member that I was available that week to the media because I did weekly press conferences where I was available to answer any single question that they chose to ask.

Where I was, was working. Where I continue to be is working. Where the member is going is not working.

Mr. Kinew: There were many emotions felt by people in Manitoba the weekend that we learned of the Maples Personal Care Home tragedy. The idea that seniors could die of dehydration in the province, that there was neglect, that there was unanswered questions, these are all very disturbing to people. I'm sure they're disturbing to the Premier, as well.

What Manitobans were looking for at the moment was leadership. The Premier sought the job of being leader of the province. It seems to me it's reasonable that the Premier would show up, at least on one of those days, to start to help Manitobans comprehend what had taken place; if not to offer accountability immediately, then perhaps at least to offer consolation.

What was the Premier doing that was so important that he couldn't be there? Why wasn't he present?

* (16:50)

Mr. Pallister: Well, a couple of things. The issues around that the member wants to score political points on are sad issues, tragic issues, perhaps some of the most tragic in the entire pandemic. So, you know, I think the member's revealing himself in trying to achieve political gain at the expense of such an issue.

Secondly, I would say we were in session, if I recall, at that time. So, clearly, I was in the question period every day and he could have asked me any question he wanted.

Thirdly, I always make myself available in the media every week. So the questions that—any questions that might have been generated as a consequence of that issue—which was not a two-day issue, by the way, but an ongoing issue—could have been raised. And I expect more of him.

Mr. Kinew: It's very clear that there's a trend here and the more significant moments, the more challenging moments that Manitobans have seen over the past year, the Premier has not been present.

Laying out a case here—these are not the sole examples but these are the significant examples: when

Prairie Mountain was moved to code orange; when Winnipeg was moved to code orange; when Winnipeg was moved to code red; when we saw Maples; when we saw the most recent announcement, the impacts of the third wave, two separate announcements; very chaotic rollout. Manitobans wondering just on that level alone what is going on with their government. And neither one of those announcements, which typified and embodied the chaos and disorganization of this current administration, was the Premier (Mr. Pallister) present.

It's a legitimate line of inquiry. It's an important question to get to the bottom of. Why was the Premier not present for any of those moments? Those are the moments when it's important to speak to people, to help them understand what's going on, to help them cope, to help them chart a course forward. And yet the Premier was absent in each and every one of them and in more.

So why is it the Premier only wants to be there for the good announcements but not there during Manitobans' times of greatest need?

Mr. Pallister: So there's a number of errors in the member's assertion. When I say his dog doesn't hunt, I'm telling him that if he looked at the facts—but he's not interested in looking at the facts—he'd find that I was—I did, I think, a dozen announcements on health orders this year, including on November 10th. So he's false in his assertion on that.

I can also tell him that I've been available to the media every single week since the start of this, with, I think, two exceptions and I stand corrected on that; maybe three, maybe one. And so I've been accountable in that respect.

His job is to make me accountable. He's trying to do it now with a false accusation. What he needs to do is work with facts if he wants his thesis to fly, and it won't fly.

So I can only say to him there aren't any easy announcements; there aren't any easy press conferences. There's no such thing. He's hypothesizing about an imaginary thing. He's trying to suggest that I do the easy work. And he's missing the point and the point is there is no easy work; it's a global pandemic, it's a son of a gun for every single Manitoban.

We've done dozens of hard announcements. We've done dozens of restrictions. It's not easy to go out and tell people you're going to ticket them. Are you kidding? It's not easy to go out and tell people they can't get together in their backyard, but I've done

that. It's not easy to take away Christmas, and I've done that and I'll keep doing it.

And the member tries to score political points saying I'm not there in the hard times. I've been there all the time. I've been attacked for being there too much. According to the Winnipeg Free Press, I'm the face of the pandemic. How do you do that unless you're there when the difficult, ugly, tough decisions are made and sometimes—most of the time when they're announced, on the day they're announced?

But even though the member may be correct in saying some of my colleagues have been involved, that's because we have a team. Does he? Does he? And if he has a team, did he tell his team all his criminal offences? Do they know what they are? Or is he hiding them from them too? Do they know his record or is he still hiding?

He hid it from his party before he ran for office. If he hadn't, he would've said so by now. He hid it from his party when he decided to seek the leadership, and only when someone on the other campaign's team started to come out with some things that some of the stuff come to light, some of the real things in his background, things that were never out there for the first two and a half years after he decided that he was going to enter public life.

And the member knows that he's been treated with kid gloves all the way through this time, and I'm giving him the opportunity to come clean because that ain't going to go on forever. And the sooner he confronts the reality, and the sooner he owns up to his past mistakes and apologizes for them, and accounts for them, the better for him. If he doesn't choose to take this advice, what comes around goes around.

My record's an open book, not a fictionalized work, the real thing. And if the media wants to ask me a question about any issue, they've had opportunities on a weekly basis to do that, and that's called accountability, and I'm happy to do that. If the media decides to ask him some questions that are tougher once in a while, that would be a change, that would be their choice. But I've asked him only a couple today and he hasn't answered them. And that demonstrates again to me that he's not ready to be accountable, not ready to accept the personal responsibilities that go with the job I have.

If I had an overpaid speeding ticket, it would be on the front page of the Winnipeg Free Press. Everybody in this province knows that, every single person who reads the Free Press knows that. I'm accountable.

I'm made accountable. And I like to be accountable. And the member refuses to be accountable, and that is to his detriment because if he would finally, finally come clean on why he decided to enter public life while hiding his own personal record from the voters of the riding he was running in, that would help him. But he refuses to accept the opportunity, to his detriment.

On the issue of personal-care homes, I can only say before this pandemic struck we had, as a government, significantly increased the amount of investment in personal-care homes beyond what was happening under the previous NDP administration. Just about a 50 per cent increase in the amount of investment in personal-care homes, adding beds, eliminating the waiting times that people had to get into personal-care homes, addressing that, safety and security upgrades—

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable First Minister's time has expired.

Mr. Kinew: So, it's pretty clear that there is this pattern of the Premier (Mr. Pallister) not wanting to show up for Manitobans during the difficult moments.

Sober assessment of the pandemic would highlight some of the clear turning points of what's been going on this past year. Prairie Mountain—again, that was a difficult moment for folks in that region, and there were a lot of questions. You know, we heard them all. People in Brandon concerned about what the rising case counts, what the impact of the outbreak at Maple Leaf meant for them. People in other parts of the region—it's a very large region, right, all the way from American border up to Swan—people in some of those other regions wondering about the effects on them. The Premier was absent from that.

Winnipeg, unfortunately, started to see rising case counts again after that, saw us move up the colour-coded scale. Lot of concern. Lot of questions. Yet, the Premier was absent at the moment. Unfortunately, things escalated from there in severity. We moved to code red. Premier again was absent from the announcement on code red.

These are all announcements about public health restrictions, things that restricted Manitobans which were being made with justification, but sometimes that justification requires explanation and explication. That's the substance of accountability. Unfortunately, code red—the case counts that came along with that wave later resulted in the tragedy at Maples, for which the Premier was absent.

He was absent, also, for other announcements more recently, including those on Friday, bringing in the latest public health restrictions, and the announcement to move schools to remote—

Mr. Chairperson: Order, please. The hour being 5 p.m., I'm interrupting the proceedings.

The Committee of Supply will resume sitting tomorrow morning at 10 a.m.

ROOM 255

* (14:40)

EDUCATION

Mr. Chairperson (Len Isleifson): Good afternoon. Will this section of the Committee of Supply please come to order.

The first set of Estimates to be considered by this section of the Committee of Supply is for the Department of Education.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Minister, do you have an opening statement?

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Education): Sorry, we're just trying to get technology established here, so—yes, I do.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, Minister Cullen, go ahead.

Mr. Cullen: Hello, everyone and good afternoon.

First of all, I'm here with my deputy minister, [*inaudible*] Rudy for the 2021 Committee of Supply discussion.

I'm proud that our government has continued to invest in education. We are increasing our education spending by \$1.6 billion over four years and are continuing to make significant progress on our 20 new schools guarantee. We are working to ensure our children and schools will be supported now and into the future.

We now have over \$3 billion being invested across summary government on education in the K-to-12 system. Our government announced a 1.56 per cent increase for our funding of schools program earlier this year. This amounts to a \$20.8 million increase and a total of \$1.35 billion. We also provided school divisions with the equivalent of a 2 per cent property tax increase—or \$23 million—so they can hold the line on local property tax owners.

I look forward to taking questions from the committee.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the minister for those comments.

Does the critic from the official opposition have an opening statement?

Mr. Nello Altomare (Transcona): Yes, I do.

It's a—indeed, an honour to be here and I'm looking forward to the Estimates process, so we can get some clarity.

I will say, looking at this year's Estimates book, I've—in my brief experience I haven't seen anything so thin and difficult to actually decipher. We don't actually see any numbers here until page 23 of a 35-page document, in a department that is the second largest in government.

And, you know, for—to do this process properly, we need to have an Estimates book that truly provides all of the pieces that we need to know what's happening in the department, because I will tell you from personal experience, and seeing the decline that I noticed in the department, not only in the pieces of leadership around curriculum and instruction but also in the leadership in the financial management portions of the department.

I will say I come from a time when—and not that long ago, actually—where the department took significant leadership role in curriculum and instruction, where many of the department consultants were available and seconded many teachers, many school leaders into developing new curriculum, into developing teaching strategies that meet with the needs of our students that we were encountering. And a lot of that piece now is beginning to disappear; doesn't exist. We're not having secondments like we used to. We're not developing curriculum—Manitoba curriculum like we used to.

There are a number of pieces that, as a department, the department has been challenged in. For example, the TRC recommendations 62 to 65, and we're yet to see any real movement on that.

I will say that there's a portion there; I believe it was recommendation No. 62 in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where we would have an ADM of Indigenous education, somebody responsible to ensure that all the calls to action are acted upon. And those are some of the pieces that we certainly

need to see, but we don't see any evidence of that in this year's Estimates piece.

* (14:50)

The minister talked about a 20 new schools guarantee, and what we have is we have the minister going out announcing the same old schools to the same old places, making the announcement now three or four times on buildings that were announced weeks and years ago. And so we need to see action on that file as well.

I will say that, in the constituency of Transcona, we were disappointed to learn that the new DSFM school was—is not going to be built in the constituency of Transcona, and that is—comes with profound disappointment for not only the eastern part of Winnipeg but also to young families in the area of Transcona that is growing, much like many of our constituencies. I can only imagine—I'm assuming Brandon East, the same. Many new developments. Many new demands on child care.

And I will say whenever we get a new school built in Manitoba, there are the requisite child-care spaces that become available. And to have those not available to our part of the world where—and I'm sure the Minister of Families (Ms. Squires) knows this—where we have wait-lists in our licensed child-care centres that number in the hundreds.

And I will also say that the member from Radisson also knows of vacancies in that constituency, as well, that we get calls on. And, you know, those—these are the challenges that we are facing. And especially coming out of the pandemic, what we—or, what I would have liked to see, certainly people in education would like to see, is a plan, a roadmap, Mr. Chair, that identifies how are we going to tackle the challenges that are going to be post-pandemic when it comes to education, challenges such as access to clinical services, because we know students haven't been at schools. Some have not. And there's going to be a crush of demand on those clinical services.

Access to proper nutrition in schools that are necessary for kids that don't have all that they need from when they're coming from home—those are some of the real challenges, right?

A pandemic roadmap for how we're going to deal with all of these challenges that are going to crush the education system—we don't see that.

And so those are some of the pieces that are really concerning.

And you know what else is also concerning, Mr. Chair, is the fact that this ability-to-play clause in Bill 45 is also repeated in Bill 64 two times.

And I will tell you, with Bill 16, Bill 45, Bill 64, teachers and all people that work in the system are feeling under the gun, are feeling targeted by this government in its approach to how, not only how they're going to fund education, but how they're going to run education. And it's caused a complete malaise to set into the system where it affects, I will say—and I don't say this lightly—it affects job performance.

We need a government that's on side with the people that they employ and that they work for so that we can get over this malaise. So that's why it would have been great to see some kind of plan coming post-pandemic for education, but we don't see that.

What we see instead is we see a government that sort of, you know, unveils how it's—what kind of employer it's going to be, especially when it comes to this new provincial education authority that is being proposed in Bill 64. We don't know that that authority will be accountable to anybody other than the minister. And that's a problem, because people in Manitoba take great pride in their schools, take great pride in their local schools. And we know that that will become an issue.

And now what we have, of course, we've had to endure now the sudden closure of our schools. Of course, we're hoping for a restart on June 1st but, Mr. Chair, with the numbers that we saw today, I still maintain some hope that we will be able to get back to in-class, in-person learning, because I know how important that is. We all know how important that is. We just wish we had a government that understood and was on side with the people that work in the system so that we can create the best possible learning environments for our students.

And with that, Mr. Chair, I look forward to this opportunity to ask the minister some questions. Thank you.

Mr. Chairperson: And we thank the member for those opening comments.

So, under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last item considered for a department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 16.1, subsection (a), contained in resolution 16.1.

Does the committee wish to proceed through the Estimates of this department chronologically, or have a global discussion?

Some Honourable Members: Global.

Mr. Chairperson: Global? Global discussion, thank you. It is agreed, then, that questioning for this department will proceed in a global manner with all resolutions to be passed once questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Altomare: At this point, Mr. Chair, in beginning this global discussion about Estimates in Education, I just—I kind of want some—what happened to that DSFM school that was going to be built in the constituency of Transcona? What kind of decision-making took place to have it moved—brand new construction—out of an area that I assume already the land had been acquired—how did that get moved and now all of a sudden it's out of the constituency in Transcona?

How did that happen?

Mr. Cullen: Just consulting with staff here.

I think maybe there was, at one time, a new DSFM school proposed for Transcona. Obviously, we work with the—respect of school divisions, and in this case, DSFM. They—DSFM—saw an opportunity to acquire a school that can be—serve the purposes that they require in a timely fashion.

So, I think that's when the purchase of the King's School came forward, and my understanding is DSFM were proponents of that and we worked with them in that regard to make that happen. And that's how the King's School situation evolved.

Mr. Altomare: I just want to continue down this line just for one more question, just because that part of northeast Winnipeg is growing, we have three new developments in the area with the accompanying new families that will be moving in. Typically, families that are young families that are going to need a school built in that area.

* (15:00)

Can the minister provide any roadmap or any information regarding the possible construction of a new K-to-8 or K-to-5 school in that part of Winnipeg?

Mr. Cullen: Yes. I thank the member for that question—

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Cullen? Go ahead; sorry. Go ahead, Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Cullen: Oh, thank you, Mr. Chair. I thank the member for that question.

Obviously, recognize that's a growing community. We do face challenges with growing communities. I guess we say they're challenges—challenges from an education perspective and—in terms of making sure we're providing schools.

So, certainly mindful of that Transcona area; I think we've got some schools in the works very close to there. We're—we are playing a bit of catch-up in a number of areas and I think that's why we've committed our 20 new schools over the course of 10 years. And, quite frankly, we're ahead of schedule in those 20 new schools.

So, obviously we've been working with school divisions across the province and looking at needs as they develop. And we do have a number of schools obviously in various states; we just announced a couple for Waverley West that's been sort of long overdue there, and we're in the process of buying some more property in various areas of the province, as well, for new schools.

We've committed to the capital side. This year's budget reflects that: \$260 million for capital; that's a \$100-million increase over previous budgets, and we expect to spend that \$260 million again next year, in terms of new schools and upgrading existing schools.

I will—hopefully we'll get into a deeper discussion about the money we are investing in schools. We set aside a certain amount each and every year for upgrades to schools in various respects. We were quite excited at the end of last year—last budget year—when a number of projects came in under budget in the tendering process.

And as a result of that, we were able to do an additional \$40 million of renovations to schools. And certainly when we're in this COVID area—era, to be able to put additional funds into things like air ventilation and circulation, certainly a benefit. But we recognize, with 800 schools across the province and obviously an aging infrastructure for the most part, we do need to make investments in upgrades.

So it was certainly promising that we are able to get some of these projects done under budget so that we could get a lot more projects complete in last year's budget, to the tune of \$40 million. So we're excited about that and, as I say, we're going to continue

making in—capital investments in schools to the tune of \$260 million this year.

Mr. Altomare: Would the minister be able to provide the most recent organizational chart, including staff names and positions, at the Department of Ed?

Mr. Cullen: Yes, we can provide—I think—if the member's asking—we can just provide a hard copy to him. Would that be satisfactory?

Mr. Altomare: That would be satisfactory to get the hard copy of that.

Do we have a time frame on that, Minister?

Mr. Cullen: Yes. Just if the member would refer to our Education budget documents. If he refers to page 11, that document in front of him, that is the organizational structure and the names—current names are all there. If there's anything in addition to that, he may want to just send us a note and ask if—what additional material that he would like. But that's certainly—talks about the senior management in education.

So, if there's anything more than that he would like, maybe he could follow up with a note and provide us details of what he's looking for.

Mr. Altomare: Yes, that would be good. Like, in curriculum, in instruction, in assessment—all of those pieces would be greatly appreciated.

Is there a vacancy rate that can be provided for Manitoba Education, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Cullen: Unfortunately, Mr. Chair, we'll get back to the member in terms of the current vacancy situation.

I just want to advise the member that we are going through a restructuring—reorganization within the department, so—but anyway, I'll undertake to provide him the vacancy rates and the breakdown of the FTEs per appropriation.

Mr. Altomare: It looks like there were 15.5 fewer FTEs in Manitoba Education this year.

Which positions were cut and why were they cut?

Mr. Cullen: I appreciate the question from the member.

I think that the member is accurate in terms of the number of positions that have been changed. I would say a lot of the positions were administrative in nature, and I think I'll go back to my previous answer in terms

of our reorganization instruction, so that is taking place, you know, as we speak.

And I think the other thing that the member would be aware of is, you know, transitioning through Bill 64 is primarily the governance component and there will be some tweaking, I guess, of undertakings, in terms of the provincial education authority. We'll have some responsibilities there and then in terms of what the government and the department itself will be undertaking. So that's a fluid situation. It's evolving as we go.

* (15:10)

We're in the process of getting the organizational structure together for the provincial education authority, at the same time working on what the department itself will be delivering and what the requirements will be for individuals and work streams within the department itself.

So, as I say, that's fluid, that's evolving and in transition.

Mr. Altomare: The minister talks about this restructuring piece and how much time it's going to take and the number of human resources that it's going to absorb.

How will this impact the Department of Education at large as we begin to transition, or that transition process begins?

Mr. Cullen: Yes, obviously this is going to be an evolution for sure.

You know, our time frame in terms of the governance piece is to have the provincial education authority running by July 1st of 2022. So, obviously, the organizational charts will be developed and positions within that agency will be designed and designated, and, as well, at the same time we will be looking at roles and responsibilities of the department. So that will be evolving over the next several months.

And to the member's comment and questioning, and I go back to our BEST strategy. Clearly, there's a lot of components to that particular strategy and four key pillars—two of them dealing with student outcomes, one about teaching, education and leadership, and the third is the governance model, and all of these things are tied together.

Currently we're trying to get the governance piece tidied up by next July, but when it comes to outcomes for students there's a lot of pieces to that particular puzzle. And we are going to be engaging Manitobans

and educators over the course of several years, quite frankly, as we work to develop curriculum and address issues such as inclusion and diversity, poverty—all of those issues which are, quite frankly, challenging issues, and they won't be solved overnight. So there is certainly a longer-term take on some of those important issues that we're going to tackle, and we'll look at that over a period of a number of years.

It's challenging work, difficult work, but something that Manitobans deserve, and our government is taking on those challenges, and we look forward to seeing how that evolves. And obviously the role, I think, of the department will evolve over time, as well, as we engage in Manitobans and how we can provide better outcomes for our students and make sure that we have effective teachers and we have the tools provided for those teachers as well. And we think all of this is very important.

So as we journey down this road, I think the goal of the department will evolve and the department will have to be responsive to those needs and those recommendations that we hear from experts around the province.

Mr. Altomare: Mr. Minister, have timelines been established for the appointment process for the transitional authority that will be in place before the provincial education authority? And what will be the qualifications for individuals to serve on this transitional authority?

Mr. Cullen: A couple of points to the member's question.

We do have a—for lack of a better term I'll call it an internal transition team that's working on the broader transition. So, we're just in the process of putting some people in place to assist in that endeavour. It will be—some consultants will be engaged to assist in that, but we'll also be hiring and potentially seconding people in during that transition period.

If the member is talking in terms of the actual provincial education authority, again those positions within the authority will all be of a competitive nature. So, clearly, the board—so, the board of directors will be appointed by government, but the positions within the authority will be a competitive process.

And we're optimistic that we can have a roadmap which has timelines in that for the public this fall—aiming for, hopefully, Octoberish. So I think if we get this roadmap developed it will outline some timelines in there and we'll have a better understanding of putting the pieces of the puzzle together.

Mr. Altomare: I'd like to ask the minister, not considering outside directives, could he please list any internal targets and mandates set out by the Education Department?

Mr. Cullen: Could you just get the member to clarify his question, please.

Mr. Altomare: Just—oh, sorry—thank you, Mr. Chair. Just any areas around even something like curriculum and instruction, were there any targets that were set, and if they were actually met, or what kind of process they're in, how are they progressing.

Mr. Cullen: Yes, so the member refers—specifically for curriculum and instruction, I don't think there's any targets set at this point in time.

Obviously, in terms of the curriculum development, we're going to be—we're asking for people to become engaged in an overall curriculum development—basically, to set the curriculum framework. I'm hoping to have those members appointed fairly soon on that front.

And, obviously, curriculum development and detail is a time-consuming process. There's a lot of components to the curriculum development, and that is an ongoing process. So we're at different levels in different areas. You know, we just put together some mental health curriculum that we're hoping to roll out fairly soon; think there has been some development and work done on some of the math curriculum, which we're hoping to make sure we roll out fairly soon as well.

* (15:20)

But I think a key component to quickening going forward will be this committee that we appoint to look at the overall framework of where we're going. And it has been 25 years since we've had a broad look at curriculum development.

So we want to make sure we get the framework correct. I'm hoping to have that rolled out over the course of the next two years, and at the same time, we'll be working on curriculum as it relates to the specific areas, whether it be the science, maths, reading, all those other areas as well. And we'll have to determine which ones we tackle first and which ones we can maybe wait 'til a later time.

So, hopefully that addresses the member's questions.

Mr. Altomare: I'd like to move onto the closing—the decision to close schools this particular week, and how that came about.

Can the minister explain what type of data information is readily tracked by public health when it comes to cases and transmission of COVID in schools?

Mr. Cullen: I appreciate this question.

Just let me say, from the outset, if I may, you know, our goal was to keep as many students at every level in classrooms. I think that's been the wish of educators, and it's certainly been our wish as well. I think we all realize that students learn better when they're face-to-face without any other disruptions and whatever—however they feel remote learning happens at home. So, that's been our goal from the outset and, again, with safety in mind.

So, we do have a dashboard that is public. It's on the website. We, as the department, will input the numbers, in terms of cases, that we receive from public health, and we will input those numbers on the dashboard. And the dashboard is specific to schools, so there will be—the number of cases in each school will be on that particular dashboard.

So, that dashboard is updated twice a week, and public health obviously are in close contact with schools for—that do have cases. They are responsible for the contact tracing there. They also report any specific situations that may be unique to schools, as well.

So, that's an effective monitoring tool for us and for public health to track trends, and obviously that's something we've been watching closely since day 1 of the pandemic.

I will say we saw a significant spike in cases I'll say associating with schools as of May 6th: there was a 67 per cent increase in student cases in a matter of a few days. And again, at that point in time we had 574 cases, and those cases are over a two-week period.

So, the numbers that you see on the dashboard are reflective of the total cases with—over those two-week periods. So, that's something that public health watches quite closely.

So, a very significant uptake, in terms of 67 per cent increase in a matter of a few days, over that two-week period, so that certainly raised alarms with public health. So, our public health [*inaudible*] have a closer evaluation of areas with respect to cases

associated with schools. I think up 'til that point, you know, there wasn't too much in the way of community transmission and they felt there was very little transmission in schools.

And the public health decided—I guess the last Friday, that there would be additional public health orders for the general population and then reflected on the increase in cases that appear to be associated with schools, the decision was made that we should go to remote learning in Winnipeg and Brandon, based on those numbers. So that was a decision that was reached over the weekend.

We do have, I guess that's approximately 300 schools in Winnipeg impacted, a little more than 20 in Brandon impacted, and we have I think four or five schools outside of those two regions impacted and going to remote learning. And we did change the—or I shouldn't say change but the criteria for going to 'emert'—remote learning in those areas outside of Winnipeg and Brandon is, in essence, two cases across two different cohorts. So that's I think the threshold where public health would engage in those schools and it—remote learning.

So it really was a reflection of a real quick and rapid spike in the number of cases associated with schools—

Mr. Chairperson: The time for that particular question is over.

Mr. Altomare: Can the minister let us know when were these concerns first raised by public health or by Dr. Roussin and how quickly did you mobilize or get this information out to school divisions?

Mr. Cullen: There was a couple of questions in there that I'd like to address.

So, first of all, in terms of on the timing and the numbers, it was actually late last week where this—these numbers became available or when we saw the spike, actually, in the cases associated with schools. So, it was late last week when we—when public health flagged that. There was a discussion about that over the weekend and, as you know, the issue was made public on Sunday.

I would say to the member that that decision clearly was not taken lightly. We looked at various options with public health, in terms of trying to protect Manitobans, and I would say that this decision went hand in hand with the new public health orders that came out on the Friday.

* (15:30)

So, clearly we're trying to eliminate, as much as possible, community transmission. And we just felt that schools were getting to be an integral part of that community transmission. And the sooner we could alleviate those potential concerns, the better. So that's why the decision was made over the weekend. It was announced to the public Sunday. And obviously, we're into that situation as of yesterday.

The other part of the question I want to address is in terms of the relationships that government has had with schoolboards and superintendents. And that's been an ongoing relationship throughout COVID. We've all been trying to work hand in hand through this pandemic. And the pandemic has, obviously, been evolving as we go, and we have to be mindful of the cases, where they're occurring and how transmission is happening.

So we, as government, have certainly invested money, in terms of our COVID response, in K to 12, and I would also say that by working closely with the school communities, trying to keep them appraised and apprised of where the situations are, where the numbers are and what the future state can hold and, quite frankly, prepare them for the worst, because we don't know what's around the corner, and I think we have to prepare ourselves for new orders.

So, I would say—and those conversations are ongoing. We have weekly meetings with the superintendents, engaging them. It was probably just three weeks ago that Dr. Roussin and I and Deputy Rudy were on a call with about 750 principals, reminding them of the situation and the potential of situations to develop, and that it was as late as last Friday where our senior staff were on the call with superintendents, and had indicated that, you know, the numbers were headed in the wrong direction and, you know, stay tuned, there could be some more changes coming. And then, over the weekend, as you know, the decision was made, so.

So we have, you know, three hundred and—close to 350 schools impacted that are remote learning. We still have close to 500 schools that are under COVID-normal, if that's the right term to use. So it's sort of business as COVID-normal within almost 500 schools. So, you know, we're optimistic that we can keep those schools open, but clearly—I know I hear counts in a school just last night that I think is probably closed today as a result of some cases that have developed.

So the Prairie regions communities are still getting impacted by transmission and COVID. And, you

know, I think it's—we have to take these reminders to remind people that we are not out of the woods here yet. Continue to be diligent and vigilant and do everything we can and make sure we keep adhering to public health protocols and all those safe practices, because that's what's going to get us through this.

And now that we're down to age 18 in vaccines, let's get people vaccinated and, hopefully, as you said, by June 1st, some optimism that we can get these students—

Mr. Chairperson: The minister's time has expired for that question.

The next question, Mr. Altomare.

Mr. Altomare: We do know about the 67 per cent increase of student cases over the week, from May 3rd to 7th.

Would you be able to provide the number of student cases each week in Winnipeg and Brandon by school since March 1st?

Mr. Cullen: I don't have those specific numbers available to me today. We would have to go to public health to obtain those numbers. So that's something that I can't get for you right away, because we will have to track that down through Public Health.

Mr. Altomare: So you're committing to that undertaking, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Cullen: Yes. We will undertake that. Obviously, you're looking at the trends, since we said March 1st, so we will do that.

Certainly, we noticed quite a dramatic spike in Winnipeg, and I know the trend is—I think, was just a little later in Brandon, but there's certainly that pretty significant uptick in cases in Brandon there at that same time period.

I actually had a conference call with the Brandon Teachers' Association. I think was on the Thursday—last Thursday—and they'd indicated to me, too, that they had concerns about an increase just over the last few days when I spoke to them, and that was reflected in the case count in Brandon as well.

Mr. Altomare: With schools moving to remote learning—and we know that in question period we asked about job security of educational assistants—has there been a direction that's come from the government or from the department to reduce this particular workforce in numbers in order to save money?

Mr. Cullen: I do appreciate a chance to follow up on this specific line of questioning.

We're in a different dynamic now as compared to the last time, as the last time we completely closed schools down and school boards. I think we, as a government or as a department, has just asked school boards to be mindful of expenses, because we really didn't know what we were in for, quite frankly. So I think then it was maybe that—that was general direction last time that schools were closed.

This time, a little different situation. We had not said anything to school divisions about staffing; clearly they are taking that initiative on their own. And I'll say where it is different this year, this May process that we're in: we are mindful of the critical service workers that are out in the community, and if they have an opportunity or are having trouble finding care for their children, we are asking schools to make allowances for those particular students of critical-service workers. So that's one aspect of it.

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The other aspect, of course, is the special needs students. I recognize some parents will want to keep their special needs students at home, that is certainly their undertaking. But if they feel that it's better for those particular students to be in the classroom, then we want to make sure those resources are supplied by the school.

So we're in a little different dynamic this time than we were last time. We were just allowing school boards, in this case, to make those decisions on staffing; no recommendations or any other messaging has been sent to schoolboards or to schools in regard to staffing.

I will say too, if I may, Mr. Chair, you know, as part of our \$185-million restart fund that we'd set aside in last year's budget, we spent over \$50 million of that for additional staffing. You know, we recognized the need for additional staffing, and I believe we were at about 2,500 additional positions across the province, including substitutes.

So we certainly invested extra money in there during this pandemic time recognizing that resources—staffing resources were going to be a challenge, and so the school boards took us up on that offer to the tune of over \$50 million.

Mr. Altomare: I'm glad the minister brought up that \$185 million, because that's where we're going to go next.

The Safe Schools Fund is a combined \$185 million this current school year, \$100 million of which was made up of savings and new money, then the \$85 million from the federal government.

Could the minister please provide a detailed breakdown on how much of that money has been spent to date on ventilation upgrades in school?

Mr. Cullen: I appreciate that line of questioning.

So, there's a number of categories where we were investing this \$185 million from last year's budget allocation. We anticipate by the end of this school year, end of June, that we will have spent somewhere in the neighbourhood between 160 and 170 million dollars. So, again, a number of categories including the category I talked about in terms of staffing.

I can give you—and these are a little bit out of date but it's—this is the end-of-March numbers that I have. So, I referenced the \$50 million for staffing. There's \$22 million for learning and technology, so these would be upgrades to laptops and other, you know, in-classroom technology. We have a category for \$16 million for health and safety. Another category of \$6 million for personal protective equipment. And then another \$10 million for other expenditures. So, those were the amounts that have been turned over to—or to school boards as of March 31st.

So, the second part of your question: have I keyed in on the \$16 million for health and safety? That certainly is a fairly broad category.

I will say that school boards did respond to recommendations from public health in terms of ventilation. So, I know there was some direction given about circulating air, having windows open, making sure you're cleaning your filters and those sort of things. So, those sort of items would be—would fall under that \$16 million, health and safety. I won't say that, you know, all of that money would be used for certainly the intent of the question you raised, but that certainly would be the broad category.

And I'll go back to my other response previously on the capital side where that capital budget would have—saw allocations for the heating and ventilation component, and that's something that's done, I would say, probably on a regular basis but also with a mind to if it was going to improve the situation for COVID.

So that's something that the folks we'd be working with, the school divisions and Central Services who are responsible for the capital budget. So while I know there was some projects completed over there on the

capital side, that would not be reflected in the \$180-million restart program. So, hopefully that helps on that front.

And I guess while we're here, I will mention that I think the member will appreciate this. Our government budget year is April 1st, so it does not coincide with the school year. So we—this year's budget—the '21-22 budget—we recognize there's going to be some carry-over from that 185 figure. So, we've taken a figure there and we're carrying some of that over into this year. And this year we're allocating a total of \$160 million for COVID response in K to 12. So a portion of that 160 will be a carry-over from last year's 185, but a big percentage of that will be new money.

And the reality is we don't know what COVID is going to look like come September of this year. So, we're obviously beginning the planning with school boards in terms of what our options may look like because we'll have to be quite mindful; there could be a lot of different scenarios in front of us come September. So, we want to make sure that school boards will be prepared as much as possible for the different scenarios they may—

* (15:50)

Mr. Chairperson: The time has expired.

Mr. Altomare: I just want to continue down this path, because we know that as—we want our kids back in school in June and we know that we'll be starting up again in the fall, and we know that some of our buildings, especially the newer ones in Winnipeg and Brandon, are air-conditioned and require these HVAC systems to performing at their highest level.

Is there a plan going forward to ensure that these environments that I've just described will remain safe for kids so that we can keep kids in school?

Mr. Cullen: Yes, I appreciate the line of questioning, and I don't think we're—we've got the concrete science around ventilation in public facilities such as schools, you know, the impact it's going to have on COVID and reducing transmission.

Clearly, we will take advice from the experts on that front and make sure that we're matching up what we're doing with the evidence that is out there. I will say, you know, we do have a five-year capital plan. School boards will provide government with their priorities, in terms of which projects they want to be completed. The government will then take those lists of priorities and determine which of those projects

should be completed and when, in terms of that five-year projection.

So, that's how the system is designed. And as I said before, we were fortunate in our last year's capital project program that we were actually under budget when it came—when the tenders came in. So, we were able to reallocate \$40 million. So we were able to complete an additional number of projects to the tune of \$40 million, and I do know some of those projects were completed in regard to the heating and ventilation systems in a number of schools.

So, that's a bit of a recap of where we are in terms of the heating and ventilation systems. I do know there's a desire to upgrade some of the older schools with air conditioning and provide those resources as well. So, I know that's top-of-mind for the folks over at Central Services.

Mr. Altomare: Knowing that now we have this time of remote learning for our kids and we know that the reason we went to remote learning was because of transmission occurring not only in the community but also happening in some of our schools, how often are you meeting or planning to meet with public health to receive data and modelling going forward?

Are there plans in place where you're meeting, or is this just public health coming to you when they see a spike?

Mr. Cullen: Just a few points to make on this particular question.

I will say we do have a responsive planning team. So that's, again, that's senior leadership here, deputy ADM level, senior public health officials on that team. And they meet—in fact, just yesterday with MTS, the superintendents association and the school boards association and the independent schools association as well. So I know there have been somewhat regular meetings in the past, but clearly we will be meeting with them very regularly going forward, especially over the next three-week period.

The Department of Education meets daily with senior public health officials, so we're monitoring the situation closely. If there's any data that we do require, we can request it of public health, and public health are usually pretty responsive to get that information to us. As I said, the dashboard data is provided to us twice a week and it's department staff that make revisions to our dashboard and that particular website.

We also do have regular meetings with some of our stakeholders, like MTS, as well. So—and I will say,

additionally, we do meet with our superintendent, secretary-treasurers at least once a week and we will certainly continue that over the course of the next few weeks and probably 'til the end of the school year.

I will say, as well, it will be the superintendents—in some cases, principals are engaged with their local public health officials as well. So there is that direct contact at the school level as well. So they do have hands-on, you know, specific situations that may be unique to each individual school.

So, obviously, a lot of people, lots of communication and, clearly, communication will be important as we go forward. And I would say public health—view education is obviously a key component of the overall strategy going forward as it pertains to public health orders.

And we have, you know, 200,000 kids in the system, so that's a very high percentage of our population in Manitoba. So we have to be mindful of their safety and obviously the staff's safety as well.

So, happy to see that public health is on board in these discussions and really take the safety of these students very safely. And we will be having ongoing daily conversations with senior public health officials.

Mr. Altomare: Just want to seek a little more clarification on that 67 per cent spike in transmissions in schools. During which period did this spike occur, and what were the thresholds established by public health or Manitoba education?

* (16:00)

Mr. Cullen: Actually, just as we're sitting here we're getting the update on this week's numbers, so hopefully we can provide you that as well.

So, the 67 per cent increase was week over week, so that—and we had 574 cases reported on May 6th. So again, these are students and staff. Again, can't say without—unequivocally, of course, that they were associated in schools, but associated with schools, for sure. So that's the number as of May 6th, and actually I guess the number that's being reported today, I guess it's May—the May 11th figure, is 670 cases.

So, I don't have the breakdown between students and staff on that up—most recent number though.

So, hopefully that helps you with that and then we're going to provide the previous data once we get it from public health.

Mr. Altomare: So it sounds like, Mr. Minister, that you were meeting daily with public health prior to the school closures?

Mr. Cullen: Yes, that's correct. Our senior staff were meeting with public health daily. I mean, it's the emails or sometimes face to face or virtual, whatever would allow.

Mr. Altomare: So—thank you, Mr. Chair—just to clarify, you were getting modelling data daily prior to the school closures?

Mr. Cullen: Obviously, public health are tracking data for individual schools across the province, obviously sharing that information with the department; the department are working closely with public health on that.

Clearly, as it pertains to schools, public health noticed an increase in certain areas, specifically in Winnipeg and in Brandon, with that week of—last week, and we listened to their expertise. They're certainly the expertise when it comes to this, and I think their feeling was we're getting more and more community transmission occurring and that is spilling over into the school setting as well.

So, again, we're not saying that these cases were a direct result of students or staff in schools, but these individuals are clearly associated with schools. So, it looks like this trend that we saw in schools, in terms of the escalation in numbers, is similar to what we were seeing in the general public as well.

* (16:10)

So, with the tightening of restrictions for the rest of the population, I believe the recommendation from public health was congruent with that and felt that we had to take steps and measures to reduce that transmission in and around schools as well. So, that's why they made that recommendation to us to close the Winnipeg and Brandon schools.

So, clearly mindful of whatever information they had at large, and the information they had as it pertained to the individual school situations.

Mr. Altomare: So then, a decision to close schools was made on Saturday, May 8th? Is that correct, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Cullen: Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Altomare: Now, I know the plan is to get back to school June 1st—of course, depending upon modelling and community transmission here in Winnipeg and Brandon.

The question I have is, is there a plan to use those rapid tests that Manitoba has to ensure that these learning spaces can get rapid data access, as opposed to waiting days to make decisions, especially because the school year only have 17 days remaining—school days?

Mr. Cullen: Yes, ultimately we'd like to see students return to in-classroom learning. We know they are—hopefully they're at home, learning. I know it's not an ideal situation, the remote learning, but hopefully they are—students are engaged at home in the remote learning process.

You know, we've tried to work diligently to make sure that we have a reasonable system in place. I mean, we've established our remote learning centre, we invested over \$10 million in that and close to 100 staff, I think, on side there. So, hopefully there's—those resources are being utilized. I know there has been a number of educators use that resource and the way it was designed for the situation that we find ourselves in over the next few weeks.

So, in terms of going forward, clearly nothing's off the table. We're trying to look at what scenarios might be in front of us over the next few weeks and what June may look like. I wish we had a crystal ball to give us some insight, but we don't.

So, in view of that, we're looking at various scenarios. We will work closely—and we are working closely with public health and—to see what schooling will look like post-June 1st.

Again, I'm trying to be optimistic that we don't get any more than just a handful of schools outside of the two zones in remote learning as well. So, again, we're trying to provide messaging to staff and students to adhere to the guidelines and be mindful of proper personal safety and hygiene, and we'll continue to deliver that message.

So, clearly, nothing is off the table. We have provided rapid testing to teachers at a few locations previously. I don't think we've had a lot of uptake in that rapid testing, but, again, we'll certainly be consulting with our public health officials when it comes to the potential of using rapid testing as we return to school. So, certainly, that initiative is not off the table.

Mr. Altomare: So, it sounds like you get a school-by-school breakdown of the number of cases. And if so, how often do you get that breakdown?

Mr. Cullen: So, we receive an update twice a week—I think it's Tuesdays and Thursdays—from public health on each of the schools.

We then use—put those numbers on our website, on the dashboard. So any Manitoban could go and have a look at their respective school and see how many cases are associated with the school.

And again, these—because the case is associated with the school does not mean transmission occurred within the school. I think we have to be clear on that.

So, it's really the community transmission that really is a concern for public health officials. For the most part, as you know, over the last several months, schools have been a pretty safe place to do business. And we haven't had too many cases associated with transmission in school.

Obviously, people are mindful, they're playing by the rules. We've established cohorts. We've asked children and kids to—and students to be mindful of those cohorts and stick to those cohorts. Kids have the proper protective equipment when they're in the school zones. Again, they're being watched by teachers to make sure that they're playing by the rules. And so, as a result of that, we have seen very little transmission in schools.

But sometimes I know it's the extracurricular events that take place, and you get—sometimes those cohorts don't always stay as cohorts and there's a possibility for transmission to occur. And I think that's why public health officials—you know, taking pretty serious steps in terms of trying to protect the general population.

But with public health orders and now seeing the rise in cases associated with schools, that something else had to be done here for the short term. So that's why those recommendations came through from public health.

* (16:20)

Mr. Altomare: Going to the COVID money piece again, we know that there was \$100 million set aside by the provincial government of this provincial money; \$52 million of that was broken down in the following ways, and this is according to an internal briefing note that came from you: \$12 million for procurement of masks and PPE; \$32 million for per pupil, max; \$8 million was held back to address serious and urgent health and safety measures over and above school division allocation.

Could the minister explain what would be considered a serious and urgent health and safety measure? For example, school closing to disinfect because of an outbreak—something like that?

Mr. Cullen: Yes. I'm not sure of the date of that particular briefing note, but that sounds like that was an original forecast, so that probably dates back to beginning of the school year, you know, potentially August or September of last year.

So, I believe that was at the time we really weren't sure what we were going to deal with when it came to COVID and COVID expenses. So, obviously, I think we're trying to be as flexible as possible in terms of the different categories, because we really didn't know what we were going to encounter for costs.

So, subsequent to that, I think we developed a system where we do—put specific expenses into specific categories, and we went through those before. I mean, we had the staffing category, which is the \$50 million; we had the learning and technology component, and then we had the health and safety component, which might be a bit of a catch-all for some of those maybe unique situations.

So, we haven't really—I guess we do have a miscellaneous category; we've got \$10 million in other expenditures that we've put into that category. And then again, we've got a personal protective equipment category separate. So, certainly for the major items, we've tried to put those into specific categories, but clearly that was a forecast—probably back prior to the beginning of the school year.

Mr. Altomare: Would the minister undertake to provide a breakdown of how much money was broken up by school division when it came to this \$100 million from the Province?

* (16:30)

Mr. Cullen: So, yes, out of the \$185 million, we did allocate \$76 million to school divisions and independent schools, and that was on a per pupil basis. And we'll send you the news release that shows the allocation per school division. I believe the news release was September 21st last fall.

So that was the initial allocation amount that we'd sent to school divisions. And there was an initial payment made, I believe, in the fall and then there was a second payment based on those allocations in—memory serves, early winter. So, that's the \$76 million out of the 185.

Now, we've set aside about almost \$40 million into a—what we're calling a Safe Restart Contingency Fund. Again, that \$40 million is part of the 185. And the design there was to support any additional and emergency—emerging needs from schools and—both school boards and independent schools. So, we set aside that \$40 million. We're still taking applications for that from the various school boards for their additional costs that they're incurring due to COVID. So that's an ongoing process.

I should say, maybe, while I'm here, we have allocated \$10 million, as well, out of that 185, to go the Remote Learning Support Centre.

Mr. Altomare: Can the minister inform the committee what is the per pupil amount you're informing school divisions is? So, when they apply for this money or they receive this money, what is the per pupil amount that the Department of Education is telling them?

Mr. Cullen: Yes, just to clarify the question, the member's asking me the per—the dollar figure per pupil?

Mr. Altomare: The dollar figure per pupil.

Mr. Cullen: You know, it sounds like a simple question, but we'll have to do a little bit of math, so we'll get someone to sharpen our pencils.

So, let me explain the process to the member. So, we knew we were going to get into a COVID situation, but we really didn't know what we were going to be dealing with, and we really didn't know, and school boards didn't know exactly what their costs were going to be—their additional costs.

So, the department came up with a formula, we'll say. So, having discussions with school boards and trying to determine what the extra expenses could be, you know, whether this be cleaning supplies, whether it be other health and safety issues that we've talked about, whether it be the technical component to it, those sort of things. So, taking all of those potential factors into play, they came up with a number, and that number was the \$76 million. That was the anticipated expense that school boards would incur relative to COVID.

So, took the \$76 million, divide that by the students in each of the respective divisions, and that was the allocation made to the respective division. So it was kind of a little bit of a reverse engineering, if you will.

So, it wasn't coming up with a number per student; it was what's the global potential costs—extra costs that could be incurred by COVID. And then just the allocation of that \$76 million to make it equitable was based on the per student allocation to the respective school divisions. So, that's how it was done.

So, we identified the \$76 million in potential extra costs and then we also set aside \$40 million for contingency costs. So, those are the unknown costs and that's what school boards are now applying for was the—or is the—any potential extra costs over and above their allocation.

So, hopefully that explains the process that the department undertook back, oh boy, I guess that was several months ago, I believe, at the beginning of the school year.

Mr. Altomare: Can the minister provide a breakdown of how much of this provincial and federal money was allocated and provided to private independent schools?

* (16:40)

Mr. Cullen: Yes, so, the independent schools were allocated the same amount per pupil as public schools. So again, it would be based on their respective enrolments.

Mr. Altomare: So, you do know the per pupil amount, then.

If it was—if you're saying that it went the same amount for private and independent schools, then we do know what the number was per pupil. Is that correct?

Mr. Cullen: Yes, I mean, we can do the math. I mean, it's \$76 million divided by 200-and-some-thousand kids. It works out to approximately \$367 per student.

Mr. Altomare: I just want to move on to the FRAME report. The actual—the last actual FRAME report we had was from 2017-18 and right now we're in—you know, getting already into month five of 2021. So we have actuals from three years ago.

When are we going to have an updated FRAME report that's reporting the actual numbers spent in a department?

Mr. Cullen: Yes, so the 2018-2019 FRAME report has been completed, has been audited and I'm told that it will be made public in the very, very near future. And I understand that—also, of course, working on the '19-20 report as well. So the member can look forward to '18-19 report very shortly.

Mr. Altomare: I'm sure the minister can appreciate it's difficult to do Estimates when we're dealing with numbers that are old and not reflective of the current situation. So, I would hope that the department and the minister get on this quickly and provide these numbers so that we can have a more fulsome dialogue about what's going on in the department.

Just going down this road again, can the minister inform us as to how many public teachers there are currently employed by the Province?

Mr. Cullen: I guess the fact is that we, as government, don't employ any teachers in Manitoba. I think we got some teachers that are probably on staff, but—or ex-teachers, I guess, on staff, but other than that, no, we don't employ any teachers directly.

So there's approximately 16,000; I don't know the exact number but MTS might be able to provide a side number, but approximately 16,000 teachers, from what I understand.

Obviously, in terms of the FRAME report, you know I do appreciate that. I like to have up-to-date information as much as anybody. I know we do rely on our school division partners to provide us information, rely on auditing process to take place in each of those school divisions, and then once we compile all that information then—that we have to go through the audit process as well. Unfortunately, all that seems to take longer than you and I would like, but I will endeavour to get that document public and a copy over to you as soon as possible.

* (16:50)

Mr. Altomare: Does the minister know how many clinicians work or are part-work here in Manitoba?

Mr. Cullen: In 2019-2020, it was 500 clinicians working in school divisions across the province.

Mr. Altomare: What is the final estimated enrolment number for students? I know that there was a number taken on September 30th.

And, because of COVID, have we been tracking this number monthly? Or is—were we just using that number that was back at September 30?

Mr. Cullen: So, as of September 30th, 2020, we have a total of 205,662 students. So that's total students. That's public school, home school, and all independent schools as well. The public school figure is 181,078.

Mr. Altomare: Can the minister provide the number of students that are being home-schooled as of—that—the latest number that you have?

Mr. Cullen: Sure, I'll give the member the figure for home-schooling as of September 30th of this past year as 8,027 students as of September 30th.

That—just for the member's information, that's an increase of 4,038 from the previous year, so that's 2,019, I guess, yes. So, obviously, those numbers are fluctuating somewhat, you know. Students are coming and going from the home-school situation, so obviously we'll get some feedback on that.

And I know the clock is ticking here, but maybe tomorrow we can have a little discussion about the—how we—what we did for schoolboards in view of the home-schooling. We did some adjustments to the formula, so we didn't want to penalize any school divisions because of this home-schooling situation.

So there was quite a bit of work done on that front to make sure that we didn't, you know, penalize any schoolboards funding-wise because parents would take this home-schooling option. So we were cognizant of that going in and we made the adjustments so that we didn't penalize any school division on the funding side of things.

So obviously we recognize the—that situation and it is a fluid situation and it's going to probably continue to evolve, but hopefully we can go back to something closer to normal in the near future and we'll see what September looks like this year.

Mr. Altomare: Did the Department of Ed have to hire more human resources to deal with the increase in home-school demands on the department—

Mr. Chairperson: Order. The time being 5 p.m., I'm interrupting the proceedings. The Committee of Supply will resume sitting tomorrow morning at 10 a.m.

This committee is in recess.

CHAMBER

* (14:40)

HEALTH AND SENIORS CARE

Mr. Chairperson (Doyle Pivniuk): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This section of the Committee of Supply is now—consider the Estimates for the Department of Health and Seniors Care.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Heather Stefanson (Minister of Health and Seniors Care): I do, Mr. Chair. Thank you very much.

And before I begin, I want to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Brent Roussin, as well as my congratulations on his receiving the Physician of the Year Award from Doctors Manitoba.

I'd also like to thank Dr. Jazz Atwal, Dr. Joss Reimer and Johanu Botha and the many leaders and members of Manitoba's COVID-19 response team, Manitoba's Vaccine Implementation Task Force and the First Nations pandemic response co-ordination team. Thank you all for your incredible leadership, your guidance, that your dedication, your commitment and compassion you have shown your fellow Manitobans during the pandemic.

To our doctors, nurses, health-care aides, pharmacists and countless other health-care professionals, we know this has been one of the most difficult years of your career and we thank you for everything that you have done. Manitobans are truly grateful for your heroic efforts you have displayed and the remarkable courage and perseverance that you have shown in the face of incredible challenges.

A special thank you to Deputy Minister Karen Herd and our assistant deputy ministers and the departmental staff of Manitoba Health and Seniors Care. Manitobans certainly recognize and appreciate the hard work and long hours you have put in to keep Manitobans safe this year, so thank you to the staff.

I also want to thank my own staff, both political and my front office staff. Day in and day out, when I arrive and when I leave, in the early mornings and the late evenings, they're here to help serve all Manitobans, and I just want to thank them for everything that they have done.

I'd also like to take some time to put on the record some of the work being done by this government to help fight COVID-19 and to protect—and to help protect Manitobans in the largest vaccination campaign ever seen in Manitoba history.

As of today, we have administered 605,555 doses in Manitoba, representing 48.1 per cent of our population over the age of 18. Expanded—we have expanded the vaccine eligibility to all Manitobans age 18 and older. Fourteen pop-up clinics are running this week, vaccinating Manitobans closer to their

home communities, with dozens of clinics running each month.

We've introduced Manitoba's paid sick leave program, providing direct financial assistance to Manitobans having to take time off work due to COVID-19. Seven vaccination supersites are now up and running, with two in Winnipeg and a site in Morden, Brandon, Selkirk, Thompson and Dauphin, and soon to be Gimli as well. Working at these sites are over 3,000 staff helping vaccinate thousands of Manitobans every day of the week.

Initially—we initially prioritized those most at risk in our province for vaccination: our health-care employees, Indigenous people, personal-care home residents, police officers and first responders. We also focused on geographic areas of concern. In Winnipeg, we focused these areas in the area of River East South, St. Vital North, Seven Oaks East, Inkster West, Fort Garry South, Point Douglas North, Downtown West, Downtown East, Inkster East, Point Douglas South, Seven Oaks West and in the areas of the Interlake Eastern Regional Health Authority, Powerview, Pine Falls. In Brandon, Brandon East End and Brandon Downtown and all those living or working in the Northern Regional Health Authority.

*(14:50)

We partnered with almost 500 doctors' offices and pharmacies to vaccinate Manitobans in their communities. We partnered with five urban Indigenous community organizations in Manitoba to create Indigenous-led immunization clinics—three of which are open in Winnipeg, Brandon and Portage—to help vaccinate at-risk urban populations, as well as our homeless populations.

Our focused immunization teams have visited every personal-care home in Manitoba to vaccinate 96 per cent of residents.

We've implemented the Fast Pass pilot program which offers dedicated asymptomatic testing to teachers, educational support staff, licensed child-care centres, nursery schools and family group child-care homes.

We partnered with North Dakota to ensure that up to 4,000 essential truck drivers will be vaccinated, allowing Manitoba's economy to keep moving.

We partnered with Manitoba businesses and critical services to launch a COVID-19 rapid testing screening program that helps limit the spread of COVID-19 through early detection and screening.

We've frozen the Pharmacare deductible to help provide COVID relief to Manitobans.

We're working collaboratively with 63 First Nations and 50 Northern Affairs communities in partnership with the Manitoba First Nations COVID-19 Pandemic Response Coordination Team.

We've created a team to implement all 17 recommendations of the Stevenson report to strengthen the long-term-care sector in Manitoba.

This is only a brief snapshot of the work being done, but we recognize that there is still more work to be done.

On behalf of the Department of Health and Seniors Care, I am very pleased to present the financial Estimates for the 2021-22 fiscal year. In doing so, I commit to Manitobans that through this budget, we will continue to deliver high-quality health care in an innovative and sustainable manner. We will continue to deliver safe and accessible services and continue to maximize health outcomes for Manitobans at large.

As the new supplement describes, we will continue to strive for optimal performance in the department and the health system with dedicated focus on results in the areas of improving access, improving health-service experience, improving patient safety, ensuring affordability and health-system spending.

The proposed 2021-22 Health budget in core represents the largest investment in health care in our history, just over \$6 billion as it resides today.

More specifically, the newly reconfigured Department of Health and Seniors Care was created on January 2021—in January, sorry, 2021, and now reflects a 2021-22 expenditure in core of 6 billion, 49 million dollars and 713.75 FTEs. This represents an \$81-million increase from the restated '20-21 budget, or a 1.4 per cent increase. In terms of summary, the 2021 health sector summary budget is set at \$6.62 billion, representing an overall increase of 2.3 per cent for Health and Seniors Care.

I should note as well that, on the topic of COVID-19, that our government has proactively budgeted for and set aside amounts in respect of pressures from COVID-19. The onset of this international pandemic represents an exceptional challenge to Manitobans, and therefore an exceptional amount of funds has been earmarked for the health sector response.

Our government has established an amount of \$1.18 billion in 2021-22 for COVID-19 response and other contingencies as an internal service adjustment within enabling appropriations for which Health and Seniors Care will have access.

The use of this funding has and will include some of the following: an increase in Manitoba's lab-testing capacity for both symptomatic and asymptomatic cases in laboratory and other select environments; bolstering Manitoba's surveillance and contact-tracing capacity to be able to track and trace the spread of the pandemic and be able to communicate results in a timely manner; procurement of personal protective equipment to help keep our health-care workers safe in the course of care; establishment and operationalization of COVID visitation shelters allowing for families and residents of personal-care homes to visit in a safe and socially distanced manner; expansion of inpatient capacity including, but not limited to, critical care where we project additional needs will present in the weeks and months to come; and last but not least, the establishment of both supersite and pop-up site locations across Manitoba for the timely delivery of COVID-19 vaccinations.

Budget 2021 includes a number of key investments and enhancements in the delivery of health services. I'll now take a few minutes to describe these investments.

Manitoba Health and Seniors Care takes the fiscal imperative of this government very seriously. This means weighing carefully our options that maximize patient outcomes and quality of care along with protecting the sustainability of the health-care system—

Mr. Chairperson: The minister's time is—has expired. Thanks for—does—I want to thank the minister for her comments.

Does the official opposition critic have any opening comments?

MLA Uzoma Asagwara (Union Station): I'd like to start my comments today echoing and restating some of the thanks that the minister has already put on the record.

I'd like to thank Dr. Roussin, Dr. Reimer, Dr. Atwal, Lanette Siragusa, Dr. Anderson and all of the health leaders and expertise that have helped guide us throughout this pandemic and who have truly shown up consistently and been very visible and vocal in a way that I know alleviates many of the anxieties that folks in our communities are facing. Their health leadership is undeniably a huge source of us being

able to get through this pandemic, you know, as well as we possibly can and we thank them for their ongoing efforts.

I'd like to specifically acknowledge and thank the efforts of the First Nations pandemic response team, the vaccination task force as well, civil servants who've all been contributing throughout this pandemic and working like never before to help us navigate this global pandemic.

I'd like to thank health-care workers across the board for their ongoing efforts in the midst of increasing stressors in this third wave, continuing to show up day in and day out for Manitobans.

And I'd like to thank those working in community health who often have filled the gaps in health care where folks may've otherwise not had their health-care needs met in what have been very tumultuous and, in moments, uncertain times during this pandemic.

You know, I recognize that yesterday was a significant day for Manitobans where we did see, unfortunately, 1,000 COVID-related deaths and I'd like to restate my condolences on behalf of our caucus to all of those families who are dealing with the loss of loved ones. And today we see a new record established around COVID cases: 560 cases today.

Certainly, you know, the pandemic has been challenging and these new numbers are challenging, absolutely, but certainly the pandemic has allowed us to also see some of the best of Manitoba, many folks showing so much resiliency and care and creativity and compassion for their fellow Manitobans. It's incredible to see the way folks have rallied around one another, around their neighbours, their loved ones, their friends and even complete strangers.

The reality is that COVID-19 has changed our province; it's changed our country, and it's changed our world. It's laid bare the flaws in our society as well and our challenges in taking collective, progressive and necessary action. It's also exposed challenges within our health-care system. That is especially true here in Manitoba where the last few years, five years of cutbacks under this Conservative government and consolidation left Manitoba particularly unprepared for this pandemic.

Our front lines in this battle have taken heroic steps, heroic steps in fighting this pandemic. It's nurse appreciation week this week; it's also allied health professionals week. And we owe nurses and all health-care professionals, allied health professionals

so much thanks. We owe them so much more than that as they've faced down this virus from beginning to this point and moving forward.

Those folks need our—a partner in government that matches their commitment. You know, unfortunately, instead, in the years leading up to this public health emergency, capacity was cut in our health system; critical care was cut, nurses were fired, emergency rooms consolidated. Right at the beginning of this pandemic as we're all aware now, there were less intensive-care beds in Winnipeg than there were in 2017.

*(15:00)

And the positions that staff in intensive-care units—the staff positions, rather, in intensive-care units have never actually been adequately or properly staffed up. We've been hearing a lot recently from the Minister of Health about positions that will be staffed up; however, unfortunately, the intensive-care units have never actually been adequately staffed up over the past few years, and that put our critical-care units at a huge disadvantage when it comes to fighting this terrible virus.

I wish I could tell this House that COVID-19 was the only challenge facing our health-care system, but I think I've already made it abundantly clear that, unfortunately, that's just not the case.

There are several other issues that face us and that we're dealing with: rural and northern health care continues to face real challenges. The minister very recently closed the Altona emergency room. I've heard from a number of folks in that community, their concerns around that and the detrimental impacts that's having.

And facilities across Manitoba have nurse vacancy rates of over 20 per cent and even more than that, in some cases.

In addition to all of these concerns that I've already laid out, my colleague, the honourable member for Point Douglas (Mrs. Smith), will spend some time inquiring of the government regarding the very, very serious addictions crisis that we're facing in this province—crisis of unmet mental health needs; a crisis of unaddressed and unmet childhood trauma-based needs—all areas of concerns, and the fact that the addiction support the government has put forward are wholly inadequate. They're just completely inadequate to deal with the crisis that's at hand. You can't call it a problem at hand; it's truly a full-fledged crisis that we're seeing.

So, lastly, I'd like to thank all of the staff here in the Legislature who have really done incredibly exceptional work—they do that on a regular basis, but certainly throughout this pandemic—in making sure that we can still continue to do our jobs and bring these issues forward and, you know, represent our constituents.

The folks who are supporting today's proceedings are also facing their own challenges in this pandemic and have continued day in and day out to show up and be kind and be energetic and be supportive, and it's just a testament to the quality of character of the folks who work here and their commitment to Manitobans. So I want to express my thanks, especially to them as well. I'll just leave my remarks there.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the critic for the official opposition for those remarks.

Under the Manitoba practice, debate of the minister's salary is the last item considered in the department of the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall now refer consideration for line number 21.1(a) contained in resolution 21.1.

At this time, we invite ministerial and opposition staff to enter the Chamber or their office.

Could the minister and—introduce the staff in attendance?

Mrs. Stefanson: I have with me today Karen Herd, my deputy minister, as well as Dan Skwarchuk, who is the assistant deputy minister responsible for administration and finance.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the minister for introducing their—her staff.

Does the critic have a staff member you want to introduce?

An Honourable Member: I do. I have with me today—

Mr. Chairperson: The member for Union Station—sorry.

MLA Asagwara: Thank you. I have with me today staff member Chris Sanderson.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay. Thank you.

Does the committee want to proceed through the Estimates of this—*[interjection]*—yes?

Mrs. Stefanson: Pardon me, Mr. Chair. I'm just having some difficulties hearing you. I've got everything up to max on my—

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, just one second, I'll move my mic—

Mrs. Stefanson: Oh, that's better.

Mr. Chairperson: Is that better? Okay. Plus I have a mask on. Okay. Can you hear me better? Okay?

Does the committee want to proceed with—through the Estimates of this department chronologically or through a global discussion? Global? Is it approved of the minister's—agreed to the whole committee as globally? *[Agreed]*

An Honourable Member: Yes, I don't have a problem with that, Mr. Chair—

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable minister. Sorry.

Mrs. Stefanson: Oh, sorry. You have to acknowledge me, I guess?

Mr. Chairperson: Yes.

Mrs. Stefanson: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

And yes, I don't have a problem with going globally. I think—and I will speak to the member maybe after—if we could co-ordinate just on some of the topics that we might be looking at on a daily basis, that might be helpful from a staffing standpoint. So I'm wondering if they are open for that approach.

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, that's—we'll go globally, but under the understanding that—making sure that you have the right staff each day based on the critic, okay? Is that agreed for the committee? *[Agreed]*

But thank you. It's agreed that the question for the department will be—proceed on a global manner based on the—on a day-by-day basis, with all resolutions to be passed once questioning has been concluded.

The floor is open for questions.

MLA Asagwara: I'd like to ask the minister some questions around labs. And I'm glad that the minister did articulate in her opening comments about some budget funding that would be allocated toward increasing lab testing capacity.

So I'm wondering if the minister can share with me how much of the current COVID-19 PCR testing is being done through Cadham labs and how much is being done through Dynacare?

Mr. Chairperson: I just want to make sure that when we do these questions—the minister, if you can just put up your hand when you're ready to answer the question so that I can identify you then, after.

* (15:10)

Mrs. Stefanson: I just want to thank the member for the question. So there's three areas who do testing in labs in Manitoba; so we used Cadham labs, Shared Health also does some testing as well as our community partner, Dynacare.

So originally we obviously started out, when COVID started, to use—you know—current capacity that we have within our system and that we run and manage; and so that would be Cadham and then obviously Shared Health. It was—you know—obviously very quickly we needed to increase capacity so we looked to increase that capacity further by reaching out to our community lab partner, Dynacare.

So it's roughly around 50-50 in terms of what is managed sort of internally, versus the utilization of our community lab partner as well. But, we'll see. Just even, as of today, where we had a record number of—the number of tests that were administered in the province, of over 4,700, you could see that we just simply would not have the capacity to do all of that internally. And it's obviously very important that we get the lab tests done and the results out to those individuals.

So we just want to thank, obviously, everyone working in Cadham and in Shared Health for all the work that they do, and also to our community lab partners in Dynacare.

MLA Asagwara: Thank you, Minister, for that answer.

Can the minister share if PCR tests are being done through Dynacare in Winnipeg? Or are some or all of them being shipped out of province, rather, for processing?

Mrs. Stefanson: Again, I thank the member for the question.

And, of course, you know, as many PCR tests that we can get done in the province of Manitoba will, and through our partners that does take place from time to time. It's obviously the most important thing, that we get the tests completed as quickly as possible to get those results back to those individuals so we can start our contact tracing and so on.

And so from time to time—you know—our community lab partner will—you know—administer some of those PCR tests through other labs outside of Manitoba, but that's just to ensure that they can deliver on a most efficient and effective way for citizens here,

that they get—that they're able to get the results on a more expedited fashion.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that answer.

I'm wondering if the minister can provide some clarity on that percentage. So I know she said from time to time, but do you—does the minister have information concretely in terms of what percentage are therefore being done through Dynacare in Winnipeg versus the ones that are being shipped out of province for processing?

Mrs. Stefanson: Again, I thank the member for the question.

And I think it very much varies from time to time as to how much is being administered here versus out of province. I will say in the initial stages—I'm told that initially, as things started to ramp up in terms of the number of testing that—number of tests that were administered at the beginning, sort of, days of the pandemic, more were going outside of province, And then, you know, sort of, as we got through this, as our community partner started to increase equipment and so on in the province of Manitoba, that has increased steadily.

And so it has varied over time, but there is, sort of, more taking place locally now than maybe was originally in some of the, you know, the higher volume days that took place in the early days of the pandemic.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that clarification.

It's interesting, because I think what the minister's identified is that as Dynacare increased their capacity as a lab, they less and less so needed to have tests processed out of province. They were able to actually do that locally in Winnipeg.

And so that does lead me to wonder why capacity has not been ramped up at the Cadham labs in order for them to do this testing. If we can see that Dynacare increasing their capacity has led to, you know, these tests being processed here, why was capacity not ramped up at Cadham labs to do this very testing?
[interjection]

Mr. Chairperson: Honourable minister.

Mrs. Stefanson: Thank the member for the question. No, I don't want to leave the member with the—with that information, because it wouldn't be accurate. There has been an increase, significantly, in the number of lab tests that were done at Cadham as well.

So that wouldn't be accurate in terms of the way the member put it. So I just want to make sure that we correct that.

I do want to just say as well and thank our Cadham team for the incredible work that they do. I know that they've been recognized with, I think it was a medal of excellence or whatnot from Doctors Manitoba really recognizing the incredible work that the Cadham team does. And so I would be remiss not to also mention that and thank them for everything they do and congratulate them for the incredible work that they've done.

MLA Asagwara: Thank the minister.

I would echo the minister's sentiments about Cadham labs. That's certainly an important acknowledgement of how hard they've been working and what they've been able to do during this pandemic.

So I do kind of have another question around capacity here, specifically around Cadham. We do know that recently, variant testing—so variants of concern, testing specifically for those—were outsourced to Dynacare. So not just the PCR tests, but the variants of concern are being processed via that contract, which we don't have details around, with Dynacare.

So I'm wondering, again, looking at capacity—especially long term, the minister has identified that they are going to be allocating some of that \$1.18 billion specific to addressing needs more long term. Could capacity not be enhanced at Cadham to be able to do some of this? Again, referencing the fact that they've now outsourced variant testing to Dynacare.

* (15:20)

Mrs. Stefanson: I just thank the member—thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank the member for the question again.

I think it's important to know and understand that various measures have taken place over the course of the last number of months to increase the capacity at Cadham labs and also, not just for the regular testing, but also for the variants of concern as well. And so we'll continue to find ways to expand the capacity as well and that's certainly all a part of the plan.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that answer.

So the minister has kind of touched on something that I think is really important to clarify in terms of what the plans are for Cadham labs. The minister has

just said that work is being done to enhance their capacity at Cadham, including for testing for variants of concern; that's a good thing.

Can the minister expand and sort of articulate very clearly what the plan actually is for Cadham labs? Is the government considering divesting its labs, divesting from Cadham labs in any or all capacity? Or is the minister considering forms of a public-private partnership?

Mrs. Stefanson: I want to thank the member for the question.

And certainly, as is the case all across the country and other provinces, there's always going to be a need for a public health lab, so that is not changing here. What we are seeing is—and was recommended that we move and consolidate some of our lab capacity under Shared Health. So it's really just more of a co-ordination effort. There will always be that need for a public health lab. So that is not changing.

MLA Asagwara: I suppose I'm wondering if the minister could expand, then, in terms of what's going on with the private partnership. Certainly, I don't think you'd find very many people at all who would disagree with the fact that we should have public labs; we need that.

Certainly with some of the changes that've happened in the last few years, we've actually seen with the shift in diagnostics and the consolidation of labs and access to labs, that it—many folks and communities have had a challenging time accessing what they need.

Certainly this pandemic has exposed the realities of what happens when some of those choices are made: seniors waiting in line for tests for hours and hours and hours; situations where parents are putting their children, who are already toileted, having to put them in diapers because they're waiting so long that they can't leave to go use the washroom; you know, other challenges with folks accessing labs just for general blood work and things of this nature. I'm sure the minister's aware, because we've written to the minister's office on these issues, as I know many Manitobans have.

And so, specifically, can the minister outline what the actual plan is for Cadham lab? It's one thing to say we know there needs to be public labs and diagnostics; it's another thing to be able to outline what the plan is for Cadham labs, which I'm sure the minister and the minister's office, they're making plans around, you know, throughout and beyond this pandemic.

So can the minister provide some clarity around what the actual plan is for Cadham lab?

And also the other part of my question that wasn't answered previously: you know, is the minister considering forms of public-private partnership and what's that going to look like?

Mrs. Stefanson: I thank the member for the question.

And, you know, we've already started to increase capacity at Cadham labs and we will continue to do so, and that's where some of these monies will be focused. So that is the plan for Cadham labs, is to increase the capacity.

MLA Asagwara: Is the minister considering forms of public-private partnership for labs?

An Honourable Member: Sorry, Mr. Chair, I didn't hear the question.

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, sorry.

The honourable member for Union Station, can you repeat that question.

MLA Asagwara: Of course.

Is the minister considering forms of public-private partnership for labs? *[interjection]*

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable minister, go ahead.

Mrs. Stefanson: Oh, sorry, Mr. Chair.

Areas of procurement are done under Central Services, but we certainly have no plans to move forward with public-private partnerships with our labs.

MLA Asagwara: Thank the minister for clarifying that. I appreciate it.

So, just some questions around long-term care. This year's budget says that long-term care is seeing a price and a volume increase. Can the minister explain that in more detail?

What comes to mind for me automatically, certainly after the devastating impacts COVID-19 had in long-term care and some of those outcomes, unfortunately, I'm thinking about staffing; that comes to mind, amongst many other things. But we do know that was an issue throughout this pandemic.

So I'm just wondering if the minister can explain in more detail what that means, the price and volume increase, and if any of that is talking specifically about staffing.

* (15:30)

Mrs. Stefanson: Just to address the price and volume increases—maybe I'll start with volume first. Volume is increasing because we're increasing the capacity of the number of beds in personal-care homes, so we're increasing in this budget 120 beds that are going to be added to Boyne Lodge, which is in Carman, Manitoba, and Rest Haven, which is in Steinbach. So that's increasing the capacity of our personal-care homes.

And when it comes to pricing, obviously, some of the challenges—you know, there's inflationary increases, but I know one of the things that we're hearing from our RHAs and that they've noticed is obviously a significant price increase in some of the, you know, the medications, the drugs that are used by those living in our long-term-care facilities.

And so I think that's what's really important here, and this is where we've—as a government and our Premier (Mr. Pallister) has been very vocal on needing to work with the federal government to ensure that they understand these pricing increases that are not just affecting us here in Manitoba but it's all across the country. And so we really need a pan-Canadian approach to dealing with the ever-increasing cost to health care.

And that's where it's going to be very important, moving forward, to have the support of I think all MLAs in terms of, you know—for Manitoba, to call on the federal government to appropriately fund health care across the country.

MLA Asagwara: Can the minister maybe provide a bit more information, a bit more detail around how much a Winnipeg PCH might expect in percentage terms this year?

I can certainly appreciate what the minister, you know, spoke to in terms of some of those hard numbers might be really really tough to nail down of some other variables, but certainly PCHs are, you know, dealing with COVID and rising costs and challenges that will continue down the road, and in seeing a description like that increase in price and volume, it would certainly be wondering, what does that mean actually, in terms of percentage and dollars.

So can the minister clarify just what might a Winnipeg personal-care home expect in terms of percentage this year? And what is that actually for?

Mrs. Stefanson: Yes, I just—I don't think we have that level of detail here with us right now today, but

certainly we could endeavour to get that information to the member.

MLA Asagwara: Thank you, I would appreciate that very much.

So, just—you know, in regards to funding for PCHs, it's interesting because one of the recommendations—I believe it's recommendation 15 of Dr. Stevenson's review—was regarding funding for long-term care, identifying that funding for long-term care needed to be much more than what it is, needs to be substantial. That has been—you know—echoed across the board from every association, organization, community member, families; need more funding in long-term care.

Yet, in this budget that funding is essentially flat. Like, that funding—anybody can look at that and see the funding is just insufficient, it's inadequate.

* (15:40)

And especially given the time that we're still in and what is in front of us in the—right now, near future, down the road for long-term care, that, to me, is incredibly concerning and it's just a huge miss. I don't think anybody—I know I certainly did not expect to see flat funding for personal-care homes, long-term care in Manitoba, given the devastating tragedies that we saw during this pandemic.

So I'm going to shift from that because I just think, ultimately, you know, it's a huge, huge miss on the part of this government. I would implore the minister to advocate on this, you know, very assertively, to not let long-term care, personal-care homes, all those folks who have suffered during this pandemic due to the devastating outcomes that we saw, not disappoint those folks further and ensure that we've got the funding that's necessary in long-term care here in Manitoba.

I'm going to specifically ask about something that we did advocate for when we saw those early signs of transmission in long-term-care homes, specifically around inspections.

I—wondering if the minister can share if there's been an increase in inspections in long-term-care facilities since the pandemic began. So not—I guess I'll just—yes, specifically to since the be—pandemic began, has there been an increase in inspections for long-term-care facilities?

Mrs. Stefanson: Just a couple of things to talk about with respect to the member's question.

Certainly, I think it's probably worth explaining that the price and volume in the personal-care home—the line sort of in the budget, you know, is just a part of the investments that are made in personal-care homes in the province.

That does not include all investments made in personal-care homes, and so I think it's important to know and understand that certainly, in the last year, we've expended over \$205 million in COVID-related costs that has gone directly into personal-care homes.

We also have—there was also \$280 million that went towards life-safety initiatives within personal-care homes as well. So that would be like sprinkler systems and so on. And those significant life-saving upgrades to—because we do know that we inherited, you know, really what was very old facilities in the province of Manitoba that in many cases, you know, we needed to move on those life-saving and life-safety initiatives to ensure the safety of all those residents, you know, so, fire code things and things of that nature.

So those are just a couple of examples of fairly significant investments that we put into, you know, our personal-care home area.

But the member I believe asked in the end about a review of personal-care homes, and just this past year we did something that has never been done before where we did a review of all 125 personal-care homes in the province of Manitoba.

Before, it was done sort of cyclically and that was sort of established under the previous government, and we changed that to ensure that—just this past year we did a review of all of those personal care homes. And I believe that review is coming out sometime soon—we can get the exact date on that. But certainly, you know, we're very committed to—and I've said publicly several times to the implementing the recommendations of the Stevenson report, and so we will continue to ensure that we do that.

We just went public with our 60-day update, or 90 days since the beginning of this, which we committed to, and we will continue to update the public every 90 days on the progress made there. And so, you know, I think we're moving in the right direction; we recognize there's work to be done and we're committed to ensuring that that work gets done.

MLA Asagwara: I'd like to thank the minister for providing some more clarification on those points.

I will say that the funding that she's referring to, the additional investments she's referring to, the \$280 million, you know, that's for basic work that should be done anyhow, that's for renovations and work that should be done regardless of whatever situation we're in in this province, pandemic or otherwise, and that the funds that were allocated to long-term-care homes during this pandemic should have been allocated to long-term-care homes during this pandemic.

They needed those resources, they were going above and beyond doing what they can to try and keep residents safe and access the resources that they needed in order to navigate this pandemic. Certainly, it wasn't rolled out in a manner that many of those working in long-term care, running long-term-care homes found to be timely in order to support those needs.

But specifically, you know, I'm referring to future investments, investments right now that we know this government, the minister, are falling short on. Funding is flat. That doesn't make any sense to me. It doesn't make any sense to anybody I've talked to.

* (15:50)

I've talked to many people about this matter in particular. It's something that is near and dear, I would say, to Manitobans across the board.

Manitobans of all backgrounds, all political leanings, are unified in identifying that long-term-care, personal-care homes need substantial funding. That needs to be addressed. And this budget doesn't do it. And that's unacceptable. I don't know how many more lessons need to be learned in regards to what happens when we don't.

And so, to me, it's just—there's no rhyme or reason that can be provided to justify that failure in terms of lack of funding for long-term care. And I—and again, I would implore the minister to address that. It needs to be addressed immediately. It's something that, again, you know, folks across the board understand to be necessary.

Now, my previous question was specific to inspections in long-term-care facilities and whether or not there's been an increase since the pandemic started. So, while I appreciate the minister providing the response that she did, I'd like clarification in regards to if the inspections, the frequency, the amount have increased.

And I'd actually—it would be great to know what the plan is for inspections for long-term-care homes. Is there a plan to increase the frequency moving forward, to increase the inspections that are being done, you know, in the future? And will those inspections and the reporting on them be made public and accessible?

Mrs. Stefanson: So just going back—just to sort of paint a picture here that the regular standard review that had taken place, sort of prior to last year, we were up to speed with all of those regular reviews.

I think in light of what was happening last year during COVID, the decision was made to expand those reviews to all 125 personal-care homes in the province so that, you know, we could see, you know, obviously what was going on, you know, across the country and so on, so we expanded that review to include all personal-care homes in the province of Manitoba.

Moving forward, we are going to continue with those reviews as of this year as well. We're not going to decrease the number of reviews that are taking place. We obviously recognize the value of doing these reviews and what we learn from those reviews.

As we have gone through these reviews, for the first time I think in the history, we have been making these reviews public so they are available online. And as we continue to move forward, the member will be able to see the results of those reviews moving forward. But certainly, you know, we want to be able to learn from these and as we learn more from these reviews, it will also sort of help us to develop a very robust plan moving forward beyond this year as to how often and as to what that review process will be moving forward.

So we're still in that exploratory phase, but I will say that doing the 100 and all 125 reviews last year, committed to doing those this year, and then obviously developing a plan based on what we've learned from there moving forward. So, that's the plan.

MLA Asagwara: I'd like to thank the minister for that clarification; I appreciate that very much.

I'd like to ask about the commitment that the minister made to implementing the recommendations of Maples Long Term Care Home review. The minister just touched on that, saying that a report was posted online; the report is available.

I'm just wondering if the minister can identify for us, you know, where they're at in terms of implementing some of the recommendations that were made. I—like I said, I know the report is available now, based on that, and that she committed to doing so. But in terms of some of the implementation, can the minister identify where some of that is at?

I've already talked about recommendation 15, where I think this government has fallen way, way short in terms of the substantial funding recommendation that was made by Dr. Stevenson, but I'm wondering if the minister can talk about the other recommendations and implementation.

* (16:10)

Mrs. Stefanson: So, what I will say to the minister is I believe we just posted—I think it was last week—it may have been the week before—forgive me, my weeks are jumbling together here, but they—we did post the review of where we're at in terms of all of the recommendations—so, the update of those recommendations, and, you know, in terms of where we're at with that.

So, we've taken an approach, and in those—and in that review and what is posted online, the member opposite will note that we've taken an approach where we've looked at sort of the whole-of-Manitoba approach, because of course we have committed to implementing the 17 recommendations, obviously not just in Maples but in all 125 personal-care homes across the province of Manitoba.

So, we've given, you know, an update in terms of where we're at implementing it in a broad range across personal-care homes across Manitoba, but we've also pointed out—there is a section in there that focuses directly on Maples Personal Care Home itself to see where we're at in terms of the implementation of those 17 recommendations within Maples itself.

And, you know, in terms of those who are doing this review, we have a very, you know, broad section of people, you know, who are working either in the RHAs, the personal-care homes, department staff, staff from the personal-care homes. There's a wide range of individuals who are helping to implement this as well. And so I just want to thank them, actually, at this time and take this opportunity, because we gave them some pretty aggressive time frames to implement this in and, you know, they have delivered on that.

And we—you know, it was very important to me and our government that we're as transparent as we

can throughout this process and that we wanted to put this—make sure this goes online for people to be able to access and to see as well.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that response and, you know, it's—I'm glad the minister's talking about Maples Personal Care Home.

Obviously, we all know the devastating deaths that happened at Maples Personal Care Home. We're all aware of the fact that it was a paramedic who posted on Reddit the circumstances that they attended to at Maples Personal Care Home which resulted in actions being taken.

But I do reflect on the government's own briefing notes before this tragedy on the 6th of November happened at Maples Personal Care Home. I recall and I reflect the government briefing note from November the 3rd, which actually described the situation at Maples as stabilizing—staffing situation as stabilizing, which, you know, anybody who has any—you have to know based on the events that took place just days later that that doesn't add up.

And so I'm wondering if the minister can shed some light on that. How does this happen? Because that's still something that we actually—we didn't get that answer from Dr. Stevenson's report. That very important question that everybody was expecting an answer to: how did this happen? How does a personal-care home be inspected and government briefing notes say the staffing situation—the situation there is stabilizing; when in fact what was going on there wasn't stabilizing and the situation was nightmarish and had heartbreaking outcomes as a result.

So, just wondering if the minister can shed some light on that because to this point no one has taken responsibility for that, no one has—no one. Not in Dr. Stevenson's report, no one has been able to come forward, be accountable and say staffing wasn't where it should be, wasn't stabilized and this is the reason why and we take responsibility and accountability for that. And that is something that is a huge component of moving forward and implementing any recommendations is that piece and it's missing.

So can the minister please shed some light on that?

Mrs. Stefanson: You know, I thank the member for the question.

Of course I believe that, you know, the department at the time did recognize there were some challenges, obviously, and took very, very prompt

action to hire—get an independent person of Lynn—Dr. Lynn Stevenson involved to do an independent—review what transpired at Maples Personal Care Home. And obviously that resulted in the 17 recommendations, which we have agreed to implement.

The member opposite is getting into details that are right now before the courts. The member opposite will know that there is a class-action lawsuit that has been filed, that these types of details that the member is getting into, it would be inappropriate to comment on these. This is something that is before the courts.

MLA Asagwara: I can appreciate the minister's comments there.

I would—you know, I think it's important to put on the record that swift action wasn't taken, and that's the problem. And that's the point that I'm making. The minister saying that immediate action was taken—the action was taken after eight people died. The action was taken after a paramedic went on social media, used Reddit to put out a cry for help. This is days after it was already identified that there was a crisis.

It's—I'm not going to minimize that. Not for the minister, not for anyone. I'm not going to minimize the significance of that. Eight people died in a matter of hours. Families traumatized. Health-care professionals traumatized, devastated. To say that immediate action was taken when it was after the fact and only because somebody posted what was going on on Reddit, to me, is wrong and it's dismissive of the realities of what took place and who was impacted by that.

You know, Revera—let's just be frank, like, Revera did it—did an abysmal job of taking specific actions to keep people safe. And I'm not speaking to the staff, I'm—you know, and even, you know, management—I know what it means to work. I've worked in long-term care. I know what a privilege it is to work in those settings and provide care to residents and their families, and it's a community and you care deeply about the work that you do and the people that you do it with and for.

But ultimately, Revera—this private company—did an abysmal job of things like cohorting patients—residents, rather—at the beginning of the second wave of the pandemic. There were sick residents that were occupied—in beds, you know, separated from those who were not sick by only an end table, which is not cohorting, I want to make that explicitly clear. I've done that before; feel like I need to state it again.

* (16:10)

You know, this went on for weeks. On November 2nd, the staff from the WRHA conducted an unannounced inspection of Maples Personal Care Home, operated by Revera, and the document—they documented, rather—several concerns with regard to staffing levels, but critically they concluded, and I quote, no major breaches of standards were noted. End quote.

Four days later, on the evening of November 6th, the facility called 911. Multiple ambulances responded to find residents neglected and dehydrated—neglected and dehydrated. Multiple residents were dead or in critical condition. In at least one case a resident had been dead for hours.

On page 30 of Dr. Lynn Stevenson's review, she said that based on the PCH Staffing Triggers document that had been reviewed by the Long Term Care Planning Table and PRRT director, the staffing shortages at Maples should have triggered a system-wide response involving provincial incident command, SWAT teams, mandatory redeployment and potential emergency orders. None of that happened. None of that occurred.

At the press briefing on February 4th, where her review was released, Dr. Stevenson was asked why requests for additional support were not heeded or heeded in as prompt a fashion as was required for such an emergency situation—which I've alluded to already, this question, and the significance and importance of it.

Dr. Stevenson replied: I don't know why the support was not given. I don't know why the support wasn't given—that's the response after all of this effort, after all of this work to get answers to that most important question amongst the others—I don't know why the support wasn't given.

The review established to get to the bottom of why so many faced—or, so many died under such horrible circumstances; and her response is: I don't know why the request for help wasn't met.

So my question to the minister: will the minister support an inquest into what happened so that there's proper and full accounting of these horrible events?

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable member's time is up.

Mrs. Stefanson: I thank, you know, the member for the question.

And, you know, I know that they believe very passionately in this and—having worked in personal care homes themselves as well. And so I certainly have respect for the work that the member has done in the past in a previous role and, you know, I thank them for their comments today.

You know, I believe that, you know, prompt action was taken to ensure that an independent review took place with respect to calling on Dr. Lynn Stevenson who had done this type of a review elsewhere as well, I believe, and so certainly it was appropriate to get her to look into this matter as well.

I also met personally with the families. Obviously, it wasn't in a way that I would've liked because it was, you know, it was remotely, obviously, by way of Zoom, Teams or whatever it was at the time and, you know, we obviously just can't get together at this time; but I did reach out to those families twice and listened to their concerns and listened to their stories.

And this is a tragic situation that transpired. I believe, you know—and I also met with the staff as well because many of the staff I know from their, you know, what they—what we spoke about in our meetings that, you know, many of these residents were good friends and it was very, very difficult for them and what they went through as well. And so, you know, it was very important to me to reach out to both the family members as well as the staff and listen to them.

So, you know, we have conducted this independent review. This is not just a review that we will, you know—it's not just about Maples; it's about ensuring that all of our personal-care homes across the province of Manitoba, you know, that we implement these recommendations in a broad scope across all personal-care homes in Manitoba to ensure that—you know, the safety and well-being of those individuals who live in these personal-care homes.

This is their homes, and we want to ensure that they're safe and well cared for within those homes. And that's what we're working towards right now by implementing the recommendations of the Stevenson report.

Mr. Chairperson: Before we go to the next question, is it will to the House that we take a—*[interjection]*—of the committee—take a five-minute recess?

An Honourable Member: I'm agreeing with that.

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, okay. I thought you said—

Is it will to the committee to go for a five-minute recess? *[Agreed]*

So we'll take a five-minute recess. Thank you.

The committee recessed at 4:17 p.m.

The committee resumed at 4:22 p.m.

Mr. Chairperson: We'll continue with the questioning.

MLA Asagwara: I'd like to thank the minister for her previous comments. I think it's really important to have clarity on this for the reasons that I've already articulated, but certainly—and the minister did kind of make the statement—not kind of—made the statement that she can't really comment on this because of the civil lawsuit.

The minister can certainly answer these questions. These are reasonable and appropriate questions to be asking within this context.

And—but I do want to highlight, again—the minister said that they were prompt in calling a review. Okay; takes me back to my previous point. You say you're prompt—sorry, rather, the minister says that they were prompt in calling a review, but the reviewer couldn't answer a key component, a key question as to why the necessary identified supports in regards to staffing were withheld. It's not that the resources and the staffing issues were unknown; they were clearly expressed. They asked for help. But the reviewer says: I don't know why supports were withheld.

Because that's what it is. It's when you know that there's an issue, when you are aware that staffing is a problem, that those residents are not receiving the hours of care per day per resident that they need to be in order to be healthy, to have adequate care provided. You're aware of this and then you don't provide the resource; you are withholding that resource.

And out of this review, the only answer that we've got to that very important question—which I would say is fundamental to any decision making moving forward in terms of how we're going to support long-term care in a proper way—the answer is, I don't know why. Insufficient.

That's—and that's the starting point from which further recommendations and implementation are coming from, from that point. The I-don't-know-why is actually the starting point for the minister in terms of addressing some of these concerns, which I think

anyone—anyone—who has any idea in regards to what happened at Maples Personal Care Home would say is wholly inadequate and insufficient.

Will the minister support an inquest to ensure that proper and full accounting of the horrible events at Maples and other Revera properties is done? Will the minister support an inquest, and, if not, can the minister please provide her reason as to why?

Mrs. Stefanson: I thank the member for the question, and certainly we do know that the Chief Medical Examiner has the power under his authority to call for an inquest into the death of an individual or group of individuals in the province of Manitoba. And so that is under his purview. I trust the work that he does. And, you know, those—that's a decision that—for him to make.

What I will say is that, you know, I do believe in getting Lynn Stevenson involved, who also conducted a similar review in Nova Scotia, did an independent review here, came up with some recommendations. We've been very transparent and open about where we're at with respect to implementing the recommendations of that review. We will continue to update Manitobans every 90 days.

And so, you know, and the member opposite is getting into details of issues that are currently before the courts and it would be completely inappropriate for me as the minister of a Crown to comment on those.

So, you know, I, again, I did meet with the families twice and I met with the staff as well and listened to, you know, their very heartfelt stories. And this is obviously an extremely tragic situation.

But I believe that, you know, prompt action was taken to get an independent review done, to get the recommendations completed so that we can ensure that we implement those recommendations in all of our personal-care homes across the province of Manitoba, not just Maples. Although there are a number of recommendations that have been completed so far in Maples, and those are outlined, again, for all Manitobans to see online.

MLA Asagwara: I'd like to acknowledge the fact that the minister, you know, has said that she's met with staff. I think it's important meeting with families and those impacted of the death of loved ones throughout this pandemic, certainly in long-term-care homes.

But I do think that it's a good step for the minister to have met with staff, that those folks were

significantly impacted and traumatized by the events at Maples Personal Care Home and other personal-care homes.

And so I do want to acknowledge that. I think that that's a good step. And I hope that the minister will continue engaging with staff in a manner that allows for them to contribute meaningfully to how things are implemented so that they have their voices heard. I just wanted to acknowledge that.

* (16:30)

And going back to—since we're—when we're talking about staffing here, I would like to get some clarification from the minister in regards to the funding that is being—the flat funding, mind you, but the funding that is being allocated to personal care, long-term care. The minister is well aware of the personal—the hours per day per resident in terms of direct resident care that is the standard in Manitoba.

The minister would also be aware that those targets were not being met during that time. I don't know where things are at right now in certain cases but certainly, you know, we're advocating for an increase of those hours per day per resident to reflect better outcomes that are backed by evidence and research—4.1 hours per day per resident.

So with that in mind, the minister's aware, based on the reports and the reviews that have been completed, that those hours, in many cases, Maples Personal Care Home, were not being achieved at all per resident per day.

Can the minister share with us how much of the funding that is being allocated to long-term care in the budget, how much of that is specifically going to address the staffing issues and the shortcomings around hours per day for resident—direct resident care?

* (16:40)

Mrs. Stefanson: I want to thank the member for the question. You know, I apologize; I've just—still in a steep learning curve here in this area, so just, you know, just having a discussion with staff here for a moment here.

So, essentially, and the member opposite will know that, you know, according to, I guess, CIHI, about 71 cents of every dollar in the personal-care home area goes towards staffing.

And so certainly what we do, obviously, is we conduct reviews of those personal-care homes. We talked about this a little bit earlier. Last year alone we

did a review of all personal-care homes across the province of Manitoba.

Within those reviews there are provincial guidelines for scheduling and staffing that it is the expectation that those individual personal-care homes are meeting those provincial guidelines. To the extent that they're not, it will be found within those reviews and, you know, it will affect licensing and things like that.

So that's sort of the process of what takes place. If, you know, again if they're not meeting those guidelines then it could affect their licence, but the expectation would be that they would increase to ensure that they meet those guidelines.

MLA Asagwara: Well, I thank the minister for that answer.

Certainly in order for personal-care homes, long-term-care homes to be able to do that they need an increased resource by way of funding so that they can have increased human resource in order to deliver an increased amount of direct-care hours per resident per day.

I think I'll leave that particular question there for now, but I do want to clarify in regards to, you know, proper accountability in terms of what's happened at Maples Personal Care Home, Revera personal-care homes, we're all well aware of the disproportionate negative outcomes in these homes in long-term care during this pandemic.

So, would the minister—and I appreciate her comments in regards to the Chief Medical Examiner, but I will say that the minister could compel an inquiry under the Manitoba Evidence Act, that is an option available to the minister. Will she do so?

Mrs. Stefanson: Yes. I mean, I think I've already addressed this, that it's certainly in the purview of the Chief Medical Examiner. I believe that, you know, prompt action was taken at the time to ensure that we had an independent review of what transpired as a result of what happened at Maples Personal Care Home. That resulted in a review that took place and with the 17 recommendations, and we're obviously in the process of implementing those recommendations.

So I don't have anything more to say except that, you know, the process will continue and, you know, I know that there is a class action lawsuit that's before the, you know, before the courts right now, so we'll see the results of that.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for clarifying her position on that. As I stated before, it's in her

purview to call an inquiry under The Manitoba Evidence Act. It's plain to hear that she will not.

As I've stated previously, there are some significant questions that were unanswered as part of Dr. Stevenson's review and some key components in terms of how this government, this minister, moves forward to address the concerns that have really been exacerbated during this pandemic, so it's disappointing to hear that that's the minister's stance on that, but I do appreciate the minister clarifying that.

Wondering if the minister can update us on the activities that she's undertaking this year as part of the phase II clinical services and prevention plan. Specifically, what new actions are being taken under that plan this year?

* (16:50)

Mrs. Stefanson: I was just sort of looking into—I know the member opposite spoke about, you know, my ability to call for an inquest, and really, that is under the purview of the Chief Medical Examiner.

I think what the member opposite is talking about is public inquiries, which is entirely a different process and that is something that is not really under this purview either; mostly under Justice. But that's a full-blown public inquiry. I think the member opposite is talking about the Chief Medical Examiner and something that falls under their purview. So, certainly, I'll leave that at that.

But the member opposite also talked about the clinical preventative services plan. I just want to take this opportunity to really thank our provincial clinical specialty leads. I have the opportunity to meet with them monthly and we talk about a whole host of things that they all believe. And indeed, you know, I meet with everyone who's responsible for different areas of the health-care system as well.

And—but this is just sort of one example of some of the changes that I think can benefit all Manitobans when we take sort of a cross-provincial sort of approach to how we look at better health care for Manitobans.

And I think one of the things is that they have found is that, you know, there needs to be more consistent clinical standards across the entire province.

And so those who are living in the North or those who are living in parts of rural Manitoba, more remote communities, that we want to find a sort of whole-of-province approach to various either—whether it's

surgical procedures or all sorts of medical procedures that need to take place.

And I think the thinking is that how do we maximize the use of facilities that are across our province for various procedures?

And so, just for example, in the way of surgeries, not everything needs to be done in Winnipeg. We have great facilities outside the city of Winnipeg and outside of our more urban centres like Brandon where, you know, those, you know, if there are ORs open to be able to perform certain surgeries and so on, we want to ensure that we're maximizing the use of the facilities that we've got now.

And part of this—that's just sort of one example, but there's many things that we want to do to improve and really look at, you know, a provincial approach to how we, you know, will look at things within our hospital system.

You know, one of the things that we did announce in this budget was I think it's over \$800 million that is being earmarked—\$800 million? *[interjection]*

Yes, \$800 million, I think, yes, has been earmarked for—we'll get the exact figure on that, but for our capital expansion of, you know, current facilities that we have and new facilities that are needed to ensure that we can take that across-the-province and whole-of—provincial approach to some of the things that we want to do.

And so, at a very high level there's many different things that we'll be looking at but I'll maybe just start with that when it comes to our clinical preventative services plan and some of the things that we're thinking about in the next phase.

MLA Asagwara: I'm done my questions. The member for River Heights, I think, is going to—

Mr. Chairperson: Okay.

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): Yes, I'll ask a question. If the minister can't answer it right away, perhaps she can provide an answer at the beginning of the next Health Estimates.

The question is this: How many of the 1 million rapid tests which the government was provided with have been used and what are the government's plans to use the remainder of the rapid tests?

Mrs. Stefanson: I think just while we're getting the actual figures—I know we're getting close to the end of our time for today, but what I did want to say to the member is that rapid tests are being used in pilot projects. We've used them in personal-care homes in the past. We've used them for teachers and we've used them in child-care facilities. We've utilized them in various businesses in the way of pilot projects as well.

We're looking for more partnerships in the community and we're in certain—we're in discussions with various members of the business community and other ways that we can utilize these rapid testing.

We know that there's a difference between, you know, some of the rapid tests that we have access to: some are more effective than others. And I won't get into the details on that, but I know that Dr. Roussin has spoken out about those, some of the challenges with some of the tests.

But certainly there was a time where we were not really at capacity in terms of our PCR testing and so it was sort of deemed to be better for us to access the—more of the PCR testing for some of these individuals rather than utilizing the rapid testing.

So when our numbers were lower, we were not doing as many of those tests, just because there simply was not the demand for it. We were using more of the PCR tests at that time.

And so, certainly, I can endeavour to get the final numbers, you know, in terms of the million that—I don't believe it is 1 million, but, you know, certainly I can get a breakdown to the member as to where those rapid tests have gone.

Mr. Chairperson: The time being 5 p.m., I'm interrupting proceedings. The Committee of Supply will resume sitting tomorrow morning at 10 a.m.

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