



Second Session, 38th Parliament

OFFICIAL REPORT OF
DEBATES OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
(HANSARD)

Thursday, March 23, 2006
Afternoon Sitting
Volume 8, Number 2

THE HONOURABLE BILL BARISOFF, SPEAKER

ISSN 0709-1281

PROVINCE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Entered Confederation July 20, 1871)

LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR
Her Honour the Honourable Iona V. Campagnolo, CM, OBC

SECOND SESSION, 38TH PARLIAMENT

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THURSDAY, MARCH 23, 2006

The House met at 2:03 p.m.

Introductions by Members

S. Fraser: It gives me great pleasure to welcome a friend from my constituency, chief councillor Keith Atleo, all the way in from Ahousaht today. Would you please join me in welcoming him.

R. Hawes: Every year, each of us suffers — yes, we do suffer — an anniversary that some of us choose to forget. That's our birthday. Today is the birthday of our deputy Whip, and I would like to wish him.... He tells us he is 40-ish, and as a politician, I know he always tells the truth. So happy birthday to the deputy Whip.

Hon. R. Neufeld: It is a great pleasure for me to actually introduce a constituent from Peace River North, Stephanie Neraasen. She has lived in Fort St. John for seven years, works at the Oil and Gas Commission, and is a senior executive assistant in the executive office of the Oil and Gas Commission in Fort St. John. Along with her is Kate La Vertu, who also works for the OGC, but in the Victoria office.

Would the House make them welcome, please.

D. Hayer: I'm pleased to introduce today some very special guests: my constituents Dan and Frieda Reimer and their five great-granddaughters: Ariel Reimer, 16; Meaghan Nickelson, 13; Rebecca Nickelson, ten; and Sarah Nickelson, six, and Jennifer Nickelson, six, are twins.

All these great-grandchildren come from the riding of my colleague from Prince George North, the Minister of Agriculture and Lands. They are here to visit our Parliament Buildings and learn about how the government works, as well as Victoria. Would the House please make them very welcome.

[1405]

Hon. B. Penner: It's an honour for me to introduce two members of a longstanding conservation organization in British Columbia. Joining us today in the gallery are Tony Toth and Shaun Hollingsworth of the B.C. Wildlife Federation. Tony, as many members know, is the executive director of the B.C. Wildlife Federation, and Shaun Hollingsworth is the vice-president and treasurer. I ask that the House please make them welcome.

R. Fleming: It's my great pleasure to introduce a friend of mine who is with us in the gallery today, Adrienne Mercer, who also accompanied by a young woman named Indigo Smart. Indigo is a seven-year-old. She lives in James Bay. She's in grade two in French immersion at Sir James Douglas School in Fairfield. This young woman has a lot of questions about the provincial government. This is her first trip to the Legislature. Will the House please make them both feel welcome.

M. Farnworth: It's my pleasure to rise in the House and introduce Ms. Lynn Robinson and Mr. Laurence Hall and the students of Irvine Elementary School in my riding. Could the House please join me in welcoming them.

Introduction and First Reading of Bills

SMALL BUSINESS AND REVENUE STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2006

Hon. R. Thorpe presented a message from Her Honour the Lieutenant-Governor: a bill intituled Small Business and Revenue Statutes Amendment Act, 2006.

Hon. R. Thorpe: I move Bill 14 be introduced and read for the first time now.

Motion approved.

Hon. R. Thorpe: This bill proposes a number of amendments to the taxation and revenue statutes administered by the Ministry of Small Business and Revenue. These amendments are made to ensure streamlining and simplification of how business is done in British Columbia, ensure fairness and equity for taxpayers, and enforce the laws of British Columbia.

The bill proposes amendments to the Assessment Act, the Income Tax Act, the International Financial Activity Act, the Property Transfer Tax Act, the Taxation (Rural Area) Act and the Tobacco Tax Act. I will elaborate on the nature of these amendments during second reading of this bill.

I move that Bill 14 be placed on the orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

Bill 14, Small Business and Revenue Statutes Amendment Act, 2006, introduced, read a first time and ordered to be placed on orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

INCOME TRUST LIABILITY ACT

Hon. C. Taylor presented a message from Her Honour the Lieutenant-Governor: a bill intituled Income Trust Liability Act.

Hon. C. Taylor: I move that the bill be introduced and read a first time now.

Motion approved.

Hon. C. Taylor: I'm pleased to introduce the Income Trust Liability Act. This new legislation will ensure that investors in publicly traded income trusts are protected from being required to use their personal assets to indemnify trustees for their actions or defaults and will limit the scope of potential loss to an investor

to the amount invested, a concept familiar to shareholders of a corporation. This new legislation will apply only to publicly traded income trusts and will not affect any other trust relationships or liability.

I move the bill be placed on orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

Bill 13, Income Trust Liability Act, introduced, read a first time and ordered to be placed on orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

MISCELLANEOUS STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2006

Hon. M. de Jong presented a message from Her Honour the Lieutenant-Governor: a bill intituled Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2006.

[1410]

Hon. M. de Jong: Mr. Speaker, I move that the bill be introduced and read a first time now.

Motion approved.

Hon. M. de Jong: Bill 15 amends various statutes to, in some cases, clarify provisions; in a couple of cases, alter the provisions; and in a number of cases, make some genuinely minor housekeeping amendments.

Specifically, Bill 15 amends the following statutes: the Employee Investment Act, the Environmental Management Act, the Financial Information Act, the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, the Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority Act, the Human Resource Facility Act, the Innovation and Science Council Act, the Integrated Pest Management Act, the Motor Vehicle Act, the Protected Areas of British Columbia Act, the Small Business Venture Capital Act, the Transportation Act and the University Act.

I move that the bill be placed on the orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

Bill 15, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2006, introduced, read a first time and ordered to be placed on orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

Statements (Standing Order 25B)

HARTLEY BAY

N. Simons: Just over 36 hours have passed since the *Queen of the North* sank off Gil Island, in the unforgiving waters of the Inside Passage. I'm sure that all members of the House join me in hoping that the two missing passengers will be found. Our thoughts are with their families.

Our thoughts are also with the captain and his crew. Few of us can likely imagine the tremendous emotional stress this incident has caused. We must acknowledge their professionalism and training and thank them for doing their jobs well. We must also acknowledge the men and women of the Coast Guard, who we sometimes take for granted but who provide such a valuable service.

As is often the case in the midst of a tragedy, we learn something new about each other. Recognizing that two people are still missing and knowing that environmental damage of an unknown scale is taking place, we also learned, in this case, about the little community of Hartley Bay — home of the Gitga'at Nation, the little village with the big heart. Members of the Tsimshian cultural group, this community lies about 145 kilometres southeast of Prince Rupert.

In the rain and wind of early yesterday morning, their help was needed. With their VHF radios by their beds or on their kitchen tables, they heard the distress call. They have been taught by the older generation and from commercial fishers that the sea must always be respected and that it is active 24 hours a day. Everyone knows of its beauty and riches but also of its dangers.

Without question or hesitation they launched their boats, they gathered blankets, and food was prepared in the hope that survivors would be brought to the shore and would need their care. Within a few hours the community centre was filling up with passengers needing warmth and sustenance. The big-hearted little village provided the frightened passengers with what they needed before the Coast Guard vessel *Sir Wilfrid Laurier* took them to Prince Rupert.

This is primarily a sad story — for the two missing passengers, for the loss of a beautiful ship, for the fear that's etched in the minds of those who were on board and for the poisons that have spilled into our waters. But it's also a story about the strength of the little village and the strength of character that emerges in a time of difficulty — a story of the band members; the residents of Hartley Bay; the Tsimshian Nation, our first nations brothers and sisters; commercial fishers; and the coastal communities in general.

SURREY BUSINESS AWARDS FOR CULTURAL DIVERSITY

D. Hayer: I want to take this opportunity to talk about some very successful businesses in my community and to congratulate those who, last night, were the winners of the Surrey Delta Immigrant Services Society's 11th Annual Culture and Diversity Awards for Business. I attended these events last night in the riding of Surrey-Tynehead with two of my colleagues.

I was tremendously impressed with the quality and the success of the finalists who were up for the awards. This annual acknowledgment of Surrey businesses which have succeeded in cultural diversity is something that all British Columbians can be very proud of. The success of these businesses is based on the owner-

ship, the management and the employees who, by all working together, contribute to this excellent work.

Eleven years ago when I was the president of Surrey Chamber of Commerce, I helped on the committee that started these awards. I am very proud to have attended each of these award nights.

[1415]

Today I want to congratulate all the finalists and recognize those who won last night. Winning the award for businesses with one to 25 employees was my constituent from Surrey-Tynehead Catherine Levan, president of Kickstart Communications; for youth entrepreneur, Ms. Sendip Gill and her business SRS Packaging Services; for the corporate category, Tony Singh, president of Fruiticana.

For a business with 26 employees, owner Anand Kishore and Canada Washworld; in the not-for-profit category, Jim King, executive director of the Surrey Crime Prevention Society; and in the public institutions category, Surrey Public Library. I ask the House to join me in congratulating all those outstanding award winners.

KAMLOOPS BUSINESSCARE PROGRAM

M. Karagianis: In Kamloops last week a number of us here in the opposition caucus heard about a marvelous business assistance initiative that's being run by Venture Kamloops, a very successful program called BusinessCARE. BusinessCARE provides coaching services to new business ventures or businesses that want to expand. The goal of the program is to establish relationships between community businesses and economic developers, and to strengthen existing companies, establish early warning systems to flag at-risk businesses that might require assistance and, further, to ensure that programs meet local business needs.

BusinessCARE provides two options for coaching. The basic model provides a feasibility assessment for new startups and business in the early stage of the operations. A coach works with the new business on where to start or how to move forward. The first hour of coaching is free, and the fees beyond that are very modest. The service is confidential, one-to-one, and can last as long as the client needs it.

The advance model is for existing business that is growing and expanding their operations or may need more in-depth coaching in order to progress. In that situation, a team of specialized business coaches work with the business, covering topics that include marketing, financial management, human resources, personnel development, and health and safety. There are no eligibility criteria for participants other than a desire to access coaching as a tool to move their business forward.

BusinessCARE has a terrific track record. Eighty-eight percent of the new businesses that have opened are still operating after a three-year period, 131 clients have been retained from previous years, and 155 new coaching clients came on board in 2004. Those were the most recent statistics they had.

It is a great model for other communities to emulate. I would like to say congratulations to Venture Kamloops for really coming up with a successful and innovative program, and I would hope that is the kind of program other communities can benefit from.

LIFE-SAVING AWARDS

R. Lee: Last Saturday I had the honour to meet some great British Columbians who had courageously rescued others under very dangerous situations. They are medal recipients of the Lifesaving Society. At the 94th annual Commonwealth honour and rescue awards ceremony, eight volunteers earned certificates of thanks or service medals.

Nicole Liddell received a service cross for her efforts in establishing supports to water incident research and life-saving sport competitors.

Silver medals were presented to Curtis Besse, Dean Rochon, Lyle Armour, Clinton Coutts, Eloise Drake, Ron Moyon, Lucia Gauvin, Kelly Sherman, Jim Sutherland and Kylie Walsh for meritorious services in saving lives.

Silver medals for bravery, which acknowledge rescue involving significant acts of bravery, were awarded to Hal Fraser Bringeland, Darwyn Hermann, Brad Reber, Garnet Smith and Clayton Hickey.

Clayton Hickey was also presented with a governor's gold medal for the most heroic rescue of the year. He rescued a three-year-old boy trapped under an overturned and sunken boat near the Nanaimo harbour last summer. By acting quickly, diving into the dark water, reaching around and clutching the small leg, he managed to bring the boy to the surface, saving his life.

The boy's father said: "I don't think just anyone could have done that. Some people act, and some people think. But he acted, and I think he is a hero, whether he admits it or not."

Bravery is a precious virtue. I would like the House to join me in honouring these brave British Columbians.

[1420]

PARALYMPIC ATHLETES

C. Puchmayr: Last Sunday, March 19, the 2006 Paralympic Games wrapped up in Torino, Italy. The games take place three weeks after the closing of the first Olympic Games in the same host city using the same facilities. The Paralympics are open to athletes with physical and sensory disabilities, including amputees and athletes with cerebral palsy, mobility disabilities and visual disabilities.

The name Paralympics derives from the Greek word *para*, which means alongside, in reference to the competition being held in parallel to the Olympic Games. The first Paralympic Games were held in Rome in 1960, and the first Paralympic Winter Games were held in Sweden in 1976.

Canada sent 34 athletes, of whom eight were from British Columbia. Alpine skiing — Matthew Hallat of Coquitlam, Brad Lennea of Whistler, Scott Patterson

of Vancouver, Bobby Taylor of West Vancouver and Lauren Wolstencroft of Victoria. In wheelchair curling, the gold medal was won by Gerald Austgarden of Westbank, Gary Cormack of Surrey and Sonja Gaudet of Vernon.

Daniel Wesley is a member of my community, and he is a longtime Paralympian. He won three medals in Salt Lake City: one gold, one silver and one bronze. He also blazed the trail for generations of elite athletes with disabilities.

Lauren Wolstencroft is known as the Winter Paralympic golden girl — an incredible athlete who has been skiing since she was four years old.

Paralympians surmount many barriers and choose to compete for the thrill of sport. The Paralympics embody the true Olympic spirit. Let's please acknowledge all the athletes in Canada, including the athletes in British Columbia, who represented us so proudly in the Paralympic Games.

VAL ANDERSON

D. Jarvis: I'd like to talk about a friend of mine, Val Anderson, who is also an old friend of this Legislature after having served almost 14 years here. Val has just had recent surgery, and it was not successful, unfortunately. He is moving to palliative care soon.

Mr. Speaker, as you know, Val is a very kind and gentle man. On research of *Hansard*, it shows that in his 14 years he spoke on 3,316 specific subjects.

I want to put on record a letter that Val has written to the MLAs of this province, and I hope you will bear with me. An open letter to all British Columbia MLAs.

Greetings, and thanks for your many letters and messages of personal support. They mean a lot.

I have had much time to reflect, and so I would like to share what I believe are two of the most important principles of government that are often taken for granted and overlooked.

The first principle is the need for governments to encompass an appreciation of family relationships. Every person, whether or not they consider themselves currently part of a family union, has or has had the experience of a family relationship. So to care for a person, one must always take into account the nature of that family and its relationship. To do otherwise is to contribute to the problem and to make it unsolvable. This awareness does not seem often to be present in the workings of government agencies.

A second principle is that the legislation must not only be legal, but more importantly, it must be fair. It may indeed be that a number of the legislative acts are unjust to an individual or group of individuals. Many interpretations of legal language create and/or prevent justice in the name of right action. Laws should be made to protect those in need rather than creating more inequities. Concern and compassion must overrule bureaucratic and political persuasions. To do anything less continues to create an unjust society for many.

Laws need to be re-examined continually to see if they protect the individual or groups in our society. Unless we care and are very vigilant, many will suffer every day for being who they are, often because of cir-

cumstances beyond their control. Not to treat them with respect and support them in opportunities is to fail in our duties as MLAs. After all, our aim is to affirm them in their recoveries, especially by having faith in them.

Thank you for your patience in reading this letter and perhaps talking to each other about these principles as you work together to do the right thing. After all, our aim is to support those in their recovery by believing that will help and that they can renew their lives.

Sincerely yours,
Val Anderson, MLA

[1425]

Mr. Speaker: Val, I understand you are watching, and I just want to say, on behalf of all of us, our prayers are with you.

[Applause.]

Oral Questions

SAFETY OF NORTHERN FERRIES

C. Trevena: I think the whole House is anxious about the fate of the two people missing after the sinking of the *Queen of the North*. Our thoughts must go to their families.

But we have also got to continue to ask questions about the safety of the northern fleet. We are getting conflicting views from the Premier, who says that the fleet is safe, and the Transportation Minister, who won't commit and says it's up to the Transportation Safety Board.

This is our marine highway, and these are our ferries. We pay \$127 million a year, and the Minister of Finance is the sole shareholder. So I would like to ask the Minister of Transportation whether he can assure my constituents and all B.C.'ers that the northern ferry fleet is safe.

Hon. K. Falcon: Yes, I can assure the member that the vessels that ply the waters of British Columbia are safe. In fact, I can assure the member that B.C. Ferries has one of the best safety records in the world.

Now, having said that, that member knows and certainly members of the opposition that were in government during the 1990s know that there have been incidents, including during the 1990s, where there have been some horrific accidents that have taken place. Indeed, there have even been some fatalities. Every member of this House knows that our thoughts and prayers go out to all those that suffer injuries or indeed even fatalities in some of these incidents that have taken place.

But I want that member to know that every single vessel is certified by Transport Canada and has to receive an annual inspection certificate. In fact, the *Queen of the North* received hers a number of weeks ago — on March 2, I believe was the date. That is a top-to-bottom survey to ensure that that vessel is capable of plying the waters in a safe manner.

As a final point, that vessel has been plying the waters of the Inside Passage for over 25 years without incident. I think that goes to the safety issue.

Mr. Speaker: The member for North Island has a supplemental.

C. Trevena: Yes, the *Queen of the North* may have been working for 25 years and have an annual inspection certificate, but I know that the minister and the government had some further information about the fleet and about this particular vessel — information that the public no longer has because B.C. Ferries isn't accountable to this House or to the public.

At a meeting of the North and Mid-Coast Ferry Advisory Committee in November 2001, the CEO at the time, Bob Lingwood, presented the following information about the *Queen of the North*. In 2001 he said: "The damage stability regulation means that the vessel will be used only in calmer periods of the year."

Surely, March on the north coast is not one of the most calm periods of the year. I would like to ask the minister whether he can explain why nothing appears to have been done with this information and why the *Queen of the North* was still operating.

Hon. K. Falcon: I think it's worth pointing out for the benefit of the member that since 2001, there has been over \$16 million in expenditure made on that vessel to improve the safety of that vessel, to overhaul the engines, to do some deck work. That has been extensive. But the member should also know — and one of the things I mentioned yesterday in the House that I'll reinforce today — that we do have an obligation to be a little bit careful in not making assumptions about what may or may not have caused this very serious incident.

One thing that might give the member comfort is to know that the Transportation Safety Board, which is an organization that.... I know of no one.... No independent person has ever criticized their ability or integrity to get to the bottom of these problems.

[1430]

The member should know that the investigations they undertake include reviewing all records, interviewing all the crews, interviewing all the passengers and, of course, doing computer simulations. They will do whatever it takes to try and get to the bottom of what caused this very unfortunate incident.

Mr. Speaker: The member for North Island has a further supplemental.

C. Trevena: I'm not making assumptions, nor am I questioning the thoroughness of the Transportation Safety Board's investigation, but this government does have a certain amount of responsibility for the safety of the vessels. This is information that was presented by the then CEO of B.C. Ferries in November 2001 when this government was in power and the minister was at that cabinet table.

If I can tell the minister what Mr. Lingwood had to say at the same time about the *Queen of Prince Rupert*. This is the vessel the *Queen of the North* is replacing, and the vessel that's about to return to service. The CEO said in November 2001: "The damage stability regulation and the level-two survey work on the *Queen of Prince Rupert* means that the vessel is no longer serviceable beyond 2004. Therefore, an appropriate used vessel must be located on the market or a new ship constructed."

I would like to ask the Minister of Transportation why no action was taken by his government to meet these concerns.

Hon. K. Falcon: I do think that question gives rise to a larger issue — an issue that was very important to our government. In 2001 we inherited a B.C. Ferry Corp. that was, frankly, in chaos. There was a complete lack of leadership, there was very damaged morale, and there was a history of some just absolutely appalling capital investment decisions that starved the fleet of the ability to have some commonsense investments made.

As a result of that, we followed the recommendations of three independent reports, including the Auditor General, that had one common suggestion. That suggestion was that you needed to set up an independent authority, independent of political and bureaucratic interference, so that they could move forward, as they are now today, on an investment program that is the largest in the history of the B.C. Ferries Corp. over 46 years.

They are investing hundreds of millions of dollars in new vessels. They have retrofitted 28 of the 35 vessels in the fleet, and they continue to acquire and build new vessels to make sure they can have a fleet that is operating as safely as possible for all British Columbians.

B. Ralston: Indeed, the government did make choices after 2001. But the government also knew in November 2001 that the ships of the northern fleet were not in compliance with Transport Canada regulations. Mr. Lingwood, the CEO of B.C. Ferries, said of the *Queen of Chilliwack*, also part of the northern fleet: "The damage stability regulation means that ships will not be serviceable after the 2003 summer service schedule and must be retired." That was information provided to the government in November 2001. Why does it appear that the government ignored this information and only began to act on this information close to some five years later?

Hon. K. Falcon: I think the member perhaps inadvertently is ignoring the information that I'm sharing with the members of the tens of millions of dollars that were invested in those vessels. I think the member also conveniently overlooks an important fact, and that is that Transport Canada will not certify any vessel to operate in the waters of British Columbia unless they meet their annual inspection certificate. That is a very rigorous top-to-bottom review of these vessels.

In fact, I have spoken in the past to a former inspector who worked with Transport Canada, and I spoke specifically about the issue of ferry safety following a meeting I had with the president of the union. One of the things that always stood out in my mind is that he was very clear about the fact that no vessel will operate in the waters of British Columbia unless that vessel is safe to operate. That remained so then, and that remains so today.

Mr. Speaker: The member for Surrey-Whalley has a supplemental.

B. Ralston: Can the minister, then, advise the House whether the damage stability regulation came into force in 2003 and whether or not the government sought exemption from that particular regulation in order to remain in compliance?

[1435]

Hon. K. Falcon: I'm not familiar with the regulation the member is referring to, but if the member could be good enough to share that with me, I would be happy to look into that for him.

M. Farnworth: In 2003 B.C. Ferries estimated the useful life of these ships at between 20 and 40 years in their service plan. One year later the estimated life was listed at 40 years. Can the minister tell why B.C. Ferries removed the lower estimate of 20 years?

Hon. K. Falcon: I can't comment directly on that, but what I can tell the member is that when the Coastal Ferry Act was put into place on April 1, 2003, there was specific direction given to B.C. Ferries that those three vessels were to be replaced within a ten-year period. As the member opposite may know, by 2012 Transport Canada would be bringing in new regulations which would mean these vessels could not continue to operate on the Inside Passage. Those directions were put in place so we could get the ball rolling on replacing these vessels.

In 2004, as the member knows, B.C. Ferries went through a community consultation to make sure that communities, as these members opposite often remind us, should be consulted on these issues. So they had an opportunity to talk about what kind of vessels they would like, what kind of amenities they want to see in those vessels.

Following us receiving that report in the end of November of 2004, in March 2005 government gave the Ministry of Transportation a financial mandate — a mandate to negotiate with B.C. Ferries and engage in an agreement so that they could move forward and acquire three new vessels. We completed those negotiations at the end of December of last year, and we just recently finalized the financial details so the ferries can indeed move forward in replacing those three vessels.

Mr. Speaker: Member for Port Coquitlam-Burke Mountain has a supplemental.

ACCESS TO B.C. FERRIES INFORMATION

M. Farnworth: The minister is giving a fair amount of information in terms of his answers, but a lot of the questions that are being asked are arising out of decisions that were taken or not taken during the past five years. These are questions that could have been asked by the public or by outside agencies or by outside consultants and experts in the marine industry if, for example, B.C. Ferries was covered under the Freedom of Information Act. One of the problems we have today is that it's not.

In terms of the actions that the government can take — and Transport Canada will be doing its own investigations, but in terms of the actions that the government can take — will the minister make a step today in terms of assuring British Columbians about what's taking place at B.C. Ferries in terms of the refits, the overhauls, the planning, those sorts of things that are taking place? Will the minister take that step and put B.C. Ferries back under the Freedom of Information Act?

Hon. K. Falcon: You know, the members opposite talk about accountability. I can only assume they harken back to the nirvana that apparently was the accountability when they were responsible for the B.C. Ferry Corp. We know what happened in the total lack of accountability and the hundreds of millions of dollars that were wasted in capital decisions that made not a lot of sense.

I've said in this House before that when it comes to accountability, there is an independent ferries commissioner — independent of government and independent of the board — that acts in the interests of the public. There is an independent board of directors with representation from labour and representation from communities. There are coastal ferry advisory committees that provide information to the Ferry Corp. There are annual audited financial statements. There is an annual general meeting where all members of the public have the opportunity to come forward and personally question the senior management of the B.C. Ferry Corp. There is more accountability today with B.C. Ferries than there ever was under the opposition, when they managed that corporation.

[1440]

FOREST WORKER SAFETY

C. Puchmayr: There have been three accidents involving logging trucks this week — three in the past 48 hours. At least two of these accidents have created fatalities. There is an alarming link between this government's deregulation of this sector — in some cases, the engineered standards of logging roads — and the number of accidents in the workplace. I am not prejudging these accidents, but merely trying to prevent further deaths.

To the Labour Minister: will the minister agree that there is a direct correlation between cuts to regulations and accidents in the forest sector?

Hon. M. de Jong: Thanks to the member for the question.

Of course, again, for those families who are now experiencing that worst of all possible feelings and tragedies, our thoughts and condolences.

I won't offer the confirmation that the member is seeking, because I cannot. As difficult as it is to look at numbers around fatalities — and we all in this House agree that one is too many.... But there is this notion about going back to the good old days. Well, in 1996, 40 people in forestry died. That ain't such a good old day. In 1997, 41 people died. In 2004, 16 people died.

Now, I am not prepared to say the opposite of what the member says — that there is a correlation to what took place — because I don't think the numbers support that either. But they certainly don't support the proposition that the member.... There's a combination of factors here that we want to work on, that we are working on, and we are going to do everything humanly possible to make forestry a safer industry to work in.

Mr. Speaker: Member for New Westminster has a supplemental.

C. Puchmayr: On December 5, 2005, in Vancouver the United Steelworkers held a B.C. Forest Fatality Summit. I was in attendance, and so was the Labour Minister. I want to quote something that the Labour Minister said at that summit. The Labour Minister said: "The observations that I have heard from a number of you — that the industry has changed and our regulatory regime has not caught up — is a proposition that I would agree with." These are the comments of the Labour Minister then.

As a result of the government's deep cuts to regulations, WorkSafe B.C. has a reduced ability to enforce standards that protect workers. Will the Minister of Labour commit today to conduct an independent inquiry involving all stakeholders, including WorkSafe B.C., specifically to address deregulation and the impact that it is having on workers today?

Hon. M. de Jong: I didn't just make those comments there. I've made them in this House.

The industry has changed, and we need to be prepared to change with it. It's why the Forestry Safety Council was established in the first place. It's why, when suggestions have been made to engage in dialogue, reviews.... It's why, in the immediate aftermath of that meeting, I wrote to the head of WorkSafe B.C. and asked and directed them to engage in a full review of all the policies. It's why, when the suggestion was made by the Steelworkers that a specific coroner be established to review fatalities in forestry, we said: "That's a good idea." It's unfortunate that it's required, but it's a good idea. Yesterday it happened, and that individual was hired.

HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPACTS OF DEREGULATION

M. Karagianis: Just several days ago in estimates, I repeatedly asked the minister responsible for deregula-

tion if the cuts in regulations had resulted in any gaps, risks or liabilities. The minister said: "We have said, and we have held true to our word, that we would not compromise regulatory reduction and put safety at jeopardy, put people's health at jeopardy or put the environment at jeopardy. Those are principles that we have clearly lived by."

My question is to the Minister of Small Business. Will you now admit that people's health and safety have been jeopardized by regulatory cuts?

[1445]

Hon. M. de Jong: I know it may be politically attractive to try and construct some kind of boogeyman out there. The numbers that I have just related again to the House are appalling, but they transcend any of the matters or changes that the member has referred to. I could say to the member in reply: you know, in 2004 we had the.... It's hard to call it the best, but we had the fewest fatalities in living memory, and maybe that was attributable to the changes that were made.

I think it's far more complicated than that, and I think it's unfortunate that the member would try and limit the discussion to any single matter when it's pretty clear that there has been a longstanding culture of risk in forestry operations in this province that needs to change. We are doing everything possible to make that change happen.

Mr. Speaker: Member for Esquimalt-Metchosin has a supplemental.

M. Karagianis: Well, a 30-percent cut to regulations in WCB, 154,000 regulations cut across government. The Minister of Small Business was very explicit about the fact that 40.2 percent of regulations were cut in government.

I repeatedly asked whether this dramatic reduction and elimination in regulations resulted in any gaps, risks or liabilities, and I was assured that safety had not been compromised in any way.

Again, my question is to the minister responsible for deregulation: will you admit that in fact there have been gaps, risks and liabilities and that personal safety has been put in jeopardy?

Hon. M. de Jong: I'm not sure that the member and I are going to have a meeting of the minds on this, but her proposition, again, seems to be: take us back to the good old days. They weren't good. If the member's proposition to this House is to re-create that regulatory regime that was in place ten years ago, then I say no, because the results were appalling.

The results last year in forestry were also appalling. That's why we've hired more enforcement officials. That's why I applaud the Forest Safety Council for having an ombudsman put in place. That's why we've applied additional resources, and that's why there's a dedicated coroner now to try and get to the heart of some of these issues. That's how we're going to deal with this — not by trying to find political boogeymen

out there. It is to go to the heart of the matter and change a culture of risk that has existed for too long in forestry.

TRANSLINK GOVERNANCE REVIEW PANEL

D. Chudnovsky: Earlier this month the Minister of Transportation announced what he called an independent panel to review the governance structure of TransLink. That review committee includes one individual whose firm has donated over \$32,000 to the B.C. Liberal Party since 2001 and another individual who sits on the board of Partnerships B.C. and served as a special adviser to the Premier.

My question to the Minister of Transportation: given that he called the review "independent," does he agree that to ensure public confidence in the process (1) the report of the committee, (2) all preliminary reports submitted to the minister and (3) any other material provided to the minister by the committee should be made public?

Hon. K. Falcon: I thank the member for the question.

These are, in fact, three eminent British Columbians that are serving on this board. The individual that you refer to, I must confess, I did not know personally at all. I don't believe I've ever met him prior to appointing him to the board. I am pleased to find out that he apparently is a supporter of good, free enterprise government.

What I can say is that all three of these individuals bring extraordinary decades of public service and private sector involvement and experience in understanding how to operate and run large organizations, and I look forward to receiving their report. I wouldn't have any problem whatsoever with making that report public once I'm finished dealing with it.

Mr. Speaker: Member for Vancouver-Kensington has a supplemental.

[1450]

D. Chudnovsky: Thanks to the minister for what I think is a partial response to my question. I just want to get down to the details. What I asked for was three things. I think that those three things be made public. I think that it's fair to the public to ask for this level of transparency on such an important investigation.

Those three things are, first, the final report of the committee to the minister.... This hand-picked committee reports directly to the minister, so first the final report of the committee should be made public. It seems to me the minister has made that commitment in this House, and we thank him for it. But there are two other things we believe should be made public. The second one is any preliminary reports that go to the minister from the committee. The third one — any other information that is forwarded by the committee to the minister. I ask him today whether he will commit to making those public as well.

Hon. K. Falcon: As much as I try to appease the opposition critic, I'm afraid today I'm going to have to tell him no on two of those three questions. But I can assure the member that once that final report is put in place and once I have had an opportunity as minister to review that final report, I will have no hesitation in sharing it with the members opposite.

COMMUNITY FILM COMMISSION FUNDING

R. Fleming: My question is for the Minister of Tourism, Sport and the Arts. The Greater Victoria Film Commission announced today that because of municipal support, they won't have to close their doors by the end of the year. The commission had sought stable, increased funding from the provincial government. Why did this government fail to step up and ensure this film commission was properly resourced when threatened with closure?

Hon. O. Ilich: In fact, we are providing stable funding to the whole film industry. We do provide, in the form of tax credits.... In Victoria there are additional tax credits that are provided, and there is also regional money that goes to the film commission.

Mr. Speaker: Member for Victoria-Hillside has a supplemental.

R. Fleming: It is with reluctance that I point out that tax credits don't flow to the film commissions.

My supplementary question is.... The Liberal government promised a review of film commission funding for all the regional commissions in the province over a year ago, but to date no action has been taken. Now the Union of B.C. Municipalities has stepped into this debate. They're requesting that this be done.

My question to the minister: when will the government commit to undertake the review and ensure that community film commissions can plan long term to continue the valuable work they do in regional economies?

Hon. O. Ilich: I would just like to note that film production this year is up about 50 percent over last year. In addition, the Victoria take on that has been up about \$28 million.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. Members.

HARBOURLYNX TAX EXEMPTION

J. Horgan: Hon. Speaker, on March 9 the Premier and the Minister of Small Business and Revenue signed order-in-council 135, providing tax forgiveness of over \$365,000 to the HarbourLynx ferry service. The following week, on March 15, the Minister of Labour signed an order rescinding that and in public said it was a clerical error.

My question is to the Minister of Labour. Could he explain the clerical error that led the Premier of British Columbia to sign an order, along with the Minister of Revenue, forgiving tax of over \$365,000?

[1455]

Hon. R. Thorpe: I can't discuss the specific discussions which take place at cabinet. I can and I will tell you, however, that cabinet gave this matter very, very serious consideration, and a decision was reached not to grant the remission.

Mr. Speaker: The member for Malahat-Juan de Fuca has a supplemental.

J. Horgan: The member, if he has his calendar available, will know that March 9 was a Thursday, and cabinet meets on a Wednesday. So that would have made this a corridor order. Now, I have some familiarity with these issues, and I do know that legislative counsel gives green flags and red flags to these orders. I'm curious.

Again, to the Minister of Labour: could he explain to me why it was okay on a Thursday for the Premier and the Minister of Revenue to give a break to a company and the following week it was not?

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

Hon. R. Thorpe: I will not discuss the administrative details of cabinet. However, I can....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. The minister has the floor.

Hon. R. Thorpe: However, I can confirm that there was an administrative error in the processing of this order-in-council. It was acknowledged and rectified immediately through a rescinding order, OIC 140, on March 15.

[End of question period.]

Tabling Documents

Hon. R. Neufeld: I have the honour to present two capital project plan reports pursuant to the Budget Transparency and Accountability Act, one for Aberfeldie redevelopment and the second one for the Coquitlam dam seismic improvement project.

Petitions

J. Rustad: I'd like to table a petition on behalf of 309 students from the College of New Caledonia in Prince George regarding tuition fees.

Orders of the Day

Hon. M. de Jong: I call Committee of Supply in both committee rooms. In this chamber it will be the estimates of the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance and in Section A, the Douglas Fir Committee Room, continuing estimates for the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

[1500]

Committee of Supply

ESTIMATES: MINISTRY OF EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME ASSISTANCE

The House in Committee of Supply (Section B); S. Hammell in the chair.

The committee met at 3:02 p.m.

On Vote 25: ministry operations, \$1,369,415,000.

Hon. C. Richmond: Good afternoon, everyone. I'm here today to discuss the estimates for the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance. Before I begin my formal remarks, I'd like to take a moment to introduce some members of my ministry's executive who are here with me today. Cairine MacDonald is the deputy minister. Andrew Wharton is the assistant deputy minister of integrated social development service delivery. Sharon Moysey is the assistant deputy minister of management services division and executive financial officer, and David Curtis is executive director of the corporate planning and operations division.

These members of my executive, along with all staff at the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, have truly shown me their dedication to public service and commitment to excellence. Their role in supporting me as minister is most valuable, and I thank them.

I would like to begin by noting that the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance budget for the current year is almost \$1.4 billion, making it the fifth-largest ministry in the provincial government. Through our delivery of income assistance, disability assistance and employment programs, we directly contribute to the well-being of almost 140,000 British Columbians in need.

Our client base is as diverse as the communities we live in. They include employable clients in need of short-term assistance; persons with significant and multiple barriers to employment, including those with mental health and addiction challenges; persons with disabilities experiencing significant restrictions in their ability to perform daily living activities; children living in the home of a relative when their own parents are unable to care for them; seniors aged 65 years or older; and low- and moderate-income families who are not direct clients of the ministry but who are eligible for health and dental assistance. We provide services to these clients through the commitment of almost 2,000 professional staff who work out of 104 ministry offices,

19 government agents branches and three service centres.

Through our partnership with external service providers, we deliver flexible and responsive employment programs to clients in all regions of the province. Over and above this substantial commitment of resources, the ministry has invested more than \$16 million in new funding to provide \$3 million to expand availability of a community volunteer supplement; \$3 million to increase earning exemptions for persons with disabilities and persons with persistent multiple barriers; \$1.4 million to double the school startup supplement; and \$10 million to restore the seniors supplement.

Before I get into details about these initiatives, I'd like to talk about the evolving nature of our work and the accomplishments we've made in helping British Columbians most in need.

[1505]

One of the most difficult things we've had to do is make a fundamental shift in the perception of income assistance, from a culture of entitlement and dependency to one of employment and self-reliance. We remember every day the impact of the culture of entitlement and the effects it had in the mid-1990s on income assistance, when one out of every ten British Columbians was on income assistance — six out of ten single mothers in the province and one out of every seven British Columbia children. What a horrible waste of human potential. We never want to see those days again.

In 2001 this government knew that it could do better, so we got to work. In April 2002 we enacted new legislation guided by a goal that is twofold: helping people who are able to work to find and keep jobs, while providing the best system of supports for those who need it most.

I am pleased to say that we've had great success on both fronts. To date we've placed more than 46,000 of our clients directly into jobs — good jobs like painters, security officers, and hotel desk clerks. We've encouraged thousands more to find jobs on their own. This means there are over 112,000 British Columbians who no longer rely on income assistance, including 48,000 children who now have greater opportunities and more promising futures.

While we are thrilled at our success in helping people who can work to get into good jobs and keep them, we certainly know that not everybody is able to work. In fact, our caseload has changed dramatically over the last five years. As we have seen the number of employable people on income assistance decline, we've also seen a steady rise in our caseload of clients with disabilities and serious barriers to employment. In June 2001 the caseload for persons with disabilities was 43,000, and today it is 58,500 — an increase of 36 per cent. Altogether, persons with disabilities and those with serious barriers to employment now make up more than two-thirds of our caseload. This is how it should be.

It has always been the cornerstone of my ministry's work to provide the best system of support for our

most vulnerable clients, persons with disabilities. That's precisely why we are ensuring that the right supports are in place to achieve this goal. Last year, because of the excellent fiscal management of this government, we were able to follow through on this commitment in a big way. We invested an extra \$55 million a year to increase disability assistance by \$70 to \$856 each month, benefiting more than 70,000 British Columbians. This was the largest increase in the history of the province, making disability rates the highest income assistance available in B.C. and the third-highest in Canada.

As well, we continue to provide persons with disabilities with low-cost annual bus passes and enhanced medical coverage, including Medical Services Plan, non-deductible Pharmacare, dental and optical coverage, medical equipment and supplies, orthotics and medical transportation.

Along with caring for their financial and health needs, we are making it a priority to increase opportunities for people with disabilities to participate more in their communities. That's why we've invested \$92 million in specialized disability employment programs since 2001 to assist them to work or volunteer as they are able.

We've created the Minister's Council on Employment for Persons with Disabilities, ensuring the ongoing provision and research of disability and employment supports. To date two significant projects have come out of this council: (1) the WorkAble Solutions marketing team to encourage and support B.C. employers to hire people with disabilities and (2) the Disability Supports for Employment Fund, providing \$1 million each year to non-profit organizations that help those with disabilities in the workplace.

So far, my council has approved 45 grants from this fund, totalling more than \$2 million and supporting projects run by the Neil Squire Foundation, Adaptive Technologies, the B.C. Paraplegic Association, the Canadian Mental Health Association and many other agencies throughout B.C.

To encourage more people with disabilities to enter the workforce, we've just raised the earnings exemption to \$500 a month — the third increase made by this government since 2001. This means persons that with disabilities now have the opportunity to have an income of \$1,356 each month when combined with their full support and shelter allowance.

[1510]

People with disabilities have told us that the earnings exemption has gone a long way in helping them pursue their employment goals and achieve greater personal and financial independence. That's our intention. We want persons with disabilities to enjoy opportunities in the workforce, confident in the knowledge that our programs and services will continue to support them.

I know these supports are making a real difference. Just recently I had the good fortune of presiding at a ceremony out in Saanich put on by Triumph, one of our service providers. It was an inspiring event hon-

ouring the determination and courage of one particular British Columbian with disabilities who refused to give up on his dream of employment, despite serious head injuries and numerous personal tragedies that threatened to hold him back. To put it in his words: "I was on the scrap heap of life until somebody saw that there was something good in me somewhere and gave me that hand up and that assistance to get back into the workforce." This man now happily works at a local business making \$12.50 an hour, using his skills as a craftsman in both metal and wood — a job he describes as great.

Stories like these are why we are investing in these employment programs, because his story is not the only one. His success represented the 1,000th success story of Triumph in serving people with disabilities. I am pleased to say this is just the beginning. Later this year we will be refining our disability employment programs so that they are the most effective they can be, ensuring the best service to clients and the best value to taxpayers.

Thanks to another surplus budget, we're expanding our community volunteer program by investing an additional \$9 million over the next three years. This investment will give 2,500 more people with disabilities up to \$100 each month to help them with the expenses of volunteering in their communities. As well, over the next three years my ministry will take a leadership role in developing an integrated and cooperative approach to delivering cross-ministry supports throughout the province. We are leading this strategy because people with disabilities are a high priority for my ministry. We're not just making our society accessible to them; we're including them.

There is another group of individuals on our caseload that is also a high priority. I'm talking about British Columbians with complex and unique challenges — people facing homelessness, mental illness and addiction. We recognize there are no simple answers for assisting these individuals and that our best solution lies in working together with other levels of government, municipalities and community organizations.

That's why two years ago this government created the Premier's Task Force on Homelessness, Mental Illness and Addictions. This task force of municipal and provincial leaders provides a multilevel, coordinated approach to developing long-term solutions to the complex issues of homelessness. As part of our contribution to the task force, we've begun a number of outreach initiatives throughout the province using creative partnership approaches to connect individuals with supports and services they need to integrate back into our community.

One of these projects is our homeless outreach in Vancouver's west end, south and downtown east side, where we've partnered with city social workers who literally go into the streets and alleys in the early morning hours to reach out to homeless and barriered individuals. We bring these individuals directly into our offices and fast-track their application for income assistance. At the same time, we help them find permanent

housing and connect them with the medical services they need.

So far, over 95 percent of people we have brought into our offices have begun receiving income assistance and had a place to live within the same working day.

Another project sees us working alongside social workers from the health authority and the city of Vancouver as part of an urgent response team. We're taking ministry services directly to individuals in hospitals and detox centres so that they are supported with ongoing community and health services, both while they are in crisis and later as they re-establish themselves in the community.

[1515]

We are supporting similar workshops in Kamloops, expanding our outreach activities to assist all individuals with mental health, drug and alcohol abuse issues. Through an investment of \$150,000, we are helping these folks back into the community, giving them access to housing, financial resources, transition and referral support services. So far we have had tremendous progress, helping close to 300 people begin a better life.

I believe this Kamloops integration project is a success because of the effective partnerships with local partners. These include the city of Kamloops, the Kamloops AIDS Society, B.C. Housing, the New Life Mission and the Forensic Psychiatric Services Commission.

Providing these individuals with income assistance, housing and community supports is the critical first step, but there's another step we are taking that is also very important. It's no use giving our most vulnerable citizens resources just to have them preyed upon every last Wednesday of the month. That's why, to safeguard their money, we are promoting direct deposit for our clients. We're doing this because direct deposit, often a cheaper alternative to the commercial money-cashing centres, ensures that our clients have a secure, safe and reliable system of handling their money.

Promoting direct deposit is just one measure we are taking to protect our clients. We simply will not tolerate the illegal activities of those who steal from our most vulnerable citizens or from taxpayers. That's why my ministry has also taken action to prevent fraud where it most commonly occurs.

Following a police sting operation in Vancouver's downtown east side, which uncovered unscrupulous landlords taking advantage of our clients, we established the housing integrated task team. This team is working to stop fraud in the area. This is not as easy as it sounds. We often discover that the same landlord owns several properties under different names, making it a challenge to identify them all at once. But through the work of the team, we are determined to do just that.

One preventive measure is doing regular checks, making sure clients are living in the rooms they are paying for. The team is also personally delivering assistance cheques to landlords for clients residing in seven downtown east side residences and withholding those cheques if clients are not living there.

Another type of fraud we are working to stop is identity theft or falsification of documents. Here we are

partnering with the Burnaby police in their current investigation into identity creation rings, making sure no one is successful in their attempt to scam income assistance. To date, these prevention activities have saved hundreds of thousands of income assistance dollars from falling into the wrong hands.

So far I've talked about our outreach services and prevention services making a real difference in people's lives, but we would prefer that we get to a point where these services are no longer needed. That's why a priority of this government is to serve British Columbians early so that families facing the greatest difficulties have the supports to prevent challenges from turning into crisis.

This concern is shared by all of government and took the greatest priority in our last budget. That's why this government is investing an additional \$421 million over four years to help ensure the well-being of vulnerable children. This includes \$72 million to add more social workers and other front-line staff, \$100 million to enhance the child protection system, \$34 million to increase funding for the child and youth with mental health disorders, \$36 million to reduce wait-lists for services to children and youth with special needs, \$31 million in additional support to implement five regional aboriginal child and family development service authorities, \$2 million for the crystal meth secretariat to integrate and coordinate efforts to combat the production and use of crystal methamphetamine and \$112 million in additional funding for K-to-12 education.

Beyond that, we are also investing \$3 million over the next three years to extend the BladeRunners construction training and apprenticeship program for disadvantaged and multi-barriered youth; \$76 million to expand universal hearing, sight and dental testing for every child in B.C. under the age of six; and nearly \$200 million in social housing — the most ever spent in British Columbia.

These are significant investments, and to add to this, I think we can all agree the best way of helping children is to make sure their parents have a good job — in other words, helping families break free from the cycle of poverty, allowing our youngest citizens to build futures they can be proud of. We know that children in working families are better off than those supported by income assistance. They do better in school, and they do better later on as adults in the job market.

[1520]

That's why my ministry is spending more than \$70 million this year in improved employment programs. This includes a new community assistance program, a new British Columbia employment program and specialized programs like our bridging employment program, which helps women who have faced abuse move toward independence. Together these programs will provide a full continuum of employment supports to help our clients find and keep jobs and succeed in today's labour market.

To help working families succeed, this government has greatly increased the income threshold for receiving child care subsidy from \$21,000 to \$38,000 per year,

benefiting 6,500 more children and about 6,000 families who will receive an increase in their existing subsidy.

To ensure more money stays with working families, we've also reduced or eliminated provincial income taxes for about 730,000 British Columbians.

Besides a job, another fundamental need for B.C. families is good health, and to help our low-income families stay healthy, we're continuing to provide extra health supports and services. Last year we raised prescription eyeglasses coverage by \$35 through the Healthy Kids program to ensure kids who need new glasses can have them each year.

We also increased payment for dental services to 80 percent of the dentist's fee guide, up from 63 percent, so low-income families have a better access to services they need. And we raised the monthly natal supplement from \$35 to \$45 to provide better pre- and post-natal nutrition and support for healthier mothers and babies.

Now with a ministry budget of almost \$1.4 billion, an increase of more than 6½ percent over last year, we are able to provide even more. To assist families on income assistance, we're investing \$4 million over three years to double the school startup allowance, providing \$84 for each child under 12 and \$116 for each child 12 or older. This is the first increase since 1993. This increase will benefit 29,000 children, giving them the tools and supports they need to succeed in the classroom.

These supports, giving B.C.'s children a solid start in life, are made possible because of this government's sound fiscal management and the excellent strength of our province's economy.

To bring this all together and ensure those who need our supports receive them, I give credit to the ongoing hard work of my regional ministry staff. On a daily basis they work personally with our clients to make sure their immediate needs are met and to help individuals going through a difficult time to once again be self-sufficient. They're doing an incredible job serving British Columbians with the highest standards of respect and sensitivity, ensuring fair and consistent service to all our clients throughout the province.

Since fair and consistent service is a priority for all of us, my ministry is developing a service code, a project that all ministry employees are involved in. This way we can continue to maintain the best level of service for our clients — service that all ministry staff can relate to, believe in and be proud of.

In all of our projects, the success my ministry has had in working together reaffirms for me that our government's priorities are on the right track and that the value of our investment reaches far beyond the dollar.

I now look forward to discussing the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance budget in greater detail and welcome comments from all hon. members present.

C. Trevena: I'd like to thank the minister, to welcome his staff — thank you for coming to help us out — and also to recognize the hard-working staff across

the province. I know that they are dealing at times with very difficult issues in very trying circumstances, and I know that they're working extraordinarily hard.

The budget that we had come down in February has been described as a children's budget, and I know the minister has been describing issues affecting what the ministry is doing to assist children. I note that the minister started by describing how it was in the 1990s, when one out of every seven children was living in a family on income assistance. I think that we have a challenging problem, because now we have one in four children in poverty, so it seems that the situation is getting worse rather than better.

[1525]

We're seeing increased usage of food banks. I know that in the minister's own hometown of Kamloops, one in four of the users of the food bank there are children, which, sadly, neatly reflects the level of child poverty in our province. I think it is a disgraceful level. I think that we should all, all of us, be ashamed of it — that we can have a society where one in four children is in poverty, where 24,000 children provincewide are using food banks, where pregnant women have to rely on hampers at food banks and have to have donations of diapers and where people can't afford basic nutrition. I think we all have to question what this means for us as a society.

My colleague, the member for Vancouver-Kingsway...

D. Chudnovsky: The other guy.

C. Trevena: ...the other guy, was in the estimates process talking to the Minister of Children and Family Development, and he asked the minister about child poverty. I think we're all very concerned about this and want to put it on the agenda and want to make sure that the issues are addressed while we have the opportunity to question ministers and do have this chance. He asked the Minister of Children and Family Development about child poverty, and that minister responded that this responsibility lies with the Minister of Employment and Income Assistance, so I would, first off, like to ask the minister whether he does take responsibility for child poverty?

Hon. C. Richmond: Just let me begin by saying the statistic that the member repeats very often of one in four children in poverty is not correct. It's at least three years old, and an awful lot has happened in British Columbia in the last three years.

I'm going to give you — since statistics seem to be important here — the statistics put out by *Hunger-Count*, which are only four months old. This is a report released in November of last year, just four months ago, by the Canadian Association of Food Banks. They're not our figures; they're theirs. It shows that the number of people in British Columbia using food banks is down 10½ percent, and the number of children using food banks is down 9.1 percent.

Although 45 percent of food banks have reported an increase in food bank use, food bank usage has de-

creased for the province as a whole. Eight thousand fewer people in the province visited a food bank this year compared to last. It shows that B.C.'s strong economy is helping more people find good jobs and build brighter futures for themselves and their families. It also shows that the largest users of food banks are single people.

I'm glad that the member had a chance to visit the food bank in Kamloops run by Marg Spina. I've been there many times myself. In fact, I was there just about a week or ten days ago taking a few things over to her. She's a very innovative person. When these young people, who are the biggest users of food banks, come in for food, she also has what she calls the store, I believe it is, where they have clothing, computers, all sorts of things — shoes, used skis, used everything that people donate.

When young people want these items, she puts them to work in the food bank doing whatever is required. They even have a community garden. I believe the member mentioned that the other day in a talk she was giving. It shows the innovation of Marg. I've known her for many, many years. She's been a good friend and supporter for a long time. She doesn't just hand them these things out of the store. They work for them, and they get points for working. So she is also instilling in them a work ethic. When you want something that you see in the store, whether it's a computer or a coat or whatever it is, you work in her food bank and earn points, and then you acquire these things.

[1530]

She's also receiving an award next week, I believe it is, from the Premier for outstanding citizen, because she truly is. But that's the way, to me, that a food bank should work. My colleague from Kamloops-North Thompson mentioned it in a speech he made the other day, simply because when you go there you can't help but come away with a feeling that this is the way a food bank should be run.

Another interesting statistic is.... Even if your statistic of one in four children was correct, you could imagine what it would be if the stats were still the same as they were in the mid-'90s, when one in seven children were in families on income assistance. Now that figure is down to one in 30. If it were still the same, can you imagine what would be happening at food banks today?

In December of 2001 there were 85,000 children, or about 6 percent of the child population, in families on income assistance. In 2005 there were 35,000 children, down to 3 percent of the child population, or only one in 30. I think that is tremendous progress, and once again I question your statistic of one in four.

C. Trevena: I take it that that means no, you aren't taking responsibility for child poverty, although the levels of poverty have quite clearly risen in the last five years. I think you just have to go to Kamloops — to the food bank, where kids play in the food bank. Go to the area where everybody can see the poverty, where it is the focus for poverty in our province — the downtown

east side. Go, I think, to any community to see the increase in poverty.

I'm not going to quibble on figures. The Hunger-Count figures — yes, they're the ones that we're using. They're the ones that you are also using. They are the most recent figures we have, and while there may be fewer children now living in families on income assistance, I suspect that's largely because fewer families have access to income assistance. I think that none of us can really avoid the fact that one in four kids — 2003 figures, one in four kids — are living in poverty. In 2003 this government was in power.

We have food banks. We talk about the good food bank in Kamloops, and I agree. It is a very vibrant food bank, and Marg does a fantastic job in making this happen. But we have kids playing at food banks, and we have food banks as part of our society. In Kelowna I was talking to workers there, and we have kids going to school hungry, kids who stop by the food bank on the way to school because they haven't had breakfast because their parents can't afford to give them breakfast. We have kids who go to an after-school program who go straight for the snacks because they haven't eaten all day. As one worker said to me: "We're starving our children." I'd like to ask the minister whether he'll take responsibility for that.

Hon. C. Richmond: For the member to assert that we don't care about child poverty or don't take responsibility for it is just nonsense. What we are doing in this government is working across ministries. Children are not just the responsibility of this ministry, but of Health, of Education, of the Ministry of Children and Families and others.

We are working very hard in this government to break down the old mentality of silos, which has been prevalent in government — not only this government, but governments everywhere — for far too long. This is why the Premier developed the Caucus Committee on Social Development, where all of these ministries get together, usually on a weekly basis, and try to knock down the silos and work across ministries.

That's when I say we're spending \$421 million over the next four years out of this budget. It's not all being spent in one ministry. It's being spent across government, and it's being spent on children — \$421 million — because children are the most vulnerable in our society, and we take it very seriously.

[1535]

In my opening remarks I outlined where all this \$421 million was going, and it's coming from across government. They were the focal point of this year's budget.

A couple of other statistics that we have to quote and we have to rely on. We have reviewed the possibility of including poverty measures in our service plan and determined that it would not be appropriate for the following reasons: reporting on low income-cut off rates across the province is already included as a performance indicator in the B.C. Progress Board series of benchmark reports. The issue of poverty does not fit

within a single ministry — as I have just said. No single organization owns or has the solution to poverty.

That's why we're working diligently across government to knock down the silos. We're working with other agencies; with municipalities; with service providers; with advocacy groups; and, of course, with everyone who is interested in children, as we all are. I'll leave it at that for the moment.

C. Trevena: I agree that we do need to have cross-governmental cooperation, because it's the only way that we're going to work, if we all do talk to each other. But we do still have the problem of massive poverty in our province.

In the service plan the ministry says, as you say, that it's part of a larger network of assistance. It states that "clients receiving our assistance and supports may also receive additional benefits, including the Canada Pension Plan, National Child Benefit or child care subsidy — thereby substantially increasing their available income financial independence." The money provided by the federal government, however, is deducted from assistance rates, so the issue of federal-provincial transfers is always one of contention. I would like to know how much of the federal child benefit is kept by the ministry.

Hon. C. Richmond: The National Child Benefit all goes to the client.

C. Trevena: This would mean, then, that the basic benefit rate a single person gets is completely topped up by the National Child Benefit and there is no claw-back at all — is that what the minister is saying?

[1540]

Hon. C. Richmond: Sorry for the delay. We were just trying to find you a complete answer to this.

B.C. has never discriminated against families on welfare by clawing back increases in the National Child Benefit supplement from income assistance rates. The fully integrated B.C. family bonus and NCB supplement is received by low-income families in B.C., whether they are on income assistance or not. In fact, the ministry tops up families who do not receive or receive less than the maximum amount of National Child Benefit supplement family bonus per child each month up to \$123.50 per child.

C. Trevena: It's interesting how we can play with figures. The National Council of Welfare has looked at this and has some statistics on how much families are getting on income assistance across the country. It compares them across the country. So a parent on income assistance.... Let's say a two-parent family on income assistance actually now has a lower income than they did in 1989 when the minister was the minister for the same responsibility in the Socred government.

If we use a fixed dollar amount, a 2004 dollar, in 1989 a single parent with one child would receive \$15,366 and now they receive \$13,778. The federal por-

tion of this has actually increased from \$1,669 to \$3,467. So the federal amount has gone up, but people are actually losing money. Welfare has gone down. I would like to ask the minister how he can explain this, if the ministry isn't clawing back the benefit.

[1545]

Hon. C. Richmond: The amount paid for single parents with one or two children since June of 2001 has gone up across the board, except in one case. For people with disabilities, it's up substantially and has not gone down, as suggested by the member. In fact, it's up considerably all across the board.

C. Trevena: Could the minister give me those figures?

Hon. C. Richmond: Sure. These figures are public knowledge. The figures I have quoted are total income including tax credits. If you would like, we will send you a copy of these.

C. Trevena: As I say, I find this very interesting because when.... Every time the federal subsidy has gone up, the welfare level has frozen and people have effectively lost money. So I'll be very interested to see the figures and how the minister can justify that. Hopefully, we will be able to discuss this as the estimate proceedings continue over the next few days.

When we're talking about clawbacks.... It's quite a nasty phrase. I just wanted to ask you about one that I hope isn't going to be a clawback. The new Conservative government in Ottawa has obviously announced the child care agreement, where they're going to be paying every family who has a child under the age of seven \$1,200. They're not going to have a child care plan, but they will give every family \$1,200 for this. I would like to know whether the minister will commit that this money, this \$120 a month, will be in addition to temporary assistance, to PWD, to PPMB — that it will be on top of the assistance rates. I would like this assurance.

Hon. C. Richmond: The question pertains to future federal government policy, but we can only assume that it's going to happen. It's a bit hypothetical, but the ministry is currently reviewing the federal government's position and the choice in child care allowances and is committed to ensuring these funds are applied in a way that maximizes the potential benefit to children. We have no intention of clawing anything back.

C. Trevena: You have no intention of clawing anything back, so I can take it that you are — as the Liberal Premier of Ontario did — making a commitment that this \$120 a month, \$1,200 a year, will go directly to every family with a child under seven that is on assistance under your ministry?

Hon. C. Richmond: I understand that is the federal program as it has been proposed. It's not law yet, but

we assume it's going to be, and the program says every child under the age of either six or seven will receive \$100 a month, or \$1,200 a year. We have no intention of touching that \$100 or clawing anything else back.

C. Trevena: I'm very pleased that that is going to be the case. I would also like the commitment that there will be no reduction in any other of the assistance rates, subsidies or anything else which is going to families who have children under the age of six — whatever age it is that the federal government sets for this child care program — to ensure that they get, on top of their benefits that they're already receiving, the extra moneys coming from the federal government directly to them.

[1550]

Hon. C. Richmond: We will not be changing any other of our supports just because the federal government is giving \$100 a month to each child. We have no intention whatever to claw anything back or to reduce any other rates.

I do want to read a few things into the record to explain what this ministry is doing to improve the lives of children living in poverty.

The Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance is committed to building the best support system in Canada to support children at risk as outlined in the ministry's goals. In the short term the ministry provides basic support and shelter for the family unit along with many other services that are directed towards children, such as the Healthy Kids program. Crisis supplements may be issued to family units, particularly those with children who face unexpected emergency needs to prevent imminent danger to their physical health.

Health supplements for dependant children of all BCEA clients and children in the home of a relative include: premium-free Medical Services Plan coverage; no-deductible Pharmacare coverage; infant formula; optical supplements; dental services; diet supplements; short-term nutritional products; medical equipment and supplies; orthotics and bracing; medical transportation; and physiotherapy, massage therapy, podiatry and chiropractic services.

A shelter top-up supplement for families who are working on the return of their children from the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development ensures the family does not have to move to alternate accommodation when a child is removed from the family. A shared parenting supplement provides a shelter top-up to parents with joint custody and child in the home of a relative.

One more item we could add on there is the increase to the school startup program.

Quite contrary to the supposition that we may be lowering other rates and clawing something back, we are doing everything in our power and within our budget to provide additional services for children.

C. Trevena: Is this money that we're all expecting to come from the federal government — this \$1,200 a year — regarded as income by the ministry?

Hon. C. Richmond: No, it will be treated as exempt.

C. Trevena: That's very encouraging, minister. I know that colleagues have been talking to people in the Ministry of Children and Family Development, and I think that ministry would be very interested to know that this is how it is going to be treated — that it will be exempt and will be in addition to all other benefits.

Your government has made a number of changes in access to assistance over the years. One of the areas is that a single parent can only claim temporary assistance until their child is three, without having to look for work at the same time. Often that parent is a woman. If the woman is divorced, she is sometimes — we often hope more often than not — getting maintenance from her spouse. The family maintenance exemption was in place since 1976, and that allowed a single parent who is receiving child support payments to keep \$100 a month. But this is one of the areas that has been eliminated.

This exemption was used primarily by single parents. I wondered why the ministry made this move.

[1555]

Hon. C. Richmond: Long and complicated. The family maintenance enforcement program, FMEP, is mandated to seek maintenance payments for income assistance recipients who are entitled to receive them. The goals are to ensure that family breakdown does not impoverish dependant family members, places no excessive burden on public funds and promotes financial independence and economic security of clients by ensuring they receive enforceable maintenance orders.

Previously, women on family maintenance were allowed to keep \$100 per month to serve as an incentive to pursue maintenance and to cover legal expenses in doing so. The assignment of family maintenance is a condition of eligibility for B.C. employment assistance. All costs in obtaining and enforcing orders are covered by the ministry and the family maintenance enforcement program. Thus, an exemption no longer serves as an incentive.

[1600]

Every province in Canada other than Quebec deducts maintenance income dollar for dollar. But I think the key in there is that the province now pays all the legal costs of the family maintenance enforcement program.

C. Trevena: Thank you for explaining the procedure, minister. I just wanted to know why women, largely women, don't get that extra \$100 a month?

Hon. C. Richmond: I thought I explained that. One of the reasons was to prevent them from having to foot the financial bills to go after the errant — usually, father — spouse who is not paying maintenance for his children. But now they don't have to do that. The province absorbs all the financial costs.

Harking back, as the member did earlier to when I had this ministry before, we brought in the family maintenance enforcement program for the very reason that there was quite a percentage of fathers who would not pay child support. Of course, that put a tremendous burden on the Crown. We decided that we would enforce the family maintenance program by getting court orders and forcing them to pay and to live up to their responsibilities, even up to and including garnisheeing wages. So we absorb all the financial cost of that program now. Hence, we do not allow an exemption of \$100. Also, it is considered unearned income.

C. Trevena: Absorbing the legal costs is clearly for going after deadbeat dads, going after the people who are not going to pay their maintenance. But this is only a proportion of the fathers or mothers who are liable for support payments. So effectively, you're penalizing others for the problems of some.

Again, I would like to know why you are doing this — why some people are bearing the cost, by not allowing this exemption, of having to pay for the legal bills for others?

Hon. C. Richmond: I think I've got the member's question straight, but I'll try this. Income assistance is the payer of last resort. Whether a woman is on income assistance or working, maybe in a low-paying job, we come to the assistance of people for the purposes of food and shelter and other sustenance as the payer of last resort.

So the errant spouse, usually a father, is expected to pay child support. When he or she doesn't, then the single parent can go to the courts and get a court order to force that person to pay up. If they don't, then the taxpayer has to pay that. Like I say, if they are on income assistance, it is a form of income and is intended for the purposes of providing sustenance for their family.

[1605]

I don't know how we could discriminate from one person to the other as to who should get the \$100 exemption and who shouldn't. The law is very specific across the board, and it is considered income. Therefore, it is unearned income, but it is also income that is owed by the other spouse.

In fairness to the taxpayer, the taxpayer should not be making up any difference. Maybe that's not the right way to put it. The taxpayer shouldn't be expected — I don't know, exactly, if I'm putting it the right way — to come up with the money for child maintenance when there's a spouse out there who is perfectly capable of doing it.

C. Trevena: People who are on assistance.... It is the last resort. People on disability are on very low levels of income. It's also a last resort for many of them. They are living, usually, in levels of high poverty. When the spouse is not errant, when the spouse is paying his or her ex money for maintenance, why is this person, usually a woman, not allowed to keep that? Why is it clawed back dollar for dollar?

Hon. C. Richmond: I guess the best way I can answer the member's question is to say that if the family maintenance provided by the other spouse is not enough for the person's daily living, to pay shelter and food, etc., then we top that up to the maximum allowable under the category that they fall under. So if the maintenance is below what is required in their category to come up to the maximum allowable, we top it up. But it is income. The family maintenance is income and is to be used for food and shelter, etc., primarily for the children. It's child support in most cases. I guess that's the best way I can answer your question. It is income, and therefore, it's deductible from their income assistance.

C. Trevena: It's not only mothers and fathers — people bringing up children — who are separated and getting support who are facing these sorts of claw-backs. Seniors are also having income taken back from them. Seniors who are on the Canada Pension Plan, who have worked their whole lives and now are in need of assistance and on CPP, have the CPP directly deducted from their income assistance. Again, I would like to ask the minister: why?

[1610]

Hon. C. Richmond: First of all, there are very few seniors on income assistance. Most seniors get the old age pension supplement — whatever you want to call it — plus CPP, which provides them more than income assistance. There are only in the entire province about 600 seniors who are on income assistance, not on old age pension, and that's because they have been in the country for less than ten years. There are very, very few that are affected by the takeback of Canada Pension.

C. Trevena: You didn't answer my question. Why? Why is the money taken back? Whether it's \$600 or \$6,000, why are you taking the money back?

Hon. C. Richmond: First of all, with the 600 people that we talked about, it would be unlikely that they were getting any CPP or any federal benefits, and they would be receiving all of their income from this ministry. Again, this ministry is the payer of last resort.

Applicants are required to present all other sources of income, but we do make an exception and have earnings exemptions for persons with multiple barriers or persons with disabilities. Likely, when these people who do not receive any income from the federal government.... Once they've been in the country for the required amount of time, which is ten years, or become Canadian citizens, then they would start to receive payments from the federal government.

In cases where CPP benefits to a senior are less than the B.C. employment assistance rate, this ministry will top up the CPP income to our rate.

C. Trevena: So basically, you will make up the level to the basic very low levels that we're talking about on assistance, minister.

This seniors supplement is only available for seniors who receive old age security and guaranteed income supplement. New immigrants are excluded from this. I'm still troubled by this disparity, and I wondered if you could explain it to me.

[1615]

Hon. C. Richmond: The seniors supplement is a monthly top-up payment to B.C. recipients of the federal guaranteed income supplement. There is no application process. The supplement is paid automatically to GIS recipients who qualify, but one of the requirements is they must be a GIS recipient to qualify. GIS is an income-tested supplement to the federal old age security and federal allowance, formerly spouse's allowance. It increases quarterly based on indexing to the cost of living.

If the income through federal payments is below what we would pay should they be one of our clients, we will top up their income at the persons-with-disabilities rate.

C. Trevena: If I can ask the minister another question about seniors. This is the children's budget. The last one was the seniors budget, and I know I'm going back a bit. But seniors on income assistance aren't eligible for the SAFER grants, and I wondered why.

Hon. C. Richmond: The reason is because we give seniors the full amount of their shelter cost. Their shelter allowance is the full amount of their shelter cost, so that's why SAFER doesn't apply.

C. Trevena: I'd like a clarification from the minister on this. So a single senior, no matter what their rent is, would get the full cost? Or are you saying that the senior would get the single person's rental allowance of \$325?

Hon. C. Richmond: Just to clarify, they get the full \$325 without receipts. They automatically get that. I should have clarified that.

C. Trevena: As we've had this discussion before, \$325 isn't a great amount to be finding accommodation for a single person. I ask the minister again, if I'm interpreting this right: without having the SAFER grant, a single senior would get \$325 — and that's it — and a couple would get \$520 — and that's it — and they would have to try and find suitable, clean, safe living accommodation for their old age at that level?

Hon. C. Richmond: We're talking here again about those very few people who do not qualify for any federal moneys at all. Like I say, the number is very low.

[1620]

They would receive a total payment per month of \$856, and a couple would be considerably more — I

don't know if I have the numbers — at \$1,469 a month per couple. So \$856.42 for singles and \$1,469.06 for a couple.

C. Trevena: I know you're saying it's only a very few people, but I think that this is B.C., and everybody does matter. These figures are total income, including rental allowances that you're talking about.

Hon. C. Richmond: Yes, that is correct. The amounts that I quoted are correct. But on top of that, we are continuing to provide services to them for dental; optical; basic eyewear and repairs; medical equipment; medical supplies; extended therapies — massage, physiotherapy, chiropractic and podiatry services — and medical transportation on top of that. We've also protected the seniors bus pass program so that low-income seniors have affordable transportation options.

C. Trevena: Talking about the shelter rates. I know that you are very well aware of them. The basic shelter rate is \$325 for anyone on temporary assistance — \$325 up to \$695 if there are seven people in a family. I'd like to ask the minister how this rate is determined.

Hon. C. Richmond: Shelter rates haven't been increased since the early '90s, and one of the reasons is that simply increasing the shelter rates is a simple answer to a complex problem that doesn't benefit the clients. For example, any increase to the shelter rate, as we know from experience, is just passed through to the client's landlord, so whatever we set it at, that becomes the rent. The rents are immediately adjusted upward proportional to the increased funding. Clients will not find new or better accommodation, and they will not be better off.

Instead, the ministry is focused on providing clients with additional resources that will stay in their pockets, and that is the support allowance. We have increased rates for persons with disabilities, increased earnings exemptions and have continued to provide all our eligible clients with a range of supplementary assistance supports.

One of the things, also, that I can tell you we are looking at — and we have done for quite some time, but it's more complex and difficult to do than we imagined; that doesn't mean we're not continuing to look at it — is getting to a point where we don't separate out the shelter allowance from the support allowance, where we just pay one sum to the person, to our client, to try to get away from the landlords who immediately put the rent to where the shelter allowance goes. If we make it one amount — which, like I say, we're working towards....

[1625]

Then the next thing we're doing — and I know we've canvassed this before in question period and in other places — is trying to get these people to go onto an electronic transfer of funds so we keep the money, as much as possible, out of the hands of the people

who prey on them the last Wednesday in every month. If we can get more of these people, especially the more vulnerable ones, to open an account in a financial institution and get them out of this handing over of their cheque to some of these unscrupulous landlords, we will be much better off.

At the moment we have about 70 percent of our client base on electronic transfer of funds. We're working very diligently to try to get that last 30 percent. We probably will never get 100 percent of them, but we want to get most of them away from the clutches of unscrupulous landlords, drug dealers, etc., who prey on them when they get their income assistance cheque.

I think you saw when we and the Vancouver police department were working together on this team. When they visited some of the downtown east side hotels, they found that some clients were going in and handing over the shelter allowance portion of their cheque, \$325, and getting \$100 worth of drugs for it, and then they didn't have a place to sleep. That's what we're trying to get away from when we go to the electronic transfer of funds.

We're working very hard on it. Some of the financial institutions are working with us, and we're working with other agencies, especially in the downtown east side. But every community has this problem to a lesser degree.

C. Trevena: These rates, as you say, have been set for some time. Again, in light of the cost of rental in every community, I ask how you determine that those rates, when you look at the figures — ahead of going to Treasury Board, ahead of the budget — are fair rates for housing in this province.

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

Hon. C. Richmond: The support rates for expected-to-work recipients are primarily based on provincial historical precedent. Support rates were reduced in 1996 for the various family size categories by 20 to 24 percent. They were then raised 5 to 6 percent in 2000. That is the rate base from which we are currently operating. Secondly, other jurisdictions' rates are examined to assess B.C.'s overall standing. B.C. is above or close to the average of the other nine provinces in three out of the four expected-to-work family type categories.

Income assistance rates for employable individuals are set at a level that provides basic supports while they seek suitable employment but below what employment at minimum wage would provide. This helps to prevent recipients from becoming dependent on income assistance and reduces any incentive for others to become reliant on it.

[1630]

Income assistance, including shelter allowances, is intended to be temporary until clients find employment. It is not intended to provide a long-term standard of living. Most reports that we see include only legally zoned rental apartment buildings. Many of our

clients live in shared accommodations, secondary suites, subsidized housing and rooming houses, or with family members. These types of shelters are not included. Therefore, the cost appears higher.

In fact, government's investment of nearly \$200 million this year, the most ever spent in B.C., supports more than 43,200 housing units across the province. The accommodation rates for income assistance recipients are set below the ministry's shelter rates.

Many of our clients receive additional assistance in response to their unique circumstances. Let's use the Vancouver downtown east side as an example. You may not be aware that 70 percent of the 6,020 cases in the downtown east side receive a higher shelter rate — in other words, a rate more than \$325 for shelter — because many of them are persons with disabilities. In fact, the average monthly amount paid to singles, representing 5,774 cases in the downtown east side, is \$701, not \$510, because a very large percentage of them are persons with disabilities.

C. Trevena: I'm going to go on to the issue of the levels of the assistance rates in a moment, but I would like to stay at shelter allowances for the time being.

Again, you quote the downtown east side as an example. Let me quote Kelowna, where it costs maybe \$500 to get a bachelor apartment, or my own community, Campbell River, where it costs maybe \$500 to get a bachelor and where people are getting \$325 for their shelter allowance. While it may be temporary for some people, for others.... People with disabilities, who you cite that you are really very concerned about, are also dealing with rentals of this level.

I will go into income assistance rates in a moment, but I'm intrigued by how you're setting these rates when having a level of shelter allowance so low is often forcing people into very dangerous situations. It's forcing women who are escaping abusive relationships back into abusive relationships because they can't find safe accommodation. I've heard many cases of this. It's forcing disabled people to share, who are then possibly cut off from benefits because they're sharing, and it's seen by the workers as a spousal arrangement. It is prone to problems.

I would ask the minister once again to explain to me why there has been no move to increase the shelter rates.

Hon. C. Richmond: First of all, though, the member says \$325 a month is not a lot of money and then talks about persons with disabilities who receive more than \$325 a month. We are putting our emphasis on people with disabilities and people with multiple barriers to work. We are not putting as much emphasis at the moment on people who are expected to work, because it is designed to be a temporary help to people.

[1635]

Income assistance is designed as a safety net to carry people across a very difficult patch in their life, to help them get rehabilitated. If they're expected to work, we don't expect them to stay on income assistance for a

long period of time. We will put them into programs. Like I said in my opening remarks, we spend over \$70 million a year to put people into programs to get them into gainful employment. If they're expected to work, that's where they should be — in one of our programs to get them back into the workforce. These programs have been very successful, and we've placed some 46,000 people back into the workforce.

People with multiple barriers or people with disabilities are treated differently. These people are not expected to work. Many of them want to work, especially the PWD people. They want to get back into the workforce or get into the workforce. They feel very keen about that, volunteering as a start and then getting into employment, even if it's part-time. That's why we have an earnings exemption for these people: to encourage them to go out and work, even if it's part-time. For those expected to work, even a low-paying job is much better than being on income assistance.

In the last two budgets.... Let me put it this way. We are not able to do everything for everybody in every budget. The last budget concentrated on seniors, and we put a lot of money into assisting low-income seniors. This budget is the budget of children. We put an awful lot of money into two things: children and training programs. In fact, across government I think the amount into training and apprenticeship programs is over \$400 million, plus the \$70-plus million that we put into programs to get people back into the workforce.

C. Trevena: Again, you've raised a few points that I'm going to be picking up on as this debate progresses — the job programs and so on.

The assistance rates. It is temporary assistance. It is, as you yourself have said, a safety net. The assistance rate for a single person is \$520. A single person has to get rent, has to buy food, needs transport, needs clothes, needs the basic things like cleaning supplies for their home, needs shampoos and toiletries and obviously doesn't need child care, because they've got no kids.

It's estimated that a single person, by the end of the month, is \$216 short of what they need. Now, if you're talking about a single parent with a couple of children, that rises to over \$700 short, because they're having to pay for child care. I would like to ask the minister to explain to me how he gets to his assistance levels when it's so clear that the amount of money is too low for people to live on.

[1640]

Hon. C. Richmond: First of all, persons with disabilities get a higher rate — I just want to clarify this — not a higher shelter allowance, except for families of three or more. So we do give persons with disabilities a higher income assistance rate, not a higher shelter rate.

An interesting statistic: 27 percent of employable starting cases are gone in two months. So it is a safety net, not a driftnet that catches people and holds onto them. It's to help them across a difficult time; 50 percent are gone in four months. This is the desired effect,

I guess. For people who are expected to work, it is just that: we expect them to get back into employment as quickly as possible. We will help them in many different ways to get back into the workforce.

Secondly, we review existing rates for expected-to-work clients, as the budget allows. Public policy requires a balance between competing priorities, including spending on public sector wages, for children, for health, for education, for skills and training and for other public services. Reducing the resources available for these services in order to increase rates for employable clients at this time is not appropriate. We wouldn't reduce the rates for others in any case, and that's just not appropriate or necessary.

Simply put, our reform of the welfare system, emphasizing independence and personal responsibility among employable clients, is working. Our caseload for employable clients has decreased by 71 percent since 2001. Clients leaving our caseload through our employment programs receive an average starting wage of just under \$11 an hour. Perhaps most importantly, 50 percent of our expected-to-work clients return to employment within four months.

C. Trevena: To the minister: I wanted to know, really, how you look at the costs of living, the costs of buying food and your transport ticket, the cost of getting a new pair of shoes every few months and the cost of rents. How do you look at these things and assess the assistance rates?

Hon. C. Richmond: I guess I can only repeat what I've said. Our focus is on getting people back to work, and our programs are working. We recognize that it's a challenge for people to live on income assistance, particularly single, expected-to-work clients; \$510 a month is not a lot of money. The fact is, though, that only a small portion of our total client caseload is receiving this amount. Some 75 percent of singles — people with disabilities and severe barriers to employment, those most in need — receive our highest rates of \$856 and \$608 per month.

Let me repeat and make it very clear that for people who are able to work, income assistance isn't meant to be a lifestyle or an entitlement. It's meant to be a temporary means of financial support. We've been successful in moving these people from unemployment and dependence to employment and self-reliance.

Like I said, we've moved over 46,000 of them back into the workforce. It's costing the taxpayers of this province over \$70 million a year to do that — to get them into our employment programs — but in the long run, it's far more effective, far more valuable to us to get these people back into the workforce than to give them an excuse to stay on income assistance.

[1645]

C. Trevena: I think we disagree on one fundamental point here. I would say that income assistance, the safety net that you describe — there is a safety net — is an entitlement in a civilized society.

Seeing as you haven't answered my question about how you are setting the rates, because you're talking about getting people off the list — which, as I say, I want to come back to in a little while — I'd like to come back to something we were talking about right at the beginning: the issue of food banks. Income assistance rates at the moment, no matter how long somebody is on income assistance, cover basically 41 percent of the costs for a single adult, which really doesn't make you wonder why people rely on food banks. It's because they're not getting enough on income assistance.

In your own hometown, minister, one-third of the people who are using the very good, very active food bank are people on income assistance who are not getting enough through the assistance, through the safety net, through the temporary help. For however short a term they need it, they are not getting enough money to feed themselves. If people don't have enough money to feed themselves, how do you expect them to go and find work? I'd like to ask the minister: what are you going to do about this?

Hon. C. Richmond: I guess I can only repeat: we review income assistance rates regularly. We assess where they are and where we feel that the emphasis should be put. This year we have put the emphasis on persons with disabilities. They are the most vulnerable in our society, and we felt that they should receive some increases. We gave them increases in the form of a \$70-a-month increase in their allowance and an increase by moving the income exemption up to \$500 per month, \$100 a month if they volunteer, and other items. We're also assisting them in every way possible to get them into the workforce, because they literally want to work.

I guess, too, when you come back to food banks, they are a phenomenon now that is a commonplace feature in the western world. There are food banks everywhere, and I assume now that they will always be with us. They are there to assist a lot of families, not just those on income assistance. A lot of low-income families use food banks, and a lot of single people use other charitable organizations and have done so for many, many years. It would be a nice thing, I suppose, to see food banks disappear. I would like to see that, but I doubt very much that it is going to happen.

Right now we are in an ideal situation in this province, because of an economy as robust as it is, for anyone who is seeking work to find employment. Expected-to-work people who do not have multiple barriers or are not persons with disabilities will find it easier right now to find work than they probably have in the last 30 years.

Unemployment figures are lower now than they have been since records have been kept. In fact, in my area the unemployment rate is 4 percent or a little bit less, which is considered by today's standards as full employment. Contrast it to five years ago. In April of 2001 the unemployment rate in Kamloops was 14.1 percent — a lot more difficult to find a job.

We have people in the hospitality industry in Kamloops who cannot find people to work in their hotels

and motels at \$14 an hour. To me, if a person is employable, expected to work and doesn't have barriers to employment, we could put him or her to work very easily. We find that if we're going to put an emphasis in the budget and use the taxpayers' money — which we do — we are going to put it more towards those with multiple barriers to employment and persons with disabilities, rather than to those expected to work.

[1650]

C. Trevena: There are a lot of areas you've touched upon, and I think that throughout our debate, as the days go on, we will cover most of them.

At the moment I'm looking at assistance rates, and I wanted to get a few more details on those before we move on to the areas such as the people on disability benefit 2. I have to admit that I have a large file of people who are very unhappy on disability benefit, who do not feel that it's enough — as do people on assistance rates, however temporary the assistance rate is.

This is, as you said yourself at the beginning of the debate, a surplus budget, and we choose where we put our money. I find it quite frightening that in Kamloops — in your hometown, where you have 4 percent unemployment — four people out of every hundred are not working. A quarter of the people who do use the food bank have no income at all. I do wonder how people are existing on that, but I'm not going to belabour the point of food banks, because again, we have a fundamental disagreement.

I don't believe that food banks will always be with us. I think we can work as a society to see that we don't have a need for them because people have enough income that they don't have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, where the next hamper for their baby is coming from or where the next nutritional supplement is coming from.

Assistance rates, minister, are low. They are, as you say, seen as temporary. Some people are on them for some time. Last year, minister, the non-political Dietitians of Canada published a report, and I'm sure you knew that I was going to be quoting from it, because I believe that the dietitians have also been talking with you. And I hope they have, because they did commend this government on its commitment to healthy lifestyles. I think we can all commend it. One of the great goals is having a healthy lifestyle.

It condemned the government for allowing the low wage and income assistance levels to effectively starve people. I can quote some of the figures that the Dietitians of Canada — who are not, as I say, a political organization — cite when they are working out the cost of living.

A family of four on income assistance. Income assistance is temporary. They get \$991 income and child and family benefits of \$504, giving them a disposable income of \$1,495. Rent is approximately \$875, hydro is \$59, and the actual cost of food is \$654. What's left after shelter, health care, food and all other daily living costs is \$561. It basically leaves a deficit for them of \$93.

A young pregnant woman on income assistance — and there are young pregnant women on income assis-

tance.... They are not all, as the minister sometimes perceives or sometimes describes, homeless. Not everyone on income assistance is an addict. Not everyone on income assistance is facing severe problems. They are facing financial problems. For whatever reason, they're on assistance. A young pregnant woman on income assistance, according to the Dietitians of Canada, would at the end of the month be \$269 short because they are trying to feed themselves.

People on income assistance, people on benefits, people on disability benefits, people on PPMB — no matter that they get extra money, if they can get the extra money, for supplements — are not buying the nutritious food because they can't afford it. They are buying the canned goods. They're not buying bulk, because they can't store it. They are generally buying cheap food, and they are supplementing it by food banks. I would like to ask the minister: how are people supposed to have this healthy diet? How are people supposed to match the great goal of healthy living, one of the golden goals of the great decade? How are they going to get this if they can't afford to eat, minister?

[1655]

Hon. C. Richmond: First of all, let me just go back to the last subject for a second. I had it here. Now it's gone.

I want to make it clear about food banks. I mentioned some statistics when we started the debate this afternoon, and I want to make it clear that the ministry policy and regulations do not promote the use of food banks as an alternative to income assistance. Individuals without food are considered to have an emergency need. They are not required to complete the three-week work search and are given an expedited application.

To date time limits have affected very few former recipients, so any impact on food bank use is minimal. There are also many exemptions to the two-year independence test — for example, persons with dependent children, applicants under the age of 19, pregnant applicants and those with medical conditions or multiple barriers to employment.

I also want to go along and re-quote some of the statistics released by the Canadian Association of Food Banks — not our statistics, theirs. It shows that the number of people in British Columbia using food banks is down 10.5 percent. These statistics are four months old. They came out in November last year. The number of children using food banks is down 9.1 percent. Although 45 percent of food banks have reported an increase in food bank use, food bank usage has decreased for the province as a whole, and 8,000 fewer people in the province visited a food bank this year compared to last year.

This shows that B.C.'s strong economy is helping more people find good jobs and build brighter futures for themselves and their families. While we recognize that food banks play an important role, we're pleased to see the trend towards fewer children and fewer families using food banks — not more people.

I did have a meeting — in fact, several of us had a meeting — with the dietitians a couple of weeks ago.

We disagree with some of their methodology, of how they come up with their figures. Their charge is based on an analysis of the total basic needs of families and the total income available to families on income assistance. This analysis, in our view, overestimates the cost of shelter, clothing and other personal needs required by temporary assistance recipients on employment assistance and underestimates the income available to them.

For example, the calculations of shelter costs do not include subsidized housing, shared accommodations, secondary suites, sublet condos or rooming houses. This non-conventional stock of housing comprises 50 percent of the rental stock in Vancouver and one-third of the stock in Victoria. Excluding this type of accommodation makes average shelter costs appear much higher than they are.

[1700]

The support allowances provided by employment assistance and for persons with disabilities are sufficient to meet the dieticians' estimates of the cost of a nutritious diet for most recipients. We agree that our rates require diligent budgeting by clients.

I have a chart which we'll share with you, if you wish, on what is left over after food and shelter and living costs for two-parent, single-parent, family of four, family of four on an average income. We'll share that with you.

C. Trevena: I'm not going to get into the debate about the dieticians' methodology nor too much into your disagreements with the dieticians' methodology, although you do cite that a number of people on assistance are in rooming houses or shared accommodation, which brings us back to the issue of accommodation and, particularly, rooming houses, where there is often no place to cook, which makes it that much harder to cook your food to have a healthy diet.

I wanted to go back to my original question, minister, of how, when people are on low incomes, when they have.... Go back to the single person. For however long they are on income assistance, they get \$325 shelter allowance — I defy you to find somewhere to live for \$325 — and \$185 for everything else. How do you achieve this government's great goal for a healthy B.C. on such low income?

Hon. C. Richmond: I guess I'm just going to have to keep repeating some of the answers I've given, but I do want to point out a couple of things. We recognize that for the single expected-to-work, it's not an awful lot of money. But let me put it to the member this way. In 2001 in this category, single expected to work, there were 53,000 people on income assistance. Today there are 12,000 — so quite a reduction in just four and a half, five years. Obviously, our programs are working. We've gone from 53,000 single-expected-to-works to 12,000.

The resources available to our employable clients provide for the necessities of daily living as they transition to employment. We recognize that it's not easy and

that choices have to be made, but temporary assistance is intended to be temporary. We, also, as we progress through a series of budgets — this was the second budget out of several to come from this government — will be reviewing rates on an ongoing basis. As budgeting allows, I am certain that somewhere in the future we will be increasing this rate.

[1705]

However, I must point out that although we have a surplus budget this year, there are tremendous demands on that budget. For example, one out of every two surplus dollars is going to settle contracts with our employees across government. That takes care of 50 percent of the surplus right off the bat. Then we put \$421 million into children's programs and, I believe, another \$400 million into apprenticeship and training programs. So there are priorities, and we have to adjust our priorities. In this budget we have put more money into persons with disabilities.

I guess I can only reiterate that our programs for getting expected-to-work people back into the workforce have been very successful. This year, in fact, we've just gone out for requests for proposals for our new B.C. employment program. This program will be up and running in July, and the cost of that program is somewhere in the order of \$70 million.

C. Trevena: Yes, I'm sure we're going to be talking about employment programs as we go along in the coming days too, minister.

I can see that there have been priorities and decisions made in allocating the moneys in this budget. I think there is a disappointment from many people because of the indication given by the minister in our last debate over the budget estimates. There was an indication — not a promise, but an indication — that rates might increase, and I know that the minister has received a number of letters and forms from people who want to see the rates increased.

If I just may read into the record, read to the minister, one or two of these letters that I've seen. This is one from a woman in Vernon who says:

I'm a single woman, 62 years old. I have actively and enthusiastically looked for work. This is after taking all the necessary classes and so-called training programs. Welfare is my only option. I'm currently renting a single room, shared bathroom, at \$425 a month. I receive \$570 from welfare. By the end of the month I am totally relying on the food bank, the mission, etc., just to stay alive.

I pray for those souls who either cannot get on or have to wait for assistance. Not only does this affect our physical needs, but emotionally and spiritually it's devastating. Our sense of dignity, freedom — whatever — is shattered.

That's from one person in Vernon on assistance — not on assistance because they want to be on assistance. They've tried to find work; they're on assistance.

There's another person who pays \$850 for rent. She has to buy food for five people and is left with \$90 a month. Another person who pays \$510 a month for a third-floor apartment with no utilities....

I would like to ask the minister why, in going to Treasury Board, in looking at all the needs of this province, he wouldn't raise the rates.

Hon. C. Richmond: To reiterate to the member — and she has just alluded to it — it's not a single person's decision to raise rates or spend money in any manner in this government. It requires a decision that's made across ministries in the government, and spending is approved, as you know, by Treasury Board.

I do want to read into the record my statements from the previous estimates debate that the member referred to. My statement said: "They indicated as the budget allows, rates can be increased. Rates are closely and periodically reviewed. The ministry is focusing much of its resources on back-to-work programs for expected-to-work clients. For employable persons, a job is always better than income assistance."

[1710]

On the question of an older person seeking employment, we have concentrated on that in specific areas. In the new B.C. employment program, which will be put into effect in July, these programs will allow us to tailor programs to individual clients much more than in the past. So we will be able to take each individual, whether it's this woman.... I didn't quite hear whether you said she was 52 or 62 — 62? A 62-year-old woman is eligible for CPP, which is one alternative for her.

We did a pilot program with one of our service providers, Sprott-Shaw, and here are some of the results. This program was aimed at clients 50 years old or older, who had either been out of the workforce for many years, in the case of some women — their husbands had left them or died or whatever, and they hadn't been in the workforce for sometimes 30 years — or in the case of some male applicants, had worked at one job all their life and the mill or whatever it was closed down. They wanted to work, but they needed some retraining.

We gave them some retraining in the spring of this year. Some of the results are as follows: (1) female, age 52, who had been out of the workforce for a long time is now employed full-time at Convergys, a call centre in Kamloops; (2) age 57, completed on March 3 — not yet employed; (3) male, 55, after a course is now fully employed. We have males aged 59, 58, 60 and 53 who completed the course, and they expect to be back into the workforce very shortly.

So we are tailoring programs to the older workers. The member opposite and, I'm sure, other members in this House get letters from time to time from people, and we do everything we can to assist them. Unfortunately, we're not able to give every one of them everything they would like, but I just want to repeat: the programs we have in place are working, and we do review rates from time to time.

C. Trevena: How often do you review rates, minister?

Interjection.

C. Trevena: I wonder if he could give me some indication of what "from time to time" is? Is it every six months? Is it every year? Is it every three years, minister?

Hon. C. Richmond: I guess the easiest answer to that would be at least once a year.

C. Trevena: What do you look at when you review the rates? What criteria are you looking at in reviewing the rates?

[1715]

Hon. C. Richmond: I've given you some of this before, but we will give it another try. The support rates for expected-to-work recipients are primarily based on provincial historical precedent. Support rates were reduced in 1996 for the various family-size categories by 20 to 24 percent. They were then raised 5 to 6 percent in 2000. That is the rate base from which we are currently operating.

Secondarily, other jurisdictions' rates are examined in three out of four expected-to-work, family-type categories. Income assistance rates for employable individuals are set at a level that provides basic supports while they seek suitable employment but below what employment at minimum wage would provide.

For example, at minimum wage it takes about 70 hours a month or two days a week for a single employable to leave income assistance. Just working two days a week, they will make more than if they're on income assistance. This helps to prevent recipients from becoming dependent on income assistance and reduces any incentive for others to become reliant on it. Income assistance for employable clients is intended to be temporary until clients find employment. It is not intended to provide a long-term standard of living without working.

C. Trevena: I'm very pleased that you do review rates every year. It's heartening that in some areas we're doing quite well compared to the rest of country. It would be good if we were the best in field for everything. That would give more comfort. I think it would also be quite helpful if we were looking at, perhaps, real rent levels, basket-of-food levels, cost-of-clothing levels when we are assessing rates, because we're not just talking about temporary assistance; we're talking, for some people, about permanent levels.

I wondered whether the minister would consider a bipartisan committee, a committee of the House, to look at the level of our income assistance rates and our other rates.

Hon. C. Richmond: I guess the short answer to the member's question is no. We feel that the professional people in our ministry are much better qualified to advise us as to what the needs of people are. We rely on our staff very much to keep us informed as to the needs of people and to give us guidance, but the ultimate decision is made by government.

C. Trevena: I'm disappointed that you don't want to discuss this jointly, because I think this is an issue that affects many people. I wondered whether your staff have, at any stage over the last two years, recommended a rate increase?

Hon. C. Richmond: The staff provide us with analysis of income assistance and rates and everything concerned with our clients. They do not make recommendations, but they do give us all the information we need to make an informed decision.

[1720]

C. Trevena: Obviously, you take expert advice from your staff, and you have respect for the staff who are looking at these issues across B.C., comparing them to across the country. They give you the facts — no recommendations. You make the decisions. I wondered, therefore, whether the two parties could work together to look at these facts and to see whether perhaps it is time — because there was a rate cut, and there has not been a rate increase for over ten years — that we looked at increasing the rates.

Hon. C. Richmond: I guess the answer there is that we also work very closely with advocacy groups, with service providers and, like I say, with our staff. With all of this input — and I'm sure the member knows that we do get a lot of input and suggestions from advocacy groups, because I'm sure they get the same correspondence as we do — I still feel it is better that these are the types of decisions that should be left with government. Budgetary matters are a big factor in this. As I have said two or three times already, there are only so many dollars to go around, and we have to make the decision of where our priorities lie and where we put this money.

The last budget concentrated mainly on seniors, and we spent many millions of dollars on them. This budget we decided to concentrate on really three things: children, training and apprenticeships, some housing and settling contracts with our employees — which, as I said, uses up one out of every two dollars we have in the surplus.

C. Trevena: It is an issue of priorities. It's an issue of what we think is important. Clearly, the fact that we have not raised rates for more than ten years, the fact that people are still living on the levels they were living at ten years ago although there has been inflation in the past ten years, is not a matter of concern.

I know that the minister has been talking quite a lot about the good things that are happening for people with disabilities through his work. I know this is a very important area for the minister. The minister has increased earnings exemptions for people on PWD and PPMB from \$400 and \$300, respectively, to \$500, which will give a single person a none too princely sum of up to \$1,350. The minister clearly recognized the importance of getting people with disabilities into the working world and is using earnings exemptions as a means to do so.

If I might just quote from a disabled person that I have been talking to, who says:

We might be able to do some work on some days, but we're not in control of when these days occur. No employer will hire someone who cannot guarantee they'll show up for work on specific days. Many of us have tried and have repeatedly experienced insults to our self-respect by attaining employment and then being let go because we are unreliable or, worse, we get hurt on the job because we were never fit to work in the first place. The amount of work involved in getting employment is substantial as it is the rare employer who will hire us, and then we must do it all over again after we are let go after a short time.

So people on disability face severe challenges. This is one example. They face severe challenges, and the emphasis on earning exemptions for people with disabilities, while helpful for some people, is clearly problematic for others.

I would like to ask the minister: how many people, first on PPMB, are receiving earnings exemptions?

[1725]

Hon. C. Richmond: We don't have exact numbers on how many people on PPMB are getting an earnings exemption. It is very small. We could probably find those numbers for you, given time, back in the ministry somewhere. If you desire them, we'll get them for you.

The number of people on PWD receiving earnings exemptions is somewhere between 14 percent and 15 percent. It's not a large number; on the PPMB, it's even smaller.

C. Trevena: Yes, I would like the figures.

Hon. C. Richmond: He found them.

C. Trevena: Great. Do you also have the PWD figures? And I'd like them as a proportion of the number of people receiving PPMB and PWD, as well, if that's possible.

Hon. C. Richmond: Yes, we have found the numbers. PPMB cases declaring earnings per month are 544, or 5.9 percent of the PPMB caseload. PWD cases declaring earnings per month: 7,905, or 13.8 percent of the PWD caseload.

C. Trevena: Not many people. How much does it cost the ministry?

Hon. C. Richmond: The figure I can give you is that the cost this year of going from \$400 to \$500 earning exemption is \$3 million.

C. Trevena: I am intrigued by the numbers. It doesn't seem to be many, and I think that actually does justify people's concern with ability to work. I wondered, if somebody reached the limit through the earnings exemption, whether they would be cut off PWD or PPMB.

Hon. C. Richmond: The answer to your question is: persons that are PWD — that's a permanent classification. That doesn't ever change. So if, for example, a person exceeded the \$500-a-month earnings exemption, anything over that would be deducted from their monthly allowance. But every other thing that a person with PWD is entitled to would remain. That's why we have an exemption of \$500. They can keep the first \$500 with no penalty, and after that, yes, it starts to come off.

C. Trevena: I know that people on PWD are wary about this. While some people are enthusiastic about the possibility of earning more money, I have heard more from people who are cautious, because for people who are capable of earning \$500 with a minimum wage of \$8 an hour, that would be about 15½ hours a week of work. They're concerned that that means they would be regarded as capable of work and lose their PWD designation.

So I wonder if the minister could put people's concerns to rest and say that this would not happen.

Hon. C. Richmond: I believe that I just answered that question. Employment by persons with disabilities is voluntary. They're not forced to work. To repeat my last answer, it's a designation that they keep. They're considered unemployable, and they remain on PWD status.

[1730]

C. Trevena: The minister is very enthusiastic about this program and has been talking about it quite a lot. He sees, clearly, the benefit of having earnings exemptions for people with multiple barriers or with disabilities, but he doesn't recognize the benefit of earnings exemptions for people on temporary assistance. Every other province recognizes the benefits of earnings exemptions for people on temporary assistance. The Fraser Institute recognizes the benefits of earnings exemptions for people on temporary assistance.

I would like the minister to tell me why we do not have earnings exemptions for people who are on temporary assistance.

Hon. C. Richmond: This is another one of those areas where we disagree philosophically, and I guess we'll just have to agree to disagree. For employable clients the evidence is clear that earnings exemptions encourage people to combine part-time employment and income assistance. Instead of helping employable clients become independent, earnings exemptions increase dependency, making it harder for the people to leave income assistance in the future.

Comprehensive research is available that supports our focus upon extending earnings exemptions solely to PWD and PPMB clients, including a study entitled *The Impact of the Allowable Earnings Provision on EI Dependency*, by David Gray and Shawn de Raaf, published in November 2002 by the Social Research and Demonstration Corp. The study reviewed the federal employment insurance program, which has a policy

comparable to earnings exemptions for welfare recipients. Research on the effectiveness of this policy on employment and employment insurance use found that it did not help frequent EI claimants to find full employment.

The report found that working part-time while on claim also tends to be associated with greater EI dependency over the long term, suggesting that this provision is not necessarily resulting in workers gaining skills and work experience that lead to full-time re-employment. Instead, the incentive to work appears to be encouraging them to pursue further non-standard — for example, part-time or part-year — work opportunities, since temporary work not only tops up the income received from their current benefits but can also be used to gain further eligibility and entitlement. The provision may represent an incentive towards unstable non-standard work mixed with short, intermittent spells as the EI recipient.

These results are important for policy purposes, especially since other income support programs, such as provincial social assistance, incorporate similar earnings exemption provisions.

C. Trevena: This policy of giving earnings exemptions to one group of people and not to another group of people — discriminating on that — is based on one piece of research. Am I correct, minister?

Hon. C. Richmond: No, we know from our own experience that it doesn't work. When the member says "one," here's another one. Another important study was completed by Charles Michalopoulos entitled *What Works Best for Whom: Impacts of 20 Welfare-to-Work Programs by Subgroup*, published in 2004. The study found that earnings exemptions can have a negative impact on employment and may encourage people already working to reduce their work effort and mix welfare and part-time employment.

I would like to cite some particularly relevant portions of the study. The author notes that:

...part-time work incentives are not associated with a significant increase in the impact on earnings for the most disadvantaged but are associated with a significant reduction in earnings for the moderately disadvantaged.

For the moderately disadvantaged, a \$1 increase per month in the incentive to work part-time is associated with a reduction in annual earnings of \$3.63 per year. Although this result might seem counterintuitive, it is well-grounded in economic theory. The idea is as follows.

[1735]

Some welfare recipients would have gone to work full-time on their own. Providing extra income to those who work part-time allows parents who would have worked full-time to curtail their work effort with less of a reduction in their income than under the old welfare system. Reducing their work effort might allow them to spend more time with their children, or it might simply allow them to work less hard without suffering as much financially.

C. Trevena: I thank you for that. We've had this discussion before, in the last estimates debate. I think

we agree that we're going to disagree on this, that this side of the House believes that having an earnings exemption does encourage people to get back into the workforce. All the other provinces think that having an earnings exemption helps people get back into the workforce. The Fraser Institute thinks having earnings exemptions helps people get back into the workforce. Unfortunately, we don't have an earnings exemption. I hope that the minister will continue to look at this issue.

I'm also intrigued. I have a letter from one of your bureaucrats to an advocate, who is talking about the earnings exemption for people with disabilities, and I just wanted to clarify what I see as a contradiction. This says: "Increasing earnings exemptions encourages multibarriered clients who want to participate more fully in the workplace — the earnings exemptions for PPMB and PWD."

Then in the same letter, in fact on the same page, it says: "Research indicates earnings exemptions and other types of exemptions do not facilitate or encourage independence for employable clients." I still think there is a fundamental contradiction here. I think it's something that is not clear. If I carry on asking, I think I'm just going to get more quotes back from your research papers, so I'm not going to.

Hon. C. Richmond: I have one more.

C. Trevena: That's fine, thank you. I do think that it is.

However, I would like to, at this point, say that in every other province and through the Fraser Institute, earnings exemptions do encourage people to get back into the workforce. It gives them the chance to earn a bit of money, to make the contacts, to get the dignity, to actually be able to get that foot in the door that isn't necessarily coming through employment programs but through employment itself. It really does assist.

I would like to take up, going back to our earlier discussion, the issue of taking any earnings out of income assistance. I wanted to know about, really, the justification for this. I've been talking to someone who is working as a cleaner. She's on income assistance. She's working as a cleaner for someone. She doesn't work so many hours that her assistance is cut off but works too many hours to get onto the bridging program. I'd like to ask the minister to clarify just how people are supposed to get back into the workforce, how people are supposed to reintegrate, if they can't actually get that foot in the door.

Hon. C. Richmond: I think we must be clear here, though, just for the people who may be watching at home and may not understand. We're talking about those expected to work versus those with multiple barriers or disabilities who are not expected to work.

There's one more bit of philosophy of the government that I wish to leave with you, and that is that in-

creasing the resources and financial independence of the province's families remains a strong focus of this government. As I said earlier, one of the most difficult things we had to do, upon taking over the government in 2001, was change the culture from one of entitlement and dependency to one of employment and independence.

Perpetuating the destructive cycle of dependency does not work and does not benefit children. We know that, for example, only 40 percent of children from income-assisted families graduate from high school. Equally alarming is the fact that children who grow up on welfare are statistically more likely to depend on welfare in their adult lives and receive six times the amount of assistance than a person raised by working parents.

[1740]

There's another program that the member mentioned; and that's community bridging for women in receipt of income assistance. It's a very, very targeted program for those who are normally not participating in any other ministry-funded program and who have experienced violence and/or abuse. Special bridging for women who meet the above criteria and who also face additional barriers to employment due to language, immigration or culture.... This category provides specific language, cultural training for aboriginal or immigrant women. Former sex trade workers — for men and women in receipt of B.C. employment and assistance or funding assistance provided under youth agreements by the Ministry of Children and Family Development who meet the above criteria and are leaving the sex trade.

About 400 to 600 clients per year access bridging employment services. Most of these clients are multibarriered and require pre-employment support.

C. Trevena: Mr. Chair, I thank the minister, and I move that the committee rise, report progress and ask leave to sit again.

Motion approved.

The committee rose at 5:42 p.m.

The House resumed; S. Hawkins in the chair.

Committee of Supply (Section B), having reported progress, was granted leave to sit again.

Committee of Supply (Section A), having reported resolutions, was granted leave to sit again.

Hon. C. Richmond moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

Deputy Speaker: The House stands adjourned until 10 a.m. Monday.

The House adjourned at 5:43 p.m.

PROCEEDINGS IN THE
DOUGLAS FIR ROOM

Committee of Supply

ESTIMATES: MINISTRY OF
CHILDREN AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT
(continued)

The House in Committee of Supply (Section A); A. Horning in the chair.

The committee met at 3:03 p.m.

On Vote 20: community living services, \$602,269,000 (continued).

A. Dix: I know that the minister's views occasionally evolve, so I wanted to ask him a question similar to a question I asked him last fall. It's a question where the events haven't occurred yet.

Can the minister confirm that the agreement with respect to children's services — the June 2004 agreement where, in fact, autism programs and children's programs went over to CLBC on a temporary basis on July 1, 2005...? This occurred, of course. I wanted to ask the minister if his commitment, which he made in 2004 and which he made again in November 2005, continues to be his commitment — that those services will return to the ministry in June 2006.

Hon. S. Hagen: There were and are a number of issues to be resolved with the transfer of this agreement. I still have some outstanding concerns, and I'll be meeting with my executives of Community Living B.C. and senior ministry staff over the next few weeks to address them. When I've completed those discussions, I'll be pleased to share the deliberations with the member for Vancouver-Kingsway.

Just so the member knows what my concerns are.... Bear in mind that the decision to do this, I think, goes back to 2002. Sometimes things do change, and I'm sort of asking whether they have or whether they haven't.

I want to make sure that families will see a seamless delivery of services through this time. I want to ensure that children are getting appropriate services in a timely manner. I want to make sure that staff and social workers are clear in their roles and responsibilities should there be any changes to their roles, and I want to ensure that the model for delivery service is in a position to be the best that it can be.

[1505]

A. Dix: Just to be clear with the minister: is he having a technical discussion of what happens when the services go back, or is he having a substantive discussion as to whether the services should go back? He was very clear on several occasions up till now on the sub-

stantive questions, and services are coming back. Is he now saying that he is reconsidering that decision?

Hon. S. Hagen: I need to be assured and have my concerns and questions answered. I don't want to re-list them again, but there are a number of concerns that I have. I'll wait to answer your question until I've had the meetings with my staff.

A. Dix: So to be clear: the minister has gone from a yes to a maybe. Is that a reasonable conclusion to draw?

Hon. S. Hagen: To the member for Vancouver-Kingsway: I want to be crystal-clear. That is, I do have a number of issues that I want to meet comprehensively on with my senior staff and senior staff from CLBC. You know, we do want to make sure that there is seamless delivery. We do want to make sure that these children and families are going to get the programs that they need.

A. Dix: I just want to go back to some of the questions around wait-lists. I just wanted to go back over it so I fully understand the agency's approach with respect to wait-lists, because we asked them questions about how many people were on wait-lists, and that, for the moment, is unclear.

I wanted to make sure that I understand properly whether, in fact, the wait-list policy as far as the minister is concerned has been fully implemented but they are just waiting for more facts — or where we are with respect to wait-list policy.

Hon. S. Hagen: The policy is in place. As a matter of fact, it's posted on the website. I did make a commitment this morning that we would have that wait-list data by the fall of this year.

So what they are doing now is developing the infrastructure, the IT system, to make sure that we can not just have a system in place where the social workers in Prince George will know how many people are on the wait-list but, in fact, where people down here can know how many people in total are on the wait-list in all of the communities.

[1510]

A. Dix: I wanted to ask a couple of questions now about systems and organizational issues at Community Living B.C. I wanted to ask particularly about the June 2005 risk assessment that was done by the internal audit and advisory service. It identified a number of concerns, pre-existing data integrity issues, insufficient case client management system, insufficient accountability with existing contracts, and related evaluation and monitoring processes. I just wanted to ask the minister and give him a tremendous opportunity here to tell me what's being done to address those risks.

Hon. S. Hagen: I'd be delighted to talk about a number of improvements that have taken place, specifically referencing the information technology plan. New systems currently being developed will allow

social workers to spend more time in the community with families and individuals, to access real information in a timely fashion and to have the ability to input information more effectively. Information collected by staff will be used to develop individualized service plans linking individuals and families to community services and funding supports and ensuring maximum flexibility.

Investments have been made in the design and development of a new IT systems infrastructure for CLBC to replace aging applications. The multiple systems that staff currently utilize provide little functionality, and a great deal of the work is being done manually. What this means for individuals and families is that they will receive more prompt attention and that their ongoing needs will be assessed and managed more effectively through the prompt sharing of information among the team of professionals within CLBC. Having access to more detailed and up-to-date data will allow for improved utilization of resources and greater understanding of requirements. Lack of good-quality data leads to crisis management and hinders our ability to be proactive in providing meaningful services to those we support.

Security of personal information is of the highest priority. The board of CLBC has adopted International Organization for Standardization ISO 17799 as the standard for information security, with "security" defined as "confidentiality, ensuring that information is accessible only to those authorized to have access; integrity, safeguarding the accuracy and completeness of information and processing methods; and availability, ensuring that authorized users have access to information and associated assets when required." All new systems will be built to ISO 17799 standards.

A. Dix: Let me ask the minister.... I mean, given what the report said about the condition of IT systems, I wanted to ask the minister — just in terms of the investment that has been made — how much has been spent on restructuring costs specific to IT and information services in Community Living since 2001, and what is there to show for it?

Hon. S. Hagen: As we're here to talk about the '06-07 budget, I'm pleased to tell you that we budgeted, in '05-06, \$3.7 million, and in '06-07, \$1.5 million.

[1515]

A. Dix: Given the really extraordinary failings that Community Living B.C. has described in terms of its information technology systems, I think it's interesting to note, and I'll assist the minister a little bit in this regard, that the MCFD service plan in 2002-2003 showed \$15 million in capital cost for new information systems. In 2003-2004 the service plan showed \$50 million in additional capital costs for new information systems. We know, of course, the extraordinary experience of the CareNet IT project that cost the province \$3.8 million. That \$3.8 million was for a system that, of course, was proven to have no value at the end, according to Pricewaterhouse — not according to the opposition.

I understand that in September of 2005 CLBC was surveying service providers to find out exactly whom they were serving and to address missing and incorrect information in their client files. They wanted to ask the minister, given that there are extraordinary plans in the coming years by CLBC, to continue to invest large amounts of money in IT and information management systems. In fact, a lot of the alchemy that, it is being suggested, will come seems to come from savings in this regard — alchemy that has been promised before.

I want to ask how much remains to be done in total and what the estimate of cost is before the system is fully up and operational.

Hon. S. Hagen: I'm told that we are making great progress, and the release of the new Paris system is set to start in April — next month. We're testing the development site. It's going on as we speak. In answer to your question about probable or additional costs, I told you about the 3.7 in this fiscal year, 1.5 in the next fiscal year, and we've booked 1.5 in '07-08.

A. Dix: May I ask why the Paris system was selected? [1520]

Hon. S. Hagen: Paris was chosen for a number of reasons. It's used by the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority. It's used in jurisdictions in eastern Canada. It's used in Europe. I don't know if it's used in Paris or not.

Here's what it does — which is why.... They looked at a variety of systems, and here's what Paris offers. It registers all people who are receiving services, delineates work flow procedures for the allocation of work between managers and staff and between various departments within CLBC. It allows information to be stored in a secure, consistent manner and to be shared as required to provide services.

It is an integrated case management tool that allows more than one professional to view the same file at the same time, and that assists workers by automating many of the current procedures, forms and letters that are required in the day-to-day work of a facilitator or analyst.

A. Dix: Perhaps Paris, Texas.

My next question to the minister is.... Community Living B.C. made a decision to let go of its chief information officer, I understand, in December? I just wanted to know the circumstances of that. Was it mutually agreed, or was it severance? Whatever it was, Mr. Pollock had a record of working, certainly, in that area in the ministry itself and, I think, went over to CLBC. That's my understanding. I wanted to know why Mr. Pollock left Community Living B.C.

Hon. S. Hagen: As the member knows well, I'm not going to discuss any personnel issues. The severance amount, I'm told, has not been agreed to yet.

A. Dix: I understand from the minister that there was a severance amount offered but that it hasn't been agreed to.

There was a process to replace Mr. Pollock. I wanted to ask the minister the time frame of that process, how long the process was from the position being posted to it being filled; the number of applicants; and the successful applicant.

[1525]

Hon. S. Hagen: The new individual was hired on a one-year, renewable-contract basis. A salaried employee was made because CLBC is in the development stage of its IT initiative and wanted the flexibility to make changes to its overall organization and structure as it moves through development to ongoing maintenance.

The successful candidate best met the mandatory and desired qualifications, based upon objective requirements identified in the RFP for this position. Price point was determined utilizing an industry standard. This IT initiative is a significant project for CLBC, and the candidate has detailed knowledge of the community living sector, CLBC business and the IT developments to date.

CLBC posted a CIO contract position via RFP on B.C. Bid on January 6, 2006, which ran through to February 10, 2006. CLBC received proposals from four companies for five individuals. Two of the proposals met the mandatory and desired qualifications and price point based upon industry standards. Both of these candidates were interviewed by a panel consisting of CLBC senior managers and an external technical expert. The successful candidate was Mr. Brian Berglund.

A. Dix: Can the minister tell the House the value of the contract?

Hon. S. Hagen: It's a contract position up to a maximum of \$216,000 a year, including allowance for expenses.

A. Dix: We're talking about \$216,000 a year. That's strictly, including expenses, for the services of Mr. Berglund?

Hon. S. Hagen: Yes.

A. Dix: I just wanted to ask.... Mr. Pollock left in the beginning of December — am I right?

Hon. S. Hagen: As I mentioned in a previous answer, I won't discuss personnel issues like that. I'm happy to give the value of this contract, but I'm not going to discuss other personnel issues.

A. Dix: I guess the issue I want to discuss with the minister is: this is a very important, high-priced position, and \$216,000 — I'm sure it's true in the minister's neighbourhood, as it is in my neighbourhood — is a lot of money. What you had was a contract for an individual on a two-week turnaround. It's not what you'd call a national search. In fact, it didn't even seem like a neighbourhood search. I wanted to ask if a two-week

turnaround RFP, with a successful applicant with a long history of connections with the government in this area, is, in the minister's view, adequate.

[1530]

Hon. S. Hagen: I'm told that a two-week turnaround to B.C. Bid is pretty typical. CLBC was within the government procurement guidelines. As the member I'm sure knows, B.C. Bid is an Internet site which guarantees broad access. Anyone who's interested in working for the government would probably be clicking on to that every couple of hours.

A. Dix: Well, what we're talking about is an individual service contract for someone. We're not talking about bidders. We're talking about a replacement for chief information officer, and we're talking about.... Given the importance that CLBC places on information technology....

And you're right. Mr. Berglund's companies have been directly awarded contracts in the past in a manner inconsistent with government guidelines, but that's not the case in this instance. This is, presumably, a major position at CLBC, and if you look at any of the CLBC documents, you'll see how important it is. So CLBC makes a major change in December or whenever it was, and then they do a two-week turnaround.

Does the minister not think that they had candidates in mind? Because it appears pretty clear to me that they had a primary candidate in mind. If they wanted to do a full national search for a position worth \$216,000 for one year, then we know that that's done. We know how that's done. It's frequently done, in fact, all over government in terms of reaching out.

In this case, there wasn't a national search. It was put up on the website, and the winning candidate, surprisingly, has strong political connections to the government. I wanted to ask the minister if he thinks that it would not have been more appropriate, given the size of this contract and the importance of the work, to have searched for the best possible candidate.

The minister may say, and the CLBC may say: "Well, we were in a hurry. We needed it right now." The question is: if they were in a hurry, then how long did it take to post? Presumably, more time could have been given to search and find the appropriate candidate. So I just want to ask the minister whether he thinks — because a two-week turnaround indicates to me that they had a candidate in mind — that they had a candidate in mind.

Hon. S. Hagen: I just want to go through the procedure again so the member is clear on how this transpired. CLBC posted a CIO contract position via RFP on B.C. Bid on January 26, '06, which ran through February 10, 2006.

CLBC received proposals from four companies for five individuals. Two of the proposals met the mandatory and desired qualifications and price point based upon industry standards. Both of these candidates were interviewed by a panel consisting of CLBC senior

managers and an external technical expert. The successful candidate was Mr. Brian Berglund.

Now, I don't know where the member is going with this stuff. I don't know if he is saying: "Minister, you should have interfered. You should have injected yourself into this process." That would be totally inappropriate. As I've said before, I know that you might have done this in the past in some of the jobs you've had. I don't do that as a minister. I don't interfere.

I trust that we have the best people in place at CLBC to make these kinds of decisions. I'm sure this is not the most major decision that this management team makes on a day-to-day basis — okay? It's a very important decision. They feel that by hiring CRB Consulting — which is, I assume, owned by Brian Berglund — they have got the best company and the best talent to do the job that needs to be done. I have confidence in them that that's exactly what was achieved.

[1535]

A. Dix: If the minister wants an object lesson in political interference, he should read the Pricewaterhouse report in which Mr. Walls and Mr. Berglund are significant figures — and the CareNet scandal.

I want to ask the minister.... I'm not suggesting that he made the decision at all. I'm just asking him why CLBC selected, on a two-week turnaround, somebody who was very much involved with — I think it's fair to say — and in this very sector, one of the most significant information technology failures in the history of the government of British Columbia.

I think that's a reasonable question. If the minister wants to talk about political interference.... Look at the tag-team e-mails sent to Ministry of Children and Families staff by Mr. Walls and Mr. Berglund, which conclude with Mr. Berglund to Mr. Walls, in an insider one, saying: "Are you okay with this, or do I need to beat him up some more?"

I wanted to ask the minister if he wouldn't think it would be more prudent for the government of British Columbia, given the \$3.8 million lost in this area, to have more than a two-week turnaround. They hired a candidate with deep links to the sector who has, unfortunately — I've never met Mr. Berglund — had a profound failure, which was the CareNet issue.

It was a failure not just of him but of the government, which was very costly to the government. It was very costly to a previous minister connected to.... The member for Surrey-White Rock, who's a fine individual in this House, took the rap for this failure. So I wanted to ask the minister if he doesn't think that this is more than passing strange and whether CLBC officials, who are responsible to him and through him to this House, considered those factors when they made this decision.

Hon. S. Hagen: I'd just like to remind the member — he may not be aware of this — that included in the panel that interviewed the two finalists, the two companies that were finalists, was one Arlyn Reid Consulting, who is a technical expert and was on the panel. It

is a human resources firm that assists in information technology hiring, and as I've said before, I'm confident that the team that came to this decision made the right decision.

A. Dix: I'm just asking whether the CareNet failure was considered before this decision was made.

Hon. S. Hagen: I'm not aware whether it was or wasn't.

A. Dix: I appreciate that we're not always aware of things, so I'll ask him if CLBC staff are aware of that answer?

Hon. S. Hagen: It's perfectly clear what CLBC was looking for. They were listed in the criteria and the RFP that went out. Those would have been the criteria that people would have responded to.

A. Dix: I just want to remind the minister of the searing process that the community living sector was forced to go through because of the CareNet scandal. That included — and it's fully detailed in the Pricewaterhouse report, which I recommend to the minister — the use of connections to the Premier's office to "work over" Ministry of Children and Family Development staff. It was not a very happy episode.

I think these are reasonable questions. I appreciate that the minister is answering them as best as he can, and I'm happy to move on.

[1540]

I wanted to ask the minister, specifically, with respect to recent changes at CLBC and the change in the service system at CLBC, if he would assess those. I understand that we've had a test run in Abbotsford and Chilliwack. I'm wondering if the minister and senior officials of CLBC would be prepared to share a copy of the new service model and the report done in Abbotsford-Chilliwack of the new service delivery model — whether he'd be prepared to share that model with the Legislature at this time.

Hon. S. Hagen: As you know, CLBC is phasing in a new delivery system. There's not a formal report being done. We learn as we go, as they say, and they're developing a new service delivery model by using an approach that will evaluate proposed changes, learn from what works and redefine those things that don't achieve expected benefits.

A. Dix: Has there been a report on the test run in Abbotsford-Chilliwack?

Hon. S. Hagen: This is good news, actually — development of a CLBC development site. CLBC wants to move toward greater community involvement in developing appropriate cost-effective and sustainable, person-focused solutions based on choice. CLBC's phased-in approach to a new model began in the fall of 2005. The upper Fraser Valley — Abbotsford, Chilliwack

wack, Langley, Mission, Agassiz, Hope and Boston Bar — was selected as the development site and began its transition in early November '05 to provide services utilizing the new CLBC service delivery model.

The number-one priority is maintaining continuity for families and gradually transitioning their workers to their new roles. Work at the site has provided CLBC with the opportunity to monitor this change, make adjustments where necessary and provide clear guidelines for further transformation across the province.

A. Dix: I'll try again. You know, hon. Chair, it's important to be persistent.

Is there a report, and will the minister share it?

Hon. S. Hagen: And I'm being persistent too. There is no report.

A. Dix: I wanted to ask the minister about the model, because if you look at California and other jurisdictions, and if you ask clients and people in the system what they like most, what they need most, what help they need most, it's often ongoing case management. It's someone to assist them in not just putting together a personal plan but over a period of years — and in some cases for social workers, over a period of decades — working with an individual, finding them the resources and getting them the resources.

[1545]

It seems to me that the plan being put forward changes the role of social workers significantly — essentially transforms social workers into personal planners. I think it's fair to say, and it's typical, really, of other innovations the government has provided.... We know that in the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, there's an effort to take away the link that an income assistance recipient would have with his own financial aid officer, assistance officer, worker. This process has happened as part of cost saving, I presume, in the ministry but has rendered a fairly impersonal model in that ministry that I think, at least for those who have to experience the system, is quite unsuccessful.

I wanted to ask the minister if he thinks that the legitimate concern over the loss of safeguards provided under their former role for social workers, which, in particular, is providing ongoing monitoring in case management, identifying and helping to resolve risks and concerns in service delivery.... Do you think the loss of that role is not a greater risk than the potential benefits?

I wanted to ask what risks in particular CLBC has identified relating to loss of oversight, and what is being done to address them. I wanted to ask the minister, because I think on the case management side, many people think that this is a significant loss — that the process is in fact.... Many people think that at the end of the day they will be abandoned in this process and that every time they call or need a new plan, which is frequently.... As the minister will know, plans change on a regular basis, and we're required to change. The

loss of that personal commitment and contact is something significant.

I wanted to ask the minister, first of all, whether he thinks there are particular risks associated with what CLBC has identified, whether CLBC has identified the risks and wants to deal with them and is trying to deal with them and, in particular, if any concerns have arisen in the piloting of this model and new service model in Abbotsford.

I'm asking the minister what they learned, because presumably, the first time you run through a new service delivery model, not everything is perfect. Did, in fact, they learn anything in Abbotsford and Chilliwack, even if there's no report made on it? CLBC pilots a new service delivery model and chooses not to do any report that they might be able to share with anybody else about its successes and failures? It's a novel approach, but I'm willing to accept that that's their position. I'm wondering if any concerns in this piloting process have been raised with respect to this new role for social workers.

Hon. S. Hagen: It's always interesting to listen to the NDP members. It takes me back to question period, where there's this sense of wanting to move backwards, wanting to move back to the '90s instead of looking ahead, you know: how do we make things better for families? How do we give families more choice? I have to say that while the member opposite seems to be — although I don't think he always is — part of the "We don't want to move too progressively on this; we want to stay back where we were," where case management is a term, we want to move ahead. In my discussions with parents, they want to move ahead too. They want things to be better. They want choice. They want to be able to make a choice. They don't want to be told by government what to do.

That's why we're doing a pilot: so we can learn from the pilot. Probably one of the biggest changes is a change in thinking from the case management approach to supporting families to make their own decisions, to help them get through this. So are we learning from the pilot? Absolutely. That's why we're doing a pilot.

[1550]

I'll just go through some of these other points, because it's an interesting field for me. CLBC has redefined staff roles and responsibilities in support of person-centred planning and support plan monitoring. CLBC will use two field-level roles: facilitators and quality service analysts. Facilitators will work with individuals and families to assist them where requested in developing personal plans. Quality service analysts will determine eligibility and funding and will monitor contracts as well as assist in implementing personal plans. Both will help to ensure that well-rounded personal plans are developed and that supports and services empower individuals and families to achieve their goals and enhance quality of life. Role separation will increase job satisfaction, stimulate creativity and lead to more flexible and sustainable options.

A. Dix: Well, I'm sure the social workers of British Columbia will be thrilled to hear the minister's characterization of the work they do and have done with people in this field, not just in the 1990s but right up to the present time. I'm sure they'll be thrilled with this dismissive view of what case management involves, the work that goes together between staff and between social workers and families in that process. Surely that caricature of the process that the minister has just presented to us, claiming that all that happens up to now is that social workers tell people what to do, is wrong.

I don't think anybody looking at the growth of the community living sector would have appreciated the innovation of the government cutting \$150 million from the sector. Certainly, the B.C. Association for Community Living doesn't agree with the minister in that regard. Clearly, B.C. FamilyNet doesn't, and the service providers don't think that was such a good experiment in community living. Of course, we all know the politicization of that experiment that occurred in 2001, 2002 and 2003.

I think I'll take the minister's approach and belief about what case management represents of a social worker working with and giving continuity to families and individuals over a period of years — that that process of continuity was simply a case of dictates from social workers — even though, surely, he doesn't truly believe that's the case.

I wanted to ask the minister a further question, then. It's a question, really, around accountability. CLBC, as the minister suggested, has been created to try to be more responsive. That's presumably its role, and the reason why all parties in the Legislature supported the creation of legislation. I wanted to ask, since nowhere in the legislation is it really clear.... I mean, it's interesting that the legislation in some places suggests that people have in a sense a right to service. In the CLBC legislation, CLBC only has a responsibility to endeavour to find service.

First of all, to move on to accountability, I want to know how the minister views and how CLBC views that distinction, because in California and other jurisdictions there is certainly a much more clear entitlement to receive services. That's certainly not the case in community living legislation, and that didn't happen by accident.

I wanted to ask the minister how CLBC views its obligation to clients and to individuals and families, and how it views and interprets its requirement only to endeavour to provide services?

[1555]

Hon. S. Hagen: To the member for Vancouver-Kingsway: I'd like to remind him, in case he doesn't know this, that B.C. is one of the most progressive jurisdictions in service delivery in North America. Even internationally, we are being watched — you know, what we're doing — because people want to learn from what we're doing. The international community is watching and is very excited about the shifts that we're making.

Let me remind the member again of what we're talking about. We're changing the way we look at things. We're looking at choice, individualized approaches and person-centred planning — fair and equitable to all. I think I was reading into his comments that there seemed to be some reluctance from the social workers and staff as to what was going on. I just want to remind him that of a total of 474 staff positions, 458 — or 95 percent — accepted the offers of employment at CLBC. Only 16 staff members declined.

A. Dix: I'm glad that only 16 declined the opportunity to stop doing the work they love to do. I mean, I don't know why the minister would be surprised at that.

With respect to the issue of choice, the minister says that this is an issue of choice. Well, it's CLBC that has a policy of leaving group homes vacant — leaving group homes vacant when there are people who want to get into great homes. The choice that he talks about after 2002 promised individualized funding; it didn't deliver. In 2003 it promised individualized funding; it didn't deliver. In 2004 it promised individualized funding; it didn't deliver. In 2005 it promised it again; it didn't deliver.

[J. Nuraney in the chair.]

Now we have 25 spaces this year for individualized funding — 25 spaces after four years of promises with 600 people on wait-lists. The minister says he believes in choice, but he's leaving one choice. He's eliminating one of the major choices for some people, which is what he's doing. There is demand out there. I think people at CLBC would acknowledge that there's demand for those spaces. He's leaving those positions vacant — that's the decision he's made — and his response is: "We're giving more choice to 25 people."

So I'd say to the minister: the right to choice only matters if it exists. I mean, it's the old quote about the rich man and the poor man having the same rights in the marketplace, but if you don't have actual services and choices to choose from and you don't have the capacity to get those choices, then choice doesn't exist. It's not an ideological issue. It's a matter of having real services to choose from.

[1600]

I think that this is where the problem lies. The proposal to move and create Community Living B.C. is still living under the burden of its inspired creators, Mr. Walls and others, who promised government that if they went to this model, they could save money — as if a funding formula could somehow create, magically, 20-percent savings, that it's all about a funding formula. And it's not. It's about real choices that people need — real choices out there that they need.

I don't think there is anybody who is satisfied, given the repeated promises on individualized funding, with the minister's 25 spaces in this year — which were, by the way, promised in much greater numbers in previous fiscal years — to trade off, against that,

other choices in the system. I think that is certainly that issue of choice. Whether choice exists and how it manifests itself, I think, is an important question and one that we have to continue to follow.

I have to say to the minister that certainly we are going to ensure.... We are going to stay on this issue, because I believe choice involves someone actually having a variety of options, including some of the options that the minister has decided to eliminate for adults with developmental disabilities. CLBC is to eliminate some of the options that have previously existed in order to create new options — which, by the way, aren't ready yet.

I'd like to ask about a couple of the performance measures because this is an important part of the government's new way of doing business, I understand — performance measures. I wanted to ask why some performance measures don't exist at Community Living B.C. I wanted to ask why there are no performance measures at CLBC to gauge service quality, safety and reduction of wait-lists. I wanted to ask the minister whether he thought that those performance measures for us to see every year would be useful performance measures, or more useful than the performance measures in CLBC's plan.

Hon. S. Hagen: To the member for Vancouver-Kingsway: he was on a diatribe about what social workers want to do. You know, I've met with a lot of social workers around the province, in various parts of the province. What social workers say to me is....

I always ask them: "Why do you do this job?" And they always answer: "Because we love to help people." That's what social workers love to do. They love assisting individuals — in this case, with developmental disabilities. I've never heard one of them say: "I love this job because I do case management." They do it because they want to help people.

That's what CLBC is working with them to achieve. CLBC is facilitating a very progressive model for staff to support the individuals that we're both talking about. Individualized funding is but one option available to families — one option. Group homes are remaining open. It's just that fewer and fewer people are choosing that as an option.

[1605]

With regard to the CLBC performance plan, this is all based on the five great goals: build the best system of support in Canada for persons with disabilities, those with special needs, children at risk and seniors. The goal is to provide supports and services that are responsive and accountable to the needs and citizenship aspirations of the individuals and families that CLBC is mandated to serve.

You look at the first objective: "Successfully operate community living services during transition." Then you go to the performance measures: "Number of adults with developmental disabilities served; the percent of people requesting CLBC-funded supports and services for the first time that have a personal support plan; and the percent of adults requiring residential supports

who are offered and accept options other than the traditional group home model."

The second objective is: "Build capacity in CLBC staff, systems and processes." Performance measure is "percent of new staff who receive training that is specific to their role."

The third objective is: "Implement innovative and responsive services." The performance measure related to that is "increase in the number of people receiving CLBC supports who express satisfaction with CLBC services; the number of adults who choose and successfully move from a staffed residential arrangement to a more individualized option; the percent of adults currently receiving residential or day services who have a personal support plan in place."

The fourth objective is: "Increase choices for individuals and families." I've said all through this discussion that this is about choice. The performance measure is "the number of people using individualized funding to purchase supports and services; the number of people receiving direct payments for adult respite."

The fifth objective is: "Increase community awareness and involvement in CLBC." The performance measure related to that is "the number of people who visit CLBC's website; the number of people who receive CLBC's newsletter; the number of opportunities for information exchange between CLBC and its community partners."

The Chair: Member.

A. Dix: Hon. Chair, it's so good to see you here. Just a question, through you to the minister....

I'd just say to the minister that of course social workers don't do social work because of a notion called case management; they do it because they believe in the value of ongoing relationships, and ongoing relationships with clients. That's one of the advantages of the case management system that the present system doesn't have.

Let me ask him about a couple of the objectives he described though. Let me ask him about this. In terms of objective four, since he's talking about choices, I wanted to ask: why do the performance measures related to objective four, "increase choices," relate only to individualized funding — that's 25 people this year — and direct funding? Why not measure responsiveness to other demands, such as group homes, day program respite and other innovative residential models?

In other words, when you define choice, you say some choices count when we count choice, and some choices don't count. In fact, what we see here and what we are seeing given what the minister has said, for many people, will be a reduction in choice.

[1610]

Hon. S. Hagen: The member focused on objective four, but I would also draw his attention to objective three. Of course, there are five.

Here are the types of choices that individuals have. They have a choice of staffed residential group homes.

They have flexible residential support models, of which there are many. They have day programming, individualized funding which itself provides options — and then, of course, the home support options. These are the two performance measures that have been chosen at this particular time. I'm sure that they will change from time to time.

A. Dix: If you are going to measure your commitment to choice by only a couple of choices — the choices that you're adding to, not the choices you're taking away — clearly, it is not a very useful performance measure.

Let me ask the minister about objective three, then — implementing responsive and innovate services. Really, the focus here is moving people out of group homes. If people want to move out of group homes, that's a great thing. But many people actually want to move into group homes and take advantage of some of those opportunities as well. I'll be happy to read into the record some of the stories of people who feel that way so that the minister will be aware of that.

I wanted to ask whether the minister thinks there is any evidence that group homes are less responsive and innovative, in principle, than cheaper residential models.

Hon. S. Hagen: As I said this morning, one of the challenges that CLBC has is that only 24 percent in the last two years have chosen group homes. While it remains an option, it's declining as the choice that people are making. Also, 60 percent of current residential resources are day programs.

A. Dix: You know, after a few days with the distinguished minister I just get used to him not answering the question, so I'll move on to another one. I appreciate his answers, and I appreciate his efforts and skill and serenity. It's Buddha-like in its quality, I say to the minister. It's a good lesson. I hope that I may perhaps be giving the minister some lessons on the opposition side for his eventual return in 2009.

I wanted to ask the minister a couple of questions about the community awareness and involvement — specific questions. I think people are interested in the question of the community council, and Mr. Mowles will be aware of it. There are some concerns about that process in the community, I think, that have been expressed to him.

I wanted to ask him some specific questions in terms of the steps taken by CLBC to engage the community in terms of consultation. How many, for example, of the 16,000 individuals and families currently served by CLBC participated or responded to these community engagement efforts? What concerns, if any, were raised by those individuals, the people in the system?

[1615]

I have read, of course, to the minister earlier in the day the condemnation that the B.C. Association for Community Living expressed of this budget, which reflects, I think, the condemnation of many advocacy

groups, including those that have consistently worked with the government over the years — condemnation of their current budgetary policies.

I wanted to ask if they've learned anything from this community involvement process, and if so, what it is and what changes they've made as a direct result of that community awareness process.

Hon. S. Hagen: As I mentioned to the member for Vancouver-Kingsway this morning, I understand the role of those agencies. They are to advocate for their members. I get that. That's why I meet with them: because I'm anxious to hear from them. I also have to balance that with what I hear from individuals and from.... You know, when you're in government you don't get to just do what advocacy groups ask you to do. You actually have to do what's best for everybody.

I do want to talk about the community consultation a bit. It's a very important part of the service delivery transformation. It's a way to get input and feedback from the community. From October 2003 to January 2004 staff from the Interim Authority hosted community meetings in all five regions of the province. Over 300 people attended the meetings, and in the spring of '04 another round of community meetings reached 20 communities and about 2,000 people.

In the summer of 2005, immediately following the July 1 proclamation, the senior executive and the board chair toured the province hosting meetings directed at families; 22 communities were visited, with an average of 50 people attending each meeting. More community family meetings are anticipated as needed and as requested by the communities. CLBC continues to go out to the community on an ongoing basis to provide information to, and gather from, families, service providers, staff and stakeholders.

By July 1, 2006, an advisory committee to the board will be established which will have representation from each of CLBC's nine quality service areas. The committee will provide the board with a provincial point of view, including providing feedback on the level of satisfaction that communities and individuals are experiencing and making recommendations that will enhance the quality of life for those served by CLBC.

Community councils will also be established after the July 31, '06, transformation completion, which will play an important role in providing community input into decision-making. Community councils will be established in the catchment areas of the 17 community living centres, and members will be appointed by the board after being nominated from the community.

A. Dix: The minister will know that CLBC, of course, is a big provincial agency with a large budget, and often — as he knows from visiting ministry offices around the province — the real face of an organization is not head office. The real face for people who live in Comox-Courtenay is their local offices and so on. So I wanted to ask, in terms of local offices of CLBC, just by way of comparison: how many such offices are currently open? That's an easy question, but I want the

minister to compare that to how many local offices MCFD had with social workers and other staff handling community living services prior to 2002?

[1620]

Hon. S. Hagen: CLBC, in its planning process, assessed the demographics where the individuals that CLBC serves live. There are now 17 community living centres, plus nine satellite offices, plus nine quality services offices.

I think it's important to understand that it's not about where the offices are but it's actually outfitting staff with the technology to be out in the community. We used to expect people to come into the office; our workers now go into where the clients are living. We have staff working in more communities now than when it was under MCFD.

A. Dix: You know, it's such an interesting thing to hear the minister talk about services in the community living sector. But I wanted to ask him a little bit about governance and community governance, because this was intended to be an aspect of it. CLBC is in fact very much a Crown corporation. Its board is appointed, essentially, by the minister and the cabinet — which is fair enough — and reports to him. That's fair enough.

I think a lot of people are asking where the community governance is, which was promised. I wanted to just ask a question about the consultation process, because it's one of those unusual consultation processes. I know, hon. Chair, you'll be particularly interested in this.

The plans were presented in a position paper for public consultation with the date November 5 on it, but they were circulated on January 12 to only a narrow subset of CLBC clients. Only a small group of the 16,000 got a copy of the position paper. CLBC gave no deadline for responding to it — no deadline in the document. But a month later they announced the consultation was over, which sounds like a consultation in a play by Ionesco.

The government — in fact, many people — has not and CLBC hasn't shared the input received — the number of responses received. I'm wondering, since many people in the community don't feel that's a meaningful consultation: how many of CLBC's clients were informed? How many responded? What did they say, and how will CLBC respond to their concerns?

[1625]

Hon. S. Hagen: Each of CLBC's nine quality service areas will be represented on the provincial advisory committee. CLBC will aim to have at least one aboriginal member. Members will be selected based on their knowledge and understanding of community living services, the local and provincial issues facing people with disabilities and their families, and a sound understanding of CLBC's vision and service delivery approach.

While the work of the advisory committee and the community councils will be linked, each will have a

different focus. The advisory committee will look at issues from a provincial perspective — for example, how responding to the needs of individuals with challenging behaviours can be integrated effectively on a provincewide basis. The 17 community councils, on the other hand, will provide feedback to CLBC management in the community living centre areas on the operation and impact of local service delivery on individuals, families and providers.

In December of '05 a position paper was distributed, as the member mentioned, to our various stakeholders, as well as being posted on the CLBC website, to explain the process so far and to describe plans for creating and supporting community councils. The paper sought input to questions about specific aspects of implementation. The board has approved the recommendations put forward in response to the paper. Detailed terms of reference are being developed for the councils.

The adult transformation working group is made up of members who broadly represent the community's interests and the establishment of CLBC and the development of its programs and services. This includes self-advocates, family members and service providers.

CLBC and MCFD are also represented on the adult transformation working group. This group's roles include providing feedback on CLBC's service delivery model, helping to develop implementation plans for the new model, assessing the impacts of proposed policies and business practices, identifying specific issues or concerns in the community that need to be addressed, and providing input on proposed communication strategies for CLBC. A children's transformation working group with similar community representation fulfils the same roles, while addressing the needs of children with developmental disabilities.

A. Dix: Why did CLBC shut down the consultation process without giving a submission deadline, and how many submissions were received?

Hon. S. Hagen: I'm told that 50 proposals came in from around the province with recommendations. They went to the board, and the board accepted all of them.

A. Dix: May I ask how many submissions there were, which was the question I asked? Were there 50 proposals and 50 submissions, or was that 50 different proposals and a smaller number of submissions — say, 26?

[1630]

Hon. S. Hagen: Fifty proposals came in; they were summarized. The recommendations went to the board; the board approved them.

A. Dix: Can the minister just explain...? The basic question is: why have a consultation process with no deadline that's shut down arbitrarily? Does that make sense to him? It's my understanding that councils won't be established until next fall or winter. Why would

there be haste around that? Very specifically — set everything else aside — why did the CLBC launch a consultation process without a deadline and then shut it down without telling people?

Hon. S. Hagen: I'm told by staff that it was open for approximately a month. Those 50-some came in very early on, and then the number of proposals just dropped off, so they decided to close the process.

A. Dix: I'm going to give way for a few minutes for some questions from my colleague from Alberni-Qualicum.

S. Fraser: Thank you to the minister and his staff for being here. I apologize if I cover any new ground. This is a relatively new issue. I had a meeting with a constituent today, actually, so it's just a coincidence that I'm in here. I'm supposed to be at the other House, so please bear with me and show me some patience, if you can.

The Community Living Services Authority is a brand-new authority — am I correct? Am I, first of all, on the right track in that regard?

Hon. S. Hagen: Yes. It actually came into being July 1 of 2005. So it's about nine months old.

S. Fraser: Am I to understand that there are potential resources that can come through the authority to people with special needs, with disabilities — both children and adults? Is that correct also?

Hon. S. Hagen: That's correct.

S. Fraser: Could those resources include — I'm not fishing here; I'm just trying to find out if this is possible — things like emotional and educational support for families that are dealing with a child with disabilities, and for the child, for that matter, and/or resources towards therapies, like speech therapies? The girl in question is facing deafness and impending blindness, too. She's got Usher disease. She's at home.

Hon. S. Hagen: I appreciate the question. It sounds to us like it's an MCFD issue, and it probably involves other agencies like Health as well. So my recommendation to you would be to connect your constituent with the local MCFD office in the community — is it Port Alberni? What they will do is help navigate. They will help the person find the services that they need if it involves more ministries than MCFD.

S. Fraser: I believe that has been done. The meeting today was with Keith Atleo. He's chief counsellor for Ahousaht. They're living fairly remotely, so there are challenges there. We've seen this. This is a problem across the country. Sometimes we disconnect between the provincial and federal authorities, and often children suffer through this. I'm looking to try to find a way to remedy this in this particular situation. I'll be bringing this to the House in a larger issue later this session.

[1635]

In this particular case there have been attempts.... They've been trying for four years to bring some extra resources. It's a challenging situation for the family. There's a father and three brothers, and this ten-year-old girl is quite brilliant in many ways and needs pretty constant care. My hope is that this particular authority — from the looks of it, on the surface — could provide some additional resources, because the resources are not being met now. Their needs are not being met. The child is the one who will suffer, ultimately. There is a cry from the community for help as well as the family, and the school is trying to cover off some of this, too.

I understand that it's multi-jurisdictional, but is there an intent of this particular authority to bring resources to children with disabilities on reserve?

Hon. S. Hagen: That is a challenge, because the funding there comes from the federal government through a delegated agency, which is MCFD. But I'll make an offer to you. If you would give me the name and the details off-air, then I will personally have my office follow up to see if there is anything that has not been discovered that is in place.

One of the reasons for the Kelowna accord in bringing the federal government and the provincial governments across Canada together in dealing with the aboriginal challenges.... That was one of the challenges that was there. We know it's there, and we've been holding discussions with the federal government. I have been holding discussions with the federal government ever since I became this minister to ask the question: "Why can't we focus on the individual and not on whether the individual is on-reserve or off-reserve?"

It is a complicated structure, but I will add the services of our expertise here to try and help.

S. Fraser: I thank the minister for that. I will take you up on that. By the end of the day I'll have the information I was given today on this.

I will take the opportunity — and again, this is apolitical.... If I can just read a little paragraph from *Jordan's Principle: A Child-First Approach to Jurisdictional Issues*:

"Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit under the law without discrimination, and in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability."

The spirit of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, herein called "the Charter," is reaffirmed by Canada and by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, where non-discrimination is the key principle. These principles in domestic and international law provide a foundation for first nations children to receive equal benefit under the law and should provide adequate incentive for all levels of government to coordinate their policies and programs respecting first nations children.

I thank you for bearing with me on doing that. I appreciate the minister's offer to work with us to try and bring some remedy to this, and I am heartened by what happened in Kelowna. But we have to work hard

to make sure that children don't fall through the cracks here, including the little girl here whose name I will forward to you.

A. Dix: I thank my colleague and thank the minister for that exchange.

I wanted to just continue on with respect to community consultation and the issues of the councils. I just want the minister to explain how it works. Is it the case that CLBC's board will appoint all the council members and set the mandates, and can remove council members at its discretion?

[1640]

Doesn't that in some respects limit the accountability to local communities and limit the sort of community oversight of CLBC? These relationships are often dynamic, as the minister will know, and it seems to me that if the board of CLBC alone is choosing the councils, and can fire members at will, this may limit the effectiveness and usefulness of the council process to CLBC.

Hon. S. Hagen: I appreciate the opportunity to outline to the member just how this will work. Community councils will provide valuable feedback, first of all, on CLBC's performance; participate in recruitment and retention of new CLBC staff; be in direct contact with community living centre managers and the managers of quality services; participate in shared decision-making regarding reallocation of resources to meet both individual and community needs; and assist CLBC in developing personal networks for people without family or friends within the larger community. CLBC may also request community councils to advise CLBC on distribution of new funds.

It is anticipated that CLBC will move forward with the creation of the community councils following conclusion of the transformation in July 2006. CLBC will establish 17 community councils, one for each area served by a community living centre: Abbotsford, Delta-Richmond, North Shore, Tri-Cities, Victoria, Castlegar, Kelowna, Prince George, Dawson Creek, Courtenay, Nanaimo, Surrey, Vancouver, Cranbrook, Kamloops, Vernon and Terrace. Following the recommendations approved by the board, community planning and development managers will have up to six months after transformation to establish their local councils.

Here are the expected outcomes for the councils: improved understanding of CLBC financial allocation process, issues and decisions; improved working relationship with CLBC managers; improved relationship and engagement with CLBC supports and associational community life; improved satisfaction with CLBC performance; and increased influence over CLBC priorities and resource allocation decisions. A further recommendation from the board states: "The makeup of each council will be 50 percent plus one, self-advocates and/or family members; 25 percent, service providers; with the remainder of seats from the community at large."

A. Dix: I just wanted to ask the minister, I guess, the question again, with respect to the appointments —

whether he feels that just appointing councils through the board of CLBC is the right approach or whether he thinks there should be some local component in that.

Hon. S. Hagen: In one of the other papers that I read from, it stated in there that the community will make recommendations to the board, and then the board will appoint them. So I think it's fairly broadly based.

A. Dix: So is the process that the community provides a bunch of names to the board and the board selects? Or will the community, in fact, present its choices and the board's appointment be a formality?

[1645]

Hon. S. Hagen: The board will respect the recommendations that come in from the community.

Interjection.

The Chair: Member.

A. Dix: Oh, thank you, hon. Chair. I was so quick to thank the minister that I failed to wait for your recognition there.

Interjection.

A. Dix: I know. That doesn't mean I'll thank the minister again. I'll just thank him the one time.

A Voice: Don't wear yourself out.

A. Dix: I won't wear myself out.

I don't want him worrying. I think he gets worried when that happens too much.

I just want to ask about the provincial advisory committee and about its purpose and whether the minutes of the provincial advisory committee's meetings are made available to everyone who asks for them.

Hon. S. Hagen: I did read into the record the provincial advisory committee and how it would work, so I'm not going to do that again. I think your question was: will the minutes be available to the public? The answer is yes. They will be posted on the website.

A. Dix: I just want to ask the minister a few basic questions, because I know the minister will be pleased at this. We're almost coming to the end of his estimates. I'm already feeling nostalgic about it, in fact — although not that nostalgic. Ministry staff never feel nostalgic about it, I don't think, actually. They have to put up with and restrain their desire to speak out in the debate, so I appreciate their role as well.

I want to ask the minister just how much was in fact spent to create CLBC.

Hon. S. Hagen: This is actually an opportunity, because I get to correct the figure that I gave you last

year. Last year I gave you a figure of \$10.4 million, and the real number is \$10.3 million.

A. Dix: Not to contradict the minister, but the figure he gave me last year was \$10.5 million.

Hon. S. Hagen: Oh, was it?

A. Dix: Yeah, but that's okay.

Interjection.

A. Dix: That's right. No one in politics will ever forget the quote: "What's a hundred million dollars?" Is that the right figure? I can't remember.

That's the figure. I thank the minister for that.

That's all in, in a sense, because the member for Surrey-White Rock, when he was Minister of Children and Family Development, reported a figure on March 24, 2003, of \$11 million with respect to the creation of the interim authority. I'm not disputing that. He may in fact have been talking about a different number, but I was just hoping that perhaps ministry staff could help me. It may be that the number is just a number.

I want to ask a little bit about the complaints process at CLBC. I want to ask when the new complaints program process was implemented. Just to move on to the next question, as well, and give two at once: how many complaints resolution appeals have there been since that occurred?

[1650]

Hon. S. Hagen: I think my staff are stretching their memories here a bit, but they think that the complaints process was started in December, and I stand corrected if that's not true. Since that time, no complaints have made it to the CEO's level. One complaint made it to the vice-president's level and was resolved. The rest of the complaints have been resolved at the community level.

A. Dix: I just wanted to ask, because I've had some questions about this. We all get a little bit of this in our constituency offices as well. How are clients informed of procedures for complaints and appeals? What process is there? And what appeal is there for those whose complaints are not resolved at CLBC?

Hon. S. Hagen: The process is on the website, and you can also respond on the website, or a person can talk to staff in offices around the province. The appeal process is through to the service quality advocate and/or to the Ombudsman and, in the case of children, to the child and youth officer.

A. Dix: I just want to get a sense in terms of requests for involvement by the advocate for service quality. That may not be appropriate. I'll just put the question on the record, I guess, if you don't have the answer. I just want to get a sense of how many requests for involvement the advocate received in 2005-2006, or this current fiscal year, versus the previous fiscal year.

Hon. S. Hagen: I don't have the exact number, but I just had a recent meeting with the service quality advocate. I remember that I was quite surprised, actually, to see that the number of complaints or inquiries this fiscal year that we're presently in, compared to the previous one, had dropped by about 50 percent.

A. Dix: I'm guessing that the minister is committed to having the advocate for service quality continue to be independent of CLBC. I just want to check with him if that continues to be his position.

Hon. S. Hagen: The answer is yes.

A. Dix: I just want to ask.... When we adjourned at lunch, we were talking a little bit about individualized funding, and it was an interesting discussion. I just want to get a sense.... The minister said that CLBC, after many years of promises, is promising this will actually happen this year. I'm wondering if CLBC knows, in terms of this particular waiting list, how many people are on a waiting list for individualized funding or have been part, I presume, of previous waiting lists for individualized funding. At one point I had understood that number to be in the 600 range, but I may be mistaken. I wanted to know how many people are on that particular waiting list?

[1655]

Hon. S. Hagen: I'm told by staff that we had individuals respond previously to an earlier individualized funding project. Those people are now on a priority list to be contacted when the initiative is launched this summer. Nobody here has the numbers available.

A. Dix: That would have been the MCFD pilot project of a few years ago, the one that 600 or so people applied for — you can get me that — and were on the list for. But then the project, for whatever reason, didn't get off the ground. Is that the one the minister is referring to?

Hon. S. Hagen: That's the one.

A. Dix: I appreciate that answer.

You know, one of the challenges in this — and it's a genuine challenge in the sector; the minister will know this, and Mr. Mowles will know this, of course — is that because this has been promised so many times, there are real concerns in terms of whether this time will be the time when someone in government delivers on it.

The whole notion of individualized funding was central to the restructuring proposed in 2001-2002. I just wanted to be really specific again — I know we've gone over some of this ground before — about when the first case, the first person.... When does CLBC believe, expect the first person will get individualized funding?

[D. Hayer in the chair.]

Why, given the centrality of individualized funding to what the minister says he likes about CLBC and oth-

ers ...? Certainly; it's been at the centre of the discussion of CLBC. This notion of individualized funding is not reflected, in terms of the first year, of significantly more people than 25.

[1700]

In fact, in future years it's not reflected of significantly more people than it is. I mean, I presume those are budget limitations, but perhaps the minister can describe the technical limitations that have caused this effort to not succeed in previous efforts and previous pilots and how CLBC has overcome those.

Hon. S. Hagen: I'm relating to what you said, because when I became the minister.... I think it was about 15, 16 months ago — something like that. I remember going to my first interim CLBC board of directors meeting. Of course, because I was new in the ministry, I wasn't aware of all of the stuff that had gone on before I got here. But I'll tell you, there was a lack of belief that we would launch CLBC. I'm sure that you heard that in the community that you live.

I was determined to launch it and made it a priority. We had discussions yesterday with regional governance — and a desire to move ahead and then a reluctance by our partners to move ahead quite as quickly. It's an interesting ministry from that perspective, because there are lots of challenges to deal with.

Your question was: when can we expect the first family to realize individualized funding? I made a commitment, I think this morning, that we would have the program up and running in the fall of this year. I'll stand by that commitment that we'll have the first one.

I don't pretend to understand all of the reasons why this program has started and stopped and hasn't moved along quicker, but I do understand one of the big reasons, and that is the tax issue in negotiating with the federal government. What we don't want to do is have this money going into families and being taxable. That has been a big hurdle.

But I'll stand by the commitment I made this morning that we will have the program in operation, which obviously would mean there would be at least one family benefiting from this. Again, I want to remind the member and everybody else that this is only one of the options. This is one of the choices that people can make. I don't know how popular the choice is going to be, but I'm sure that between now and the fall, we'll get some idea.

A. Dix: We won't relive our debate on performance measures, but it's the only option that's seemingly recognized in judging the performance of Community Living B.C.

[1705]

I wanted to ask the minister a few questions in the short time we have left about the family independence fund. Is the family independence fund...? Maybe the minister can tell me how that fund differs or if it's in fact the same fund as the community living restructuring fund that was launched in 2003.

Hon. S. Hagen: This is a new fund this year, \$30 million, to establish a new family independence fund. The community living restructuring fund was available to agencies and families. This is really focused to assist families with a child or adult with developmental disabilities to help keep the family member at home. This will be capital grants to eligible families, which can be used for home renovations including lifts, elevators, ramps and accessible vehicles as well.

A. Dix: With respect to the community living restructuring fund, I recognize this is a different fund. I want to ask the minister why, in that case, for-profit agencies were eligible for the funds? It seems quite significantly different, obviously, than this fund, which seemed unusual at the time.

Perhaps the minister could assist me in pointing me to assessments that were done about the success of that fund: how that fund worked to assess the number of people it helped, how many of the 16,000 families served by CLBC were helped, whether there is a comprehensive ministry study of the success of that fund and how that success will be reflected in this new fund.

Hon. S. Hagen: As the member probably knows, that money was turned over to the Victoria Foundation. If you contact the Victoria Foundation, I know I've seen annual reports where they list the individuals or groups that got grants from that fund.

A. Dix: I just wanted to finally say to the minister that with respect to these important issues of community living, services and Community Living B.C., I think it's really important for all of us to remember in these discussions that people have a variety of needs. My concern with what the minister is doing is not that Community Living B.C. favours choice, but that the result will be less choice and, for some adults with developmental disabilities, not having access, in fact, to the choices that they need, the choices that are right for them.

I want to read him a letter from one parent, just to put this in context. There is in the sector, as well, especially for people whose families are receiving services, a feeling and sense of uncertainty about the future. That's natural, I think. It's been a period of real upheaval. Both the 2002 cuts in funding community living, and.... Also, it's change. Whether it's good or bad change for us as policy-makers, it's always felt as a burden for our people who live in the communities, who don't know — who are very vulnerable, in fact — to change.

[1710]

In conclusion, I just want to read a letter from a mother from Vancouver. The words are fairly tough for the ministry, for CLBC, but I don't think that's the intent. I think what it reflects is the angst so many people feel and that we really need to recognize, as policy-makers on all sides of the House and as senior officials,. Sometimes we forget that when we're here in Victoria. The message from her is:

It's about time those in Victoria thought about the impact of their decisions and began to develop some compassion and respect for clients and their families. So many of us have worked long and hard with incredible opposition and personal stress to find secure, safe and livable homes for our disabled children.

Give families some credit for thinking of their children's best interests. I know of no one with a challenged adult or child who would not want them to live an independent life if they were capable of such and could do so safely. The truth is that our children have high needs. It is extremely cruel to clients and their families to continue to hang this cloud of re-evaluation and possible diminished services over their heads.

My autistic son is an adult and well-settled in a group home. Were he to be housed in a lesser environment, I am sure he would end up in the streets or worse. My son does the best he can, but he will always need this 24-hour staffed environment. The fact that he has three other autistic men living in the house means that he is with his peers and, like many young men, is sharing a home accommodation. Thus there is a normalization within the safety net.

I have done the best I can as a parent. These constant threats are distressing and cruel. Should my son be moved at somebody's whim, I would be deeply, deeply concerned.

Regardless of what one thinks about the politics and policies, I want to impress upon the minister that these are the circumstances people face. I don't think we should forget the importance of maintaining a menu of services and of options — of not one day choosing individualized funding, the next day group homes. When we make these decisions, it's not that people are fearful of change but that the change affects them in such an unbelievably profound way — a way that I don't think we could possibly understand; we try to understand, as policy-makers — but in a really profound way.

I just want to say to the minister and to the people from CLBC that what is going to happen in the next year at CLBC will be of enormous importance. To the extent that we can support initiatives — I was at the opening of CLBC — we will support positive initiatives. That's extremely important to do and to recognize. Not everything is about debate and disagreement.

I just want to say that there is a lot hanging on this. It's not about 16,000 people, but it's about each individual person dealing with the struggles of their lives. I think that parents, especially in families of people with developmental disabilities.... I just can't imagine the contribution and the work and the effort and the pain and the struggle and the joy, as well, of all of that. It's impossible for those of us not in that position to imagine it.

In closing this debate, I want to encourage both Community Living B.C. and the minister to recognize that and to do their very best in the next year, because there is so much at stake for individuals in our communities.

Hon. S. Hagen: I couldn't agree with you more. The respect I have for parents who are living with persons with disabilities or have children with disabilities.... My respect and admiration for them is so high. I take very seriously this job as the minister and having the responsibility for CLBC as well.

I can assure that mother that her son will not be moved out of that group home if he doesn't want to be moved. There is a choice to stay; it's not just a choice to leave. I want her to rest assured that we do care and that we don't actually sit here as policy-makers in Victoria trying to disrupt people's lives. We're actually trying to make people's lives better. That's why we've set the high goals that we have, and I think there are areas where we can work together to make that happen.

Having said that, I'd like to move the vote.

Vote 20: community living services, \$602,269,000 — approved.

Vote 19: ministry operations, \$1,234,026,000 — approved.

Hon. S. Hagen: I move that the committee rise, report resolutions of the Ministry of Children and Family Development and ask leave to sit again.

Motion approved.

The committee rose at 5:15 p.m.

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Published by British Columbia Hansard Services, and printed under the authority of the Speaker by the Queen's Printer, Victoria. Rates: single issue, \$2.85; per calendar year, mailed daily, \$298. GST extra. Agent: Crown Publications Inc., 521 Fort St., Victoria, B.C. V8W 1E7. Telephone: (250) 386-4636. Fax: 386-0221.

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