

Fifth Session – Forty-Second Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
Standing Committee
on
Legislative Affairs

Chairperson
Mr. James Teitsma
Constituency of Radisson

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Forty-Second Legislature

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA
THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

Thursday, January 26, 2023

TIME – 9 a.m.

LOCATION – Winnipeg, Manitoba

CHAIRPERSON – Mr. James Teitsma (Radisson)

VICE-CHAIRPERSON – Ms. Janice Morley-Lecomte (Seine River)

ATTENDANCE – 6 QUORUM – 4

Members of the committee present:

Hon. Mrs. Guillemard, Hon. Ms. Squires

*MLA Fontaine, Ms. Morley-Lecomte,
Mrs. Smith, Mr. Teitsma*

APPEARING:

Ms. Amanda Lathlin, MLA for The Pas-Kameesak

*Ms. Sherry Gott, Manitoba Advocate for Children
and Youth*

*Ms. Karlee Sapoznik Evans, Deputy Manitoba
Advocate for Children and Youth*

MATTERS UNDER CONSIDERATION:

*Annual Report of the Manitoba Advocate for
Children and Youth for the fiscal year ending
March 31, 2021*

*Annual Report of the Manitoba Advocate for
Children and Youth for the fiscal year ending
March 31, 2022*

* * *

Clerk Assistant (Ms. Katerina Tefft): Good afternoon. Will the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs please come to order.

Before the committee can proceed with the business before it, it must elect a Chairperson.

Are there any nominations?

Hon. Sarah Guillemard (Minister of Mental Health and Community Wellness): I nominate James Teitsma.

Clerk Assistant: Mr. Teitsma has been nominated. Are there any other nominations?

Hearing no other nominations, Mr. Teitsma, will you please take the Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: Our next item of business is the election of a Vice-Chairperson.

Are there any nominations?

Mrs. Guillemard: I nominate Janice Morley-Lecomte.

Mr. Chairperson: Ms. Morley-Lecomte being nominated, are there any further nominations?

Hearing no other nominations, Ms. Morley-Lecomte is elected Vice-Chairperson.

This meeting has been called to consider the annual reports of the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth for the fiscal years ending March 31st, 2021 and 2022.

Before we would begin, I would like to remind everyone that questions and comments must be put through me, the Chair.

Are there any suggestions from the committee as to how long we should sit this morning?

Ms. Janice Morley-Lecomte (Seine River): I suggest two hours.

Mr. Chairperson: Two hours being suggested, is that agreeable? *[Agreed]*

Does the honourable minister wish to make an opening statement, and would she also please introduce the officials she has in attendance?

Hon. Rochelle Squires (Minister of Families): I'd be more than happy to. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'd like to introduce my team: my deputy minister, Michelle Dubik; my acting—or my assistant deputy minister, Christina Moody; assistant deputy minister, Heidi Wurmann; Shelley Jonasson, here on support. And then we have two individuals from Justice that are joining us this morning. We have assistant deputy minister and deputy minister, Jeremy—*[interjection]*—sorry, thank you; Executive Director Briget Maer *[phonetic]* and assistant—deputy minister of mental health, community and wellness, Kym Kaufmann.

Mr. Chairperson: You can go ahead with your opening statement.

Ms. Squires: I'm very pleased to be here this morning.

It's a good opportunity for me to once again welcome Ms. Sherry Gott into her role as advocate.

It is a pleasure to be working with you and I personally benefit greatly from the work that the advocate's office does. The policy that you conduct, the research and the reviews that you do is greatly helpful to myself, my department, the entire team. And everybody in the province benefits from the work that you do. So I thank you for accepting this honour to be the advocate.

And I also want to just take a brief moment to thank your predecessors, particularly the acting advocate, Ainsley Krone, who also had undertaken remarkable work during her tenure and really advancing protection and well-being and the advancement for all children and youth in the province.

And so, really pleased with this—to have you here today and pleased about the collaboration that our two offices have.

One example of those positive benefits of us working together were the distribution of those Thrival Kits, and I know that many students from grades 4 to 6 all throughout the province have received these Thrival Kits, which are really enhanced tools to greater mental health and resiliency in children, which is something that I think we can all support. And they were developed by MACY and the Canadian Mental Health Association, and so thank you for all of that.

Really also very pleased that I was able to meet your Youth Ambassador Advisory Squad last year that—the YAAS! crew, and I know under your leadership this group of ambassadors are just not only growing and fulfilling in their own journey towards adulthood, they're also mentors for others, and so that is really incredible, important work.

In June of 2021, I was honoured to announce the proclamation of the portions of The Advocate for Children and Youth Act that expanded the mandate of the advocate to review or investigate serious injuries and deaths of children outside of the child-welfare and adoption systems. Government staff are currently working with MACY to put in place the reporting mechanisms for serious injuries of children and youth. And in the spring of this year the last remaining section of The Advocate for Children and Youth Act, the section 21, which deals with the duty to report these injuries, is expected to be proclaimed.

Our government has—the proclamation will mark the completion of that commitment to broaden the scope and oversight of the work that MACY does,

and it's in response to recommendations by Commissioner Hughes following the inquiry into the death of Phoenix Sinclair. He had called for the important work of the advocate's office to include supporting children in receiving services provided through other provincial departments.

And in response to this broader mandate for MACY, that a new deputy ministerial committee was formed and the cross-departmental working group ensures a whole-of-government response to those recommendations and the ongoing work of improving services and supports for children. That work, of course, includes co-ordinating responses to the 73 recommendations to Manitoba that MACY has made since 2019, and I'm very pleased to be working on those recommendations.

And, as we all know, the landscape on the CFS system and the systems that are protecting children and youth in our province are shifting greatly underneath our feet as we speak. There are very exciting developments in the transformation—I would say that the largest transformation that child welfare has undertaken in 50, 60 years. It is life-changing for many, and these are moments where we're working with a very fluid and dynamic system. And great work is being conducted right now, as the Province is working with Indigenous governing bodies who are drawing down jurisdiction and, you know, undertaking authority over child welfare, which we see as a very, very positive step.

And as the ground beneath our feet is shifting, the system is in flux and there's a lot of fluidity, and that makes our work even all the more important to be ensured that we're moving in the right ways.

* (09:10)

And so, with that, I will conclude my opening remarks, but just, again, to express my gratitude to everybody who works in the child-welfare space, the Department of Families, the department of—other government departments who are now having that expanded mandate to work with the advocate and particularly your office and all those that you serve.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the honourable minister.

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

MLA Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): Aaniin. Good morning, everyone. Our—on behalf of our team, we're pleased to be here this morning to consider the

2021-2022 annual report for the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth.

We're glad to be able to have an opportunity to discuss these important matters with the Manitoba advocate, Sherry Gott. And first off, on behalf of our team and, as we said at your swearing-in ceremony, we are incredibly honoured to have you at the helm doing really important work.

And, as everyone on this side of the table has said many, many times in the Chamber, and certainly outside the Chamber, representation matters. Representation, when you are doing such important work in respect of advocacy, particularly on the most vulnerable of our province, representation matters. When you're dealing with families that are navigating, you know, the intergenerational effects of colonization, of residential schools, of '60s scoop, representation matters.

And so we are incredibly pleased that you are the new advocate—the Manitoba advocate.

I also want to acknowledge Kelly Gossfeld, the Indigenous Deputy Advocate for Children and Youth. I think that those are such important, important roles.

I cannot stress it enough how much representation matters when you're doing this work, right? When we're looking at ensuring that the lives of children—and we all know in this room that, predominantly, the children that come to access or—services or look for advocacy from your office are Indigenous. Those are predominantly Indigenous families that are, as I said, navigating the effects of colonization.

And, you know, often I think that when we say, you know, navigating the effects of colonization, people tend to think of, like, it's this, you know, long past thing in history. No, we navigate that today. We navigate that within all the systems, within all the departments.

And so I cannot stress enough how pleased we are that you and your team are where you are and the work that you're doing.

We want to also say miigwech to the outgoing, former acting Manitoba advocate, Ainsley Krone, who, no doubt, had helped in the preparation for this annual report that we're going to be discussing.

I also want to just say miigwech to all of the staff at MACY. It's not easy work, and it's certainly very important work, again, to be able to advocate on the most vulnerable, and so we do lift up all of the staff

that work there and say miigwech for that really important work.

And then, certainly, MACY plays—plays a really important role within Manitoba by advocating on behalf of children and families within all systems now, which is a good thing, an important thing. And we know that the staff and the leadership work tirelessly and we want to acknowledge that.

And, again, we look forward to the discussion this morning and, again, wish you well on this new journey and this new path that you're embarking on.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the member.

Do the representatives from the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth wish to make an opening statement?

Ms. Sherry Gott (Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth): Tansi. I'd like to thank the Committee on Legislative Affairs for the opportunity to appear today. We are here today on Treaty 1 territory to discuss the content of the 2021-22 annual report of my office, which was released on November 29, 2022.

Before I begin, I would like to introduce my deputy advocates who are here with me today: Kelly Gossfeld, the Indigenous deputy advocate, who is responsible for advocacy, services and youth engagement; Dr. Karlees [*phonetic*] Evans, deputy advocate responsible for research, quality assurance, public education, investigations and child death reviews.

Today I will provide members of the Legislative Affairs committee with a summary of the activities of the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth office, as outlined in our annual report and service plan.

I want to note that the work of our office is guided by the United Nations convention of the rights of the child. Indeed, children's rights are at the forefront of everything we do. Although our office remains heavily engaged in matters related to child-welfare system since 2018, when The Advocate for Children and Youth Act was proclaimed, our mandate has expanded. We know—we now advocate in additional domains beyond child welfare. The domains my office are in are Child and Family Services, adoptions, disabilities, mental health, addictions, education, youth justice and victim support services, which includes domestic violence and sexual exploitation.

In 2021-2022, our office received 2,721 requests for services. While the majority of these cases originate with a reported concern regarding the child-and-family-services system, 61 per cent of the youth

we served had more than one social-service need. When young people have more than one social-service need and complex needs, advocacy officers are often co-ordinating help between several programs and services.

After a slight drop in requests for services last fiscal year, the overall numbers for requests went back up this fiscal year. In 2021-2022, we saw the easing of public health orders, and adults had increased contacts with children, which increased the likelihood of youth being identified of having a need for advocacy supports.

Relatedly, many service providers began shifting from remote work back to in-person services, meaning they also had more contact with young people. Sources of referral can include educators, case workers and professionals who directly work with children. An increase in requests is likely due to more children and youth accessing services from professionals as public health orders eased.

As mentioned, our annual report reveals that, last year, 61 per cent of these children, youth and young adults struggled with more than one service need. Overall, 59 per cent of the young people we served experienced mental health or substance abuse issues; 36 per cent were victims of abuse, neglect and/or assault; 28 per cent were living with a disability; 24 per cent were victims of domestic violence or sexual exploitation; 21 per cent were chronically absent from school and were suspended or expelled from school, and 12 per cent were involved with the criminal justice system.

As noted in our annual report, the 2021 and '22 fiscal year brought a major operational change to the Manitoba advocate office. On June 1st, 2021, the government of Manitoba proclaimed additional provisions of The Advocate for Children and Youth Act, which is—which now allowed the child death reviews and investigations program to formally examine a wider scope of child deaths. Where a child or their family receives services within one year of the child's death from any reviewable service, such as CFS, addictions, mental health or youth justice, that now falls in scope for the review by the Manitoba advocate.

Once a death is determined to be in scope, the Manitoba advocate can examine any designated service, such as CFS, addictions, mental health, youth justice, education, disabilities and/or victim supports, that have been involved with the child's family.

One area of concern highlighted in the annual report is that my office continues to see young people underserved in the provincial mental health system. Our concerns include minimal ongoing support following a young person's discharge from mental health care. Many families are left to navigate the system on their own, sitting on long wait-lists and accessing short-term crisis services with inefficient results.

* (09:20)

Since last fiscal year, we have seen 23 per cent increase in the proportion of children and youth with mental health and/or substance abuse services needs. Mental health and/or 'substan' abuse are issues consistently ranked as the highest social-service need for the young people we work with.

The COVID-19 pandemic has 'exasperated' already scarce resources, especially in rural and northern communities. In May 2021, the Manitoba advocate joined with the other members of the Canadian council of youth and child advocates to issue a statement urging governments to increase investments in child and youth mental health during and after the pandemic.

My office will continue to monitor mental health services in the province, urging the government to prioritize responding to the critical need through increased access and investments as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, discharging planning for mental health care services is a major concern that we have. Despite the presence of multiple indicators of risk, young people are sometimes discharged with a—without a discharge plan. Some of those discharge plans do not address the scope of the child's needs, and too often the burden of arranging after-care falls to the family, who may be unfamiliar with how to access service needs. Often, services may not be available to them in their community, or the family may be experiencing other barriers to accessing services. As a result, families are left to navigate these systems while their child is in the middle of a mental health crisis.

Another ongoing concern is—we have is how agreements with young adults, or AYAs, are implemented. These are agreements for services for youth who were in care at the time they turned 18. The transition between youth and young adulthood is a critical stage of development and presents multiple challenges. For adolescents who experienced complex trauma in their earlier years, including children who

were in care, the challenges may continue when they reach the age of 18.

Recognizing these unique circumstances, agencies may enter into AYAs—sorry. AYAs can be placed until the young person turns 21 and can support them in their educational goals, training, treatment programs, in transitioning to adult services or independent living, or any other areas that can help the young adult succeed.

While AYAs are important—an important tool to support young adults, MACY continues to note, with AYAs in a number of areas. For example, gaps in the mental health and substance use treatment services in Manitoba are also associated with experience of homelessness for young people. This is not only in the transition from services, but also while waiting for treatment and services. This is particularly the case with respect to wait-lists for residential treatment.

It grieves me that the suicide—that suicide is still the leading manner of death for youth ages 10 to 17 in Manitoba. As noted in our annual report, since the beginning of the investigations and child death reviews program in 2008, the Manitoba advocate has examined the issue of youth suicide, a public health crisis that continues to affect too many families in Manitoba to this day.

The Manitoba advocate continues to monitor with concern the issue of youth suicide, including actions the government of Manitoba is taking to solve this crisis. Suicide deaths can be prevented if proper supports, like early assessment and intervention, are available to children and youth. The government of Manitoba has a duty to children and their families to provide the highest attainable standards of health care, including mental health, addictions as outlined under article 24 of the UNCRC.

Compliance monitoring and recommendation issued by my office is an important tool to hold various government departments accountable for ensuring they are consistently working to improve programs and services for children, youth and young adults. Our most recent compliance report was released on January 17th and can be found on our website.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., a right delayed is a right denied. This quote—

Mr. Chairperson: Sorry, the time has expired.

With leave of committee, should we allow her to complete?

An Honourable Member: Yes.

Mr. Chairperson: All right. Thank you. With leave, continue on.

Ms. Gott: Thank you. This quote is especially meaningful for us at MACY because inaction of implementing recommendations represent an unnecessary delay, a delay that prevents the rights of children and youth in Manitoba from being fully realized.

The compliance report that was just released notes 18 per cent or 12 of 67 of all recommendations issued by my office are now complete. My team and I have identified three areas for the provincial government to prioritize with respect to the 67 recommendations we issued between 2018 to November 2021.

These three themes do not only represent areas of opportunity to further progress on implementing recommendations, but also will help improve services for children, youth and young adults and families.

MACY recommends prioritizing actions to address capacity inequities for Indigenous child welfare authorities and the outstanding Phoenix Sinclair inquiry recommendations, implementation of safe sleep related infant deaths, implementation of mental health and addictions recommendations.

We look forward to the forthcoming proclamation of phase 3 of our legislation. It will require provincial services area to report to my office any incident where a child or youth was seriously injured when the child was receiving or whose family was receiving a reviewable service at the time of the injury or in the year before the injury. Such incidents include hospitalization or sexual assaults.

This will allow my staff to collect information on these serious injuries, analyze, review, investigate and release them on reports—release reports on them.

The development of regulations and reporting mechanisms are in their final stages; my office has already notified in some cases of serious injuries. We are grateful that four additional positions: one manager, two investigators and one administrative support have been approved to take on this work.

That said, however, we anticipate the workload of our staff will increase substantially as more organizations are educated about their duties to report under this change to our legislation. Therefore we will closely monitor the impact on our office and seek additional resources as required.

Another change in our landscape has been federal legislation, An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families, coming into force. Indigenous governing bodies are exercising their right to self-determination and developing their own child-welfare legislation. It was assumed by some that this legislation would significantly decrease our work-office's workload. This has proven to be incorrect.

The majority of young people we support face co-occurring challenges across multiple systems. I am saddened to report today that the number of youth with co-occurring challenges is increasing.

As more people become aware of our mandate to work across various domains and as we take on serious injury reporting we anticipate becoming busier than we have ever been as an office.

Before I close today, I want to note how deeply concerned I am about an issue of most importance to us—the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and two-spirit persons. This past December marked the 20th anniversary of the 2002 launch of Manitoba's action plan on child exploitation, Canada's first provincial strategy to prevent sexual exploitations—exploitation.

Since December 10th, 2008, the strategy became—has been known as Tracia's Trust in honour of Tracia Owen, who died by suicide in 2005 at the age of 14 after she was sexually exploited. The strategy is now 20 years old and it needs urgent updates and actions. We need to enhance the strategy by pivoting toward the current evidence around child exploitation.

As Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, it is my legislated responsibility to raise awareness and understanding of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, including article 34 and 35, which states governments must protect children from sexual abuse and human trafficking.

In spite of the special reports, recommendations issued and the individual and ongoing advocacy my office is doing, children and youth in our province continue to be sexually exploited, harmed and killed as part of the crisis.

* (09:30)

While I'm aware of the commitment in the government Speech from the Throne to increase funding that targets child exploitation and to release a progress report regarding the government's gender-based violence framework in the coming months, more action on the National Inquiry into Missing and

Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' 231 calls for justice is needed now.

I was appointed to the role of the Manitoba advocate in October 2022. I plan to continue the work of our office to amplify the voices of children, youth, young adults and their families. Community building is very important to me, so I intend to focus on collaborating and 'strengthening' relationships with all youth services—servicing organizations throughout the province, especially those service—servicing Indigenous communities.

My office will focus on carrying out this work through a decolonize lens. We are in the beginning stages of developing a new strategic plan for our office which will focus on 231 recommendations from missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls inquiry, inquiries, calls for justice and the TRC commission's 94 Calls to Action.

One thing we will—that will remain the same is our work will be guided by UNCRC. At the heart of all the work we do, children's rights will always be at the forefront.

I am humbled and honoured to serve in this role. My goal is for young people and their families to be fully aware of their rights. I want them to be supported to navigate various systems. I want to help empower them to speak about these services, how services must evolve so that young people in Manitoba can thrive and accomplish their dreams.

I appear before you in the spirit of collaboration. Together we will listen to young people and collectively work to create conditions in Manitoba where all children have a chance to succeed and thrive.

Ekosi, Kinanâskomitinawaw. Thank you. I welcome any questions or comments you may have.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you very much, Ms. Gott, and welcome officially to the role, on behalf of committee.

The floor is now open for questions.

MLA Fontaine: I have a series of questions for both yourself and for the minister this morning, but I do want to pick up—obviously, in respect of your last couple of points, more specifically in respect of MMIWG2S and some of the things that you've raised there.

So, first, I appreciate you raising here at committee Tracia's Trust. As some folks know, I was the

director of justice for the Southern Chiefs' Organization for almost 10 years, and part of that work was actually working with the government of the time in respect of Tracia's Trust. And we did a whole bunch of work across the 'promince.' But again, that work was done in partnership and in collaboration with community.

And so, and actually that work derived itself from September of 2007. In August of 2007, Fonassa Bruyere went missing. Fonassa Bruyere is from my community of Sagkeeng Anicinabe First Nation. Her body was found in September—early September of 2007. And Fonassa was 17, just a baby—16 or 17—just a baby, looked like a baby; and she fell through gaps in service.

In fact, Fonassa wasn't part of CFS, and at the time she had been trying to get into Little Sisters because she wasn't part of CFS. She fell through the gaps. And like Commissioner Wally Oppal—for those folks that don't know, Commissioner Wally Oppal is the commissioner that looked at the missing women inquiry in BC. And one of the things that he said there definitively in his executive summary—he said, you know, often society folks will use the term, Indigenous women put themselves at risk, Indigenous youth put themselves at risk, Indigenous girls put themselves at risk, right?

And that narrative is actually a means of placing blame, right? If you hadn't done this, if you hadn't been there, none of this would have happened to you.

And he did a very good job at rejecting that narrative and really ensuring that society understands that it's not us as Indigenous women or Indigenous girls that put ourselves at risk; it is society and the lack of concern and protections that put Indigenous girls, women at risk. And Fonessa's a perfect example of that.

And so, from her death, very quickly we organized what was called the community—sexually exploited community coalition, SEY, and they were engaged in doing that work with the government of the time, at revamping, at looking at Tracia's Trust. And there was some phenomenal work there: outreach, Manitoba outreach; HOME, Hands of Mother Earth—really important work that was being done.

And so I do acknowledge that what you're saying is that there's a lot of work that needs to be done and re-visioning, revamping, giving more resources to

Tracia's Trust. And so—and I think that that discussion is always important, always urgent, always critical.

But certainly, as we've seen just this past December, right, it—we at this table, who hold such important roles and sacred responsibilities, shouldn't be good with that Winnipeg, in December, announced its second serial killer of Indigenous women. We shouldn't be just thinking that's just normal for our city or for our province. It's not.

And like the previous psychopath, and this psychopath that had ties to white nationalism, they targeted Indigenous women, because they know that Indigenous women are put at risk by society, and little girls are put at risk by society.

And so I really do appreciate that that is something that your office is focused on.

I would like to hear more, from your expertise and from what you're seeing, what you think the province—both the government, but also the province as a collective, right?—what do you want to see in respect of protections and addressing those gaps in services?

And ultimately—often, you know, we talk in that you will never—we will never get rid of sexual exploitation. I reject that. Like, we have to do better that children as young as—the member for Point Douglas (Mrs. Smith) and I work with sisters that were sexually exploited at nine and 10. One of them ended up murdered, actually, the year after Fonessa Bruyere was found. Like, I reject that that's going to be a part of our society.

So I'd like to hear from you what the office would like to see, what the office is seeing and what you want done.

Mr. Chairperson: Before I give the floor to Ms. Gott, I just want to remind all members to address their—use language through the Chair and to not refer to each other as you, but rather to refer to the advocate or to the members around the table in that way through me.

Ms. Gott: Thank you for that.

I just—you know, I want to state that it is a crisis. It is an epidemic with respect to Indigenous women and girls and two spirit that are being targeted.

And I would hope that the government would implement more prevention services to prevent this kind of 'tradey'—tragedy occurring on an ongoing basis. That is what I am asking: that we focus more on prevention in areas of mental health, addictions, suicide and prevention services and child welfare.

Mr. Chairperson: Further questions?

MLA Fontaine: So, I would direct my question to the minister in the same—and the advocate has brought up that, in the Throne Speech, there was, I believe it was a sentence in respect of dollars and an action plan. But there hasn't been any further—as far as I know, and again, perhaps I've missed it—but in respect of, you know, what is—what are the dollars that the Province is looking at? Where are those dollars going to be targeted? What's the status of the action plan? Who's involved in the action plan? And when is the release of the action plan?

* (09:40)

And what is the department's hope and goal in respect of—and, again, I—and maybe the minister can enlighten me; I don't know if there's an actual name to this work, or—but what is the department hoping with that?

Ms. Squires: I thank the critic for the question. I also thank the advocate for her work that she's done on this space and for providing a voice. I appreciated the editorial that was in the Free Press in December raising awareness on this issue.

And I really agree with many of the statements that the critic had said and the work that your office is doing in that we need to really change the landscape in our province. We need to change beliefs. We need to change the way we frame stories and the narrative that is often being told, because the narrative that was told previously had perpetuated the exploitation and misogyny and other initiatives that really not only oppressed women and racialized people and L-G-B-T-Q-S-plus individuals, it harmed them greatly.

And so we are working with many stakeholders and groups and offices such as yourself to ensure that we can have a whole-of-province shifting in that space so that we can better serve and protect vulnerable women and girls and minorities and those who are stigmatized, to reduce that stigma.

I also did want to express, again on behalf of the government, the utmost condolences to the families who are experiencing and are undergoing trauma right now and for the tragic loss of their loved ones that we all tragically read about in the last few months and the, sort of, bringing about a knowledge and awareness of another serial killer has greatly impacted many people, and my heartfelt condolences to everybody, and I know you're supporting many of those people.

Specifically what our government is doing in response to the work for MMIWG and the calls to—the calls for justice. One of—we have recently—I'm going to touch on two pieces of legislation that just were recently proclaimed, and then talk about some of the community-led initiatives that we're working with to get action on these calls for justice.

The two pieces of legislation that directly addressed some of the calls were in—earlier in the spring, we had passed—pardon me, earlier in the fall, we had passed bill 40, which was an act that was specifically about addressing child sexual exploitation: bill 40, The Hospitality Sector Customer Registry Act and Amendments to The Child and Family Services Act and The Child Sexual Exploitation and Human Trafficking Act.

This bill ensures that any child who is vulnerable, who is being preyed upon by a predator, somebody who wants to harm that individual, who wants to exploit that individual, there can be a no-contact order placed between that harmful individual and that vulnerable youth or child without having harm already taking place.

Prior to the implementation of this bill, the—prior to the proclamation of that section of the bill, there was no way to get a no-contact order until harm had already occurred. But we know that that's too late. We do not want to let something bad happen to a vulnerable individual in order to intervene.

And so that is yet another tool that is—will be greatly utilized by everyone in society to ensure that we can prevent things from happening and we don't have to wait until something bad has happened. We don't have to just sit back with our unease and know and watch that someone is being preyed upon and without the ability to intervene.

So, this law now allows the intervention, whether that child is with the system of CFS or not. Prior, it was available for kids that were involved in the CFS system. Now it's involved in any youth, any child that is in the province of Manitoba, regardless of whether or not they're connected with the system.

It also creates a duty to report. It is absolutely unfathomable that we have a duty to report child abuse and child pornography in this province but we don't have a duty to report child exploitation. And so, if you have a direct line of sight into exploitation, and we know that there are industries that do have—there are sectors that have a direct line of sight into child sexual exploitation, predominantly taxis and ride for hires

and the hotel industry, and they have not had a duty to report.

So, our legislation brings in that duty to report and we are going to be doing a public awareness piece on that, because I did hear from some segments of society that we're placing onus on, you know, taxi drivers who may not be equipped. And I understand those concerns. We're placing onus on hoteliers, who may not be equipped to identify sexual exploitation. And while I understand those concerns, I reject that premise because all of us have a duty to report child abuse, child pornography and now child sexual exploitation. And we don't all need to take hours and hours of training to understand what those look like. And so, really, really pleased to be working in this space and bringing others into this space and moving further.

The other bill, bill 44, was the introduction of the new generation of Clare's Law, which is also putting more power in the hands of individuals that might be in an intimate-partner relationship and they have questions and concerns, whether that intimate partner has an ability to impact their own safety or the safety of their children.

Further, we now have the ability—if a parent, for example, watches their teenage child or their young adult child or any loved one enter into a relationship that they wonder whether or not that is a safe environment for them and they want to know, does that person have a past history with restraining orders and other known offences, he's a known—he or she is a known violator of intimate-partner violence, they can get that information now through disclosure.

And further, in addition to asking for disclosure, we are putting forward the supports so that—acting on the assumption that if you're coming to the province for disclosure, for history of your intimate partner's background, you need to be equipped with resources. And so that is at the front and it is new in the country to have this level of involvement with—or mandate in the legislation, and we think that it will be another tool.

Specifically, about the MMIWG report and the calls for justice, we are partnering with community, and I was really, really pleased to establish a relationship with Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata and, as well as Sandra DeLaronde, who is going to be the lead on this work. And just last—prior to Christmas we had announced \$456,000 to this group that will be really pulling together the calls and addressing the gaps and then working specifically with government, providing

recommendations and reports for government. And so that work is under way as we speak.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you.

Further questions?

MLA Fontaine: So, I just want to read out the line in the Throne Speech. And I appreciate the minister sharing the bill—bill 40, and I appreciate that the minister is acknowledging some of the concerns or requests in respect of training for those individuals, and certainly public awareness, so I do appreciate that.

* (09:50)

I do want to just read into the record again here the line from the Throne Speech: Violence against women and girls and the incident of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls continues to be a priority for our government. The first progress report and update to the gender-based violence network will be released in the coming months.

So that was the only line in the Throne Speech in respect of that. So I do appreciate, in respect to the bills, which I would say are, you know, one small and—but important component to the infrastructure in protecting women and girls from sexual exploitation.

I am curious where the progress report is and then the update to the gender-based violence framework. And so—and I'm trying to clarify the—I think you said—or, I think—I believe the minister said \$456,000 being led by Sandra DeLaronde who, by—is an extraordinary Indigenous woman, well versed in a variety of different fronts, including the justice system—she used to work for Manitoba Justice—brilliant, and I'm glad to see that she's going to be taking the lead on this.

Are these the only dollars that have been identified right now in respect of this line in the Throne Speech? And I know that the minister has said that we've met with stakeholders and I know that the minister has identified Ma Mawi. I am curious who are the other stakeholders and I want to go back to what the Manitoba advocate said. The Manitoba advocate said, and has told the committee today, that she's committed to engaging with community and building those relationships. And I certainly believe and have seen already some of that work.

So—and I know that the government often will say that we've met, we've consulted or we're meeting with stakeholders, but I am curious who those stakeholders

are, because I know that some of the groups that myself and the member for Point Douglas (Mrs. Smith) work with have not been engaged in this to this point yet.

So who are the stakeholders? Is the \$456,000 the only dollars that have been identified in respect of what I just read out into the record from the Throne Speech? And when we look at the national inquiry's calls to justice, there's a whole host of calls to justice and a whole host of spheres that—policing, for instance; Victim Services, for instance; CFS, right?

So, to that end, you know, what is the government's strategy on all of those? So it's not only when we're talking about MMIWG2S; it's not only—and of course it is a huge piece to it—it's not only the sexual exploitation of Indigenous women and girls, but it is all of those pipelines to the systems that put Indigenous women and girls in harm's way. So that's what I'm asking.

Ms. Squires: I appreciate the critic's question. I do want to clarify as well, or put a lot of information on the record, but just to start off with—and, again, we are here to review the advocate's very thoughtful reports that she has provided to us for review.

And, under the whole umbrella of children in care and the vulnerabilities that children in care creates, and then if you overlay those with the calls for justice, we know that one of the strongest initiatives that we can advance as a government is to ensure that we have fewer children coming into care and that we're providing care—or services, preventative services, for families to enable them and empower them to keep their children so that that break in family is not—does not occur. We know that that is one of the main—of significant priority for government, significant priority for community and a significant priority in advancing the opportunities for children and youth to achieve their fulfillment and their destiny.

And so, to that end, our government has worked to reduce the number of kids in care. We have seen a 65 per cent reduction in the apprehension of newborn babies; those are babies between the day of—from zero to three days, a 65 per cent reduction. We know that we have a lot of work to do in continuing to reduce the number of newborns coming into care.

We've also seen a significant reduction in the number of overall children in care. In 2016, when we formed office, the number was almost hovering around 11,000 kids in care. Today, there's 9,100 kids in care, and there are still too many children in care.

And we know that we need to continue to support families at the outset, support families, whether it be through the Indigenous Doula Initiative that we had started, whether it be with the Mothering Project at Mount Carmel Clinic. Those are many initiatives that we are working towards to addressing that call for justice with the MMIWG report.

Specifically, the member wants to have a listing of some of the initiatives that we have done since—in the last year or so, to support the calls for justice on the report and, specifically, how to better protect Indigenous women and girls. And so I'll read into the record a few of the things that we have done in the last few—in this fiscal year, for example.

We have been working with a healing lodge, the Eagle Embracing You initiative, which is an Indigenous-led, four-bed treatment facility for sexually exploited female and transgendered youth, \$1.5 million a year.

We are also—we've expanded StreetReach, which is, of course, a part of Tracia's Trust. This—core operations for StreetReach Winnipeg gets \$369,000 a year, but then we moved up North because we know that a lot of children in the North were not receiving services. And so the StreetReach North program is getting \$900,000 a year. That is new. That is a new initiative, and I really do want to take a moment to congratulate and acknowledge the good work that they do.

In three months' time, the StreetReach co-ordinator had shared with me that they had built—they had rescued over 600 kids that were vulnerable and had, sort of, were in flux; they were either not showing up for school or not showing up in a place that they were expected to be. And so, through the relationships that StreetReach North has developed with community and with these kids, they were able to go into that safe—into that spot, into that place, and find that youth and take them out for a cup of coffee and say, can we talk about what's going on, and really start to connect that youth with the services that are available. That is such a better approach than sending in law enforcement or sending in a truancy officer to say, why weren't you in school today. This is a friend, this is somebody who's connected to supports and this is a more trauma-informed approach.

* (10:00)

We have also funded a \$1.7-million new pilot initiative in co-ordination with ANCR, the children and family all-nations co-ordinator response to—called

Safe Ride, which helps facilitate the safe return of absent and missing youth in care and will reduce the risk for youth in care by ensuring that they have access to that safe transportation. We know that a lot needs to be done in that space. Safe transportation is vital service and more needs to be done in that space. And yet we are—and we are committed to doing that.

We have also worked with the Clan Mothers to expand their programming. We're working on a social enterprise initiative with them, where they are working to train—I don't remember the number off the top of my head, but they're training Indigenous women to work in—to connect them to the labour market. But they're training them in a labour—in a trauma-informed response.

So it's not just about, get your hard hat on, get your work clothes on and show up for work at 9 in the morning. It's about land-based healing, it's a trauma-informed approach, and then at the end of going through the program, they will also be having skills that will connect them to a labour market. And that is an exciting initiative that we have piloted with them, and I'm hearing really good results from the preliminary assessment.

In regards to the GBV framework that was touched upon in the Throne Speech, of course, that will be released this spring and our government is updating the framework this year. We did recently sign on to that national action plan on ending gender-based violence. I'd signed that action plan with the minister responsible for women and gender equity at the national level, as well as every other provincial and territorial minister had signed—with the exception of one province—we had signed collectively. And so that means the entire country is moving forward in a national framework for ending gender-based violence, which of course also addresses the calls for justice in there.

And in response to other moneys that have been invested, we have modernized the shelter system. We know that emergency shelter—the demand for emergency shelter had grown significantly in the last little while. And of course we'd like to say everything is pandemic-related. The pandemic certainly did put pressures on families and exacerbated a crisis that put women and girls and, you know, 2-L-G-B-T-Q-S-plus individuals in harm's way. So we've modernized our shelters, nearly doubling their funding and creating a bit of equity in the system so a bed space is getting the same funding, whether that bed is in Thompson, whether that bed is in Winnipeg. And so with the

10 emergency shelters throughout the province of Manitoba, they all received significant funding increases in this last fiscal year.

And I think my time is probably running out, but I certainly can address a little bit more. The Throne Speech did highlight the priorities that are yet to come. And I know that we are in the process of building a budget which will see much more modernization of our services and more initiatives working with community to get better results, whether it be more respite—and I think of Granny's House and how we were able to move forward with Granny's House 2.0 and help them ensure that they're expanding their respite services to ensure that those—a little bit—bits of support for families when they need it can certainly go a long way, whether that is addressing shoring up vulnerabilities that Indigenous women and girls are experiencing, or whether that's shoring up families to ensure that there is less intervention from the CFS system.

We believe that all those initiatives are important, and I look forward to providing further updates to both the advocate and the critic in the months to come.

MLA Fontaine: Miigwech to the minister for providing all of that information.

I'm going to move on in respect of mental health services that the advocate briefly spoke about in her report. We often hear about the difficulty, and the advocate did allude to some of that in respect of transitioning from CFS services to adult services and not-quite-adult services or the lack of discharge plans for youth when leaving mental health issues—or mental health facilities.

In the advocate's expertise, and certainly what the advocate and the office has seen from youth that are coming to the office looking for advocacy, what else can Manitoba do to support this transitioning? And I'm interested in respect of some of the things specifically that the advocate's office would like to see.

Ms. Gott: I'm going to defer this question to Karlee, so she can talk about the mental health concerns.

Mr. Chairperson: Sure. We like to refer to people by their last names only in committee. So, Dr. Evans.

Ms. Karlee Sapoznik Evans (Deputy Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth): To answer the member's question, as the advocate has shared, we continue to see mental health and addictions-related gaps to be one of the key areas. And, as noted in the clients'

report that she released on the 17th of January, we have issued—out of the 67 recommendations that we've issued, 20–30 per cent have been related to that specific area. And so, in particular, in terms of the gaps, we've also highlighted this morning the issue of AYAs and homelessness. And so those are two areas in particular that we're seeing as youth are transitioning out of care, massive areas of concern for our office.

Furthermore, the suicide epidemic that was alluded to is another area; what we can say today is that we already have surpassed last fiscals' total, and we are deeply concerned about what we are seeing this fiscal when it comes to suicides.

Furthermore, in Manitoba, we continue to see—we have concern related to youth not being able to access long-term treatment. We are seeing some of these youth trying to access services outside of our province because it's not available. And so, as the advocate has stressed in our compliance report most recently, we need a youth-specific action plan, when it comes to mental health and addictions, that focuses not only on ages 15 to 18 and up to 21, but under 15 as well. We are seeing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic for many children and youth, and we suspect to continue to see those impacts for years to come.

MLA Fontaine: Miigwech for outlining some of the concerns which are what the Manitoba advocate had also shared. But, again, I want to kind of just go back to some of the more, like, specific things. And I do appreciate that the doctor did note a youth action plan. So that's one specific item that the advocate's office would like to see.

But I am curious, in respect of—because, you know, the advocate and the advocate's office sees first-hand the consequences when folks—when youth can't access those services, and I suspect that the youth share what they would like to see or what they need to see. And so, specifically, in respect of mental health supports and those gaps in services, what are some of the things that the youth have identified and what would the advocate's office like to see?

Ms. Gott: I just want to state that, you know, there has been, as I said before, there has been an increase in youth accessing mental health services and requesting services under mental health. And there is a lack of services, as we know. And in many of our reports, we've stated this, like, from Angel's story, Circling Star, Matthew's story—so—and the suicide aggregate.

We talked about—there needs to be a framework developed with respect to mental health and the gap with respect to planning, discharge planning. People need to come to the table and collaborate to keep—to kind of wrap support and services around that youth. So that piece has been missing.

* (10:10)

We are very concerned at the fact that while I appreciate what the minister said about additional funding, we know that some of the stuff goes unreported with respect to children that go missing, so—and also, you know, I think that in the North, particularly, there is a lack of services in the areas of mental health, addictions, and our report has stated the increase of number in suicides in, you know, within the youth.

So the pillars that—five pillars that were developed, we would like to know who is at that table with respect to developing services for youth, so in the areas of mental health, and we—I think we really need to address that, and there's a crisis in Manitoba.

MLA Fontaine: Miigwech for both of your interventions.

This question is for the minister. Does the government intend to extend—or expand extension agreements for children in care from 21 to 25? And I know that, you know, this is an issue that we've been talking about for many years. All of us in—or, you know, all of us in this work have been talking about this for many years, right, and I think that we can even, you know, those of us that are parents and have children can even see in your own home, right. Like, you know, my youngest just turned 21, and he's in university and needs still so much support to be able to go on the path and experience the path and pursue his goals and dreams.

And so, you know, when we see children that are in care and then all of a sudden as soon as they're 18 or 21 that's it, it's really quite heartbreaking, right. Like, I'd never be able to tell my son, like, okay, you're done, get out. Like, never. I would never do that. I would never—he'd not have the capacity right now. He's just a student. He's all of these things, right.

So it is certainly something that we've all been talking about for many, many years, and so, you know, again, does the minister plan on extending that or expanding that?

Ms. Squires: Thank you very much for the question. And I think back to one my conversations when I was

newly appointed as minister. I met with the executive director at Resource Assistance for Youth, and she had said to me how there was the—the taps were on full blast was her analogy, to—into homelessness from children exiting CFS before they were prepared.

And I think about how all the things that we need to do to prepare our children before they launch into adulthood and how, you know, there are so many kids that are exiting care without a bank account, without information and connections and a safety network. Many of them leave care with a bag of their belongings, and that is how they're launched into adulthood. And it is an absolute travesty, and it is devastating because we know that without that safety net these children are very, very vulnerable, and that is such a transformative year—those are transformative years going from adolescence into adulthood without the proper supports.

And so the last two fiscal years we have committed and provided \$7 million in the extension of AYAs to ensure that kids are supported and that they're not exiting care, and we are working on a strategy, on a plan that will extend those supports as the minister—or as the critic had suggested.

Ms. Amanda Lathlin (The Pas-Kameesak): I have a question—I have two questions. Yesterday there was a media gathering with Manitoba Nurses Union in regards to no funding when it comes to children and youth being sexually assaulted in the North and rural Manitoba; they have to come here.

But, currently, right now, there's nobody working. So, what's the role of MACY in ensuring that these services are going to be provided for our children, instead of what happened to me and my family being told not to shower, and what's your role there to work with the Minister of Health (Ms. Gordon) to ensure that funding does get there? After all, it is a bill that we presented on this side.

Ekosi.

Ms. Gott: Thank you for that question.

I think it is very important for us to be involved, to advocate, you know, and to meet with the people that are—especially the children in that area, and the lack of services in northern Manitoba, when it comes to such a very sensitive subject with regards to sexual assaults and stuff like that.

So part of our legislation allows us to conduct research and advocacy in those areas, so it saddens me to hear that, you know, the services were cut. And, as

you know, it's a tragic thing for a youth or a child to experience when they've been sexually assaulted. And I think more support needs to be provided in that area, areas like, you know, resources, resourcing a unit, staffing, supports in areas of mental health to deal with that serious assault.

So I think that our role could be again to, you know, push government to provide those resources and supports.

Ms. Lathlin: This question is for the minister. In regards to the—page 56 of the report, it says here: fund a comprehensive provincial youth gang prevention strategy.

Currently, right now, there's a 17-year-old from The Pas-Moose Lake area who's wanted for double homicide. This is absolutely gang related and a drug war. The two people that were killed were drug dealers, and the 17-year-old was a drug dealer as well. Excuse me.

And so, this provincial youth gang prevention strategy—what could have been done to this child, you know, to not become a murderer, you know, over drugs? You know, like, where were the parents? Where were the—you know, how did this child get from being a child to a murderer? And what kind of prevention strategy do you see that can help, you know, that this would not happen again? Obviously we can't prevent it one hundred per cent, you know, but these kids, you know, they didn't grow up to imagine that to be part of their future, right?

So, share with us what this strategy will look like, please.

Ekosi.

*(10:20)

Ms. Squires: I did want to just take an opportunity to quickly put on the record, I know the members opposite had addressed earlier about the work, particularly with the sexual assault nurse examiner program. And I know the critic had provided—brought to the floor a really important legislation that we had passed unanimously, which would ensure that we would have sexual assault nurse examiners in a variety of geographical locations throughout the province.

And so our government did recently invest \$640,000 and—for the recruitment and retention and training of sexual assault nurse examiners so that people would be on the ground being able to provide that service in places outside of Winnipeg.

We certainly agree that it is an absolute travesty that child sexual assault survivors need to actually come down to Winnipeg to be in receipt of a forensic examination. And so Shared Health is in the process of working to recruit, retain and expand that program and I look forward to giving further updates in that regard.

In regards to the violent-offender strategy and the youth gang prevention, I apologize for the delay. I did have to confer with the deputy minister of Justice, as that is certainly an area that the Justice Minister could expand upon much greater. But I will highlight a few things in the work that is being done in relation to gang prevention and the strategy working with Indigenous partners in community. That work, of course, is being led by Justice. It is a cross-departmental approach on a long-term strategy through a holistic approach.

There's education—there's an educational component as well. I know our education minister had announced an initiative just last week about how to be providing those supports when kids are in school and they are needing additional supports to stay in school and to be diverted from the corrections system. You know, the youth task force is doing some of that work. There's a violent-offending program with the wrap-around services that are specific for high-risk youth and youth who are justice involved.

And, of course, the Minister of Justice (Mr. Goertzen) and I had announced an RFP that will be going out to create another initiative for justice-involved youth. And we are working with Marymount as one of the providers to ensure that there's those wrap-around supports for certain youth to—that are at risk of being justice involved. So, a number of initiatives.

I do ask for the opportunity to confer with my colleagues and provide a written response in a very short future date to the member to give a more broad response to her question, if I may.

Mrs. Bernadette Smith (Point Douglas): My question's to the children's advocate.

I've had a lot of emails lately from schools for advocacy around getting AFM workers back into the school because school councillors, guidance councillors, teachers are seeing an increase in addictions. And that's leading to truancy and it's also leading into harder drug use, which is leading into some of the things that the member from The Pas was

talking about: criminal offences. They're really struggling.

And we know that, you know, with the pandemic, getting back to school has been a struggle for a lot of our kids, tons of our parents. Parents are also reaching out to schools for more supports around mental health, but particularly around, you know, addictions, because kids are using drugs to, you know, deal with the mental health issues that they're—whether it's anxiety, you know, whether it's relationships, whether it's transitioning back to school, whether it's living in poverty. And we know poverty is a huge risk in, you know, whether kids to into care, whether kids are being sexually exploited, whether kids are going missing and murdered and certainly suicide.

So I'd like to ask the advocate whether, you know, they're hearing anything from educators around the need for AFM workers to come back into schools. And they're also having more difficulty accessing services for those youth to get them referrals to AFM.

I've also met with one of the stakeholders that the minister just mentioned, Marymount. They are also experiencing a lot of difficulty around continuum of care for kids when they are going in for treatment and just being discharged with, you know, not a comprehensive plan because there's not the services there for kids to access. You know, they go in for addictions treatment, you know, they're expected to kind of just come out and maybe meet with someone once a week, and we know that that's not feasible for our youth.

And it's leading to homelessness as well for these youth because they're now running away from home, they're not going home. Parents are left with less resources. And I know it's a huge question but we don't have much time, so I'll leave it there.

Ms. Gott: With respect to our compliance report, one of the themes that we identified is that there is an urgent need for child-specific mental health and addictions strategy. There's system gaps, there's barriers and obstacles for children and youth to receive mental health and addictions services they need and to which they have the inherent right to services—is the most pervasive system issue that we continue to see in our work.

Not surprisingly, since 2018, twenty of our 67 of recommendations issued by MACY, 30 per cent have been to address urgent gaps for children and youth related to mental health and addictions.

The third and final theme, therefore, concerns the ongoing need for child-specific mental health and

addictions. So, while we're encouraged by some of the recent investments in mental health and addictions services, in particular the recent funding for the youth hubs and Huddles and the creation of Mental Health and Community Wellness department in 2021, we remain concerned by the lack of implementation plan to address gaps in current services amongst children and youth who need them right now.

Children have unique needs and childhood is a time for early assessment and rapid intervention to prevent chronic and lifelong struggles. We cannot continue to make young people wait for the critical mental health and addictions care that they need, to which they are entitled.

So, children ought to be at the back of the line when cuts are being made and at the front of the line when funding is being made available.

Mrs. Smith: My question's to the minister, just around the same lines. You know, what more needs to be done, what more is the government willing to invest, especially with the increase in need coming from agencies that are, you know, trained—highly trained to be dealing with these complex needs with kids, such as Marymount, saying that they're overloaded, they need more support.

There's complex needs that they just—they've had to shift the way that they're working with youth, with families, but also schools, you know, calling out and saying, like, we don't have the capacity to deal with the amount of mental health and addictions that we're seeing in our schools; we need help.

And, you know, I feel we're doing a disservice to our kids, who are going to become adults and possibly using more services then, when we can be doing some preventative work now in the areas of dealing with the youth in schools and in these organizations.

So, what is the government willing to do to—or doing now and willing to do more to support those youth so that, you know, they're not becoming homeless, going missing or murdered, committing suicide, getting into harder drugs, having more complex needs down the road?

* (10:30)

Ms. Squires: To—I thank the critic for the question.

And, in order to provide a full response to that question, I ask for leave that the minister responsible could answer.

Mr. Chairperson: Is there leave that the minister of mental health and wellness answer the question? *[Agreed]*

Mrs. Guillemard: I do appreciate the question from the member.

And I want to also acknowledge today that there a number of people present in the room who have had very difficult journeys thus far and have had amazing lessons throughout that journey and are providing some very important insight to these discussions today. I want to acknowledge as well that some of these topics are extremely difficult to be talking about and can absolutely create a trigger of memories. So I want to acknowledge that I appreciate the discussions today and sensitivity around that aspect.

When it comes to youth and mental health supports, what we have learned as a department, even in terms of the after-care and what the support networks look like even for children who aren't in care, families have expressed the need to have better tools to support their own children. So, if we already understand the need within families whose children aren't in care, I imagine the needs are even greater and then harder to identify who those support networks are for the youth when they do receive treatment, and then who's the support network afterwards.

So our department has been absolutely looking at how do we expand those services to help support families. We definitely have some more work to do to understand what does that support network look like within children in care. That would look a little bit different than those who are not in care. So understanding that and providing those supports will be our focus.

I think we have to focus, as well, on some of the good investments that have been made, and I note that the child's advocate also recognized that opening of the five youth Huddles throughout the province has been a key response to that need. It is a walk-in service; you don't need referrals. It is a wrap-around service that includes peer support, that includes people with lived experiences and also nurse practitioners to provide some of that primary care that, when you imagine yourself, even as an adult, sometimes it's difficult to reach out for health-care services or mental health services. So having that in one location that is a support network, I think, is a very good step towards addressing the needs of our youth.

We've also been investing in mental health teams in schools, and we are making more services accessible to children, including Strongest Families and the Huddle I just mentioned and Kids Help Phone. We know that many of the youth who are in care are also in schools, and that's a very accessible point to connect with them, provide care and to make sure that we're monitoring their journey through mental health needs and the extra strain and stress not only that the pandemic has put on them, but also their families.

So we will continue to grow the existing programs and then create new ones as we learn more about the needs and then the structure of supports for children. It absolutely is a focus of our department; it is why it's one of the pillars within our five-year road map that children and youth and the supports for them, which includes children in the care of the CFS system, and we will continue to make that one of our focuses.

Mr. Chairperson: Any further questions from members?

MLA Fontaine: For the advocate, I would ask that—it was noted that Manitoba Health has the lowest compliance rate of 25 per cent, which has remained unchanged for three straight years.

Can the advocate speak a little bit more on why they continue to lag behind?

Ms. Gott: I guess what I can say to that is that, because the lowest—with respect to that compliance rate, I know that pandemic had an influence to responding to those recommendations, and that was with respect to the safe sleep report. They haven't had a chance to look at that piece. And so we're hoping in the next compliance reporting, that that will have been—some of those recommendations will have been responded to and looked into.

MLA Fontaine: For the minister—and, of course, I believe that the the advocate just briefly alluded to—but currently, there are 13 recommendations that the Manitoba advocate has put forward to address infant mortality, so why has the Province failed to take adequate action in respect of safe sleep recommendations, and are there targets for the government to comply with these recommendations and including timelines?

Ms. Squires: I thank the member for that question, and I also appreciate the advocacy's work on that area of safe sleep, and we know that we need to do better to ensure that all infants have a safe sleeping environment.

And we agree that it's very important to be supporting families with infants under 12 by sharing information about the latest research and information on how to ensure that safe is made as—sleep is made as safe as possible. This is already a requirement for public health and is being imbedded into the CFS standards.

I want to clarify that the advocate's office has confirmed that there has, indeed, been progress on the two infant sleep recommendations directed to Manitoba families. One moved from 25 per cent compliance to 100 per cent compliance, and the other remains at 25 per cent with a work plan under way to complete it, and that means that we've moved from an average of 25 per cent to 62.5 per cent compliance with those recommendations.

And so some of the work that is being undertaken to ensure that we are in full compliance, you know, one of the findings is that most families do have a safe sleeping surface in their homes, and assistance is already available for families to obtain sleep—safe sleeping surfaces, such as through Employment and Income Assistance. There is additional supports for expectant parents to ensure that they have the appropriate—like, a crib, a bassinet or a cultural sleep surface like a cradleboard for their infant.

Manitoba Public Health also provides the following additional details about their work on the—in follow up to these recommendations. So they've developed the safe sleeping for your baby resource, which is available now online and in a variety of languages. Safe sleeping for your baby resource includes information related to safe sleep environments and other safe sleeping options and safer bed sharing.

During the month of October in 2022, there was a social media campaign that the—public health had taken through the government of Manitoba channels to promote safe sleep and awareness on the—on safe sleep.

And, of course, public health is working to address MACY's recommendations related to infant safe sleep for full compliance and modifying and re-distributing the safe sleeping for your baby as a Manitoba resource.

MLA Fontaine: Before I move on to my next question, the additional supports that are available for those that are on social assistance, does the minister happen to know what the amount is for that?

Because I—that is very important, and I wonder how many people actually know about that.

* (10:40)

Ms. Squires: I agree that more awareness for recipients on EIA is definitely needed. That is something that our department is working with, and that is why we're moving towards embedding those services in community so that there's people on the ground that can access—or that have the information that they can distribute to people who are in community that need the information as to what their entitled benefits are.

And I do ask for leave to respond to the member within a few short days with the exact information about the amount of that benefit, if I may.

MLA Fontaine: I appreciate that. And then, just in respect of that information, so the amount, but I guess also—because again, like, I never heard of that, and I just asked the member for Point Douglas (Mrs. Smith); she hasn't heard of that either. And certainly the folks that we work with and advocate for, that's really important information, right, and then, ultimately, hopefully prevents, right, infant deaths and contributes to infant safety.

So the dollars, but I guess also, like, the process would be really helpful so that we would have that information that we would be able to disseminate. So that would be beautiful.

Twenty twenty-two was the first year that MACY assessed recommendations related to six systemic issues: child-welfare training, disabilities, parent treatment/resources, the Phoenix Sinclair inquiry, gang prevention, anti-racism and cultural inclusion in education.

Can the Manitoba advocate speak a little bit more about the compliance rates in respect of systemic issues? So, for instance, the compliance rate for implementing recommendations related to child-welfare training is only at 25 per cent. So I would ask the advocate if she would be willing to share a little bit more about that.

Ms. Gott: I want to—because I wasn't part of this report this year, I want to ask Evans—Deputy Evans to answer the question.

Ms. Evans: To answer the member's question, as noted in the report, indeed, we had six new systemic issues. These were all based on recommendations that were issued this last round. And so, as can be expected in some cases, some of them involve legislative amendments, and so they will take time.

In particular, though, we want to stress that there are two themes that we are very concerned about, and we would urge action and priority be taken on, and those are child-welfare training, which is at 25 per cent compliance. And then, secondly, related to the disabilities report, where recommendations are at 28 per cent, we continue to see gaps when it comes to transitions between CDS and CLDS, families who are struggling when it comes to respite and gaps in that system in particular. And, of course, as alluded to, child-welfare training, and that issue isn't part of the new ones, but in terms of caseloads, we continue to be concerned about that piece.

We do also want to acknowledge that there has been some good movement on some of these new systemic issues, and so we want to note, in particular, that Manitoba education is at a rate of 75 per cent when it comes to anti-racism and cultural inclusion in education, which is very promising.

MLA Fontaine: Miigwech for that. In respect of the two that you've identified, so, child-welfare training, and there was alluding to caseloads and how that impacts on caseloads, so can—would the advocate's office share a little bit more specifically in respect of what the office would like to see in respect of child-welfare training; and then again how that lack of training then impacts on or translates into a greater caseload?

Ms. Gott: Thank you for that question.

I'm just—what we are concerned about is because there's delays in training with respect to COVID-19 and I think that, you know, we need to ensure that all workers are trained in, you know, case management, case conferencing, case planning, you know, especially with planning for AYAs ageing out of care, what does that look like.

We are also concerned about the number of cases that each worker carries. You know, under the Phoenix Sinclair inquiry, Commissioner Hughes—the late Commissioner Hughes—had recommended that each worker carry 20 cases. So for me, it—you know, when you carry that—like a high number of cases, you are not doing meaningful casework and you are not meaningfully engaging with families to develop a case plan, and I think that it's really important for workers to have time to develop assessments, develop a case plan when they are working with children and families.

If they have a caseload that's really high that they can't manage, they're basically doing crisis work,

which is not part of child welfare. I think that, you know, our—the workers need to be further trained with respect to assessments and, you know—what do you call it—transitioning children out of care, and all those important pieces when it comes to child-welfare management.

Thank you.

MLA Fontaine: Miigwech for that.

I would ask the minister then: the compliance rate for implementing the recommendations to child-welfare training is only 25 per cent. Can the minister explain why this is so low?

Ms. Squires: These are very important questions and I thank the advocate for highlighting some of those areas of systemic challenges. And I just want to very quickly run through a few innovative initiatives, including a pilot that we've recently undertaken to really support kids in the CLDS system.

We had announced an \$8-million bridge program whereby children who previously had no known protection concerns were being brought into the CFS system so that their families could enhance greater respite. I can think of no more greater heartbreak than needing to assign your child over to the child-welfare system when there's no protection concerns, only because you need greater respite for addressing the needs that your child with developmental or physical disabilities has. And so this \$8-million bridge pilot is under way to support families, to prevent youth from coming into care when there's no protection issues.

And we've also enhanced \$5 million in funding to the Children's disABILITY Services, specifically to enhance greater respite for families in that regard.

When it comes to the training, we have provided over a million dollars to the authorities in this fiscal to enhance training—or was it over—either this fiscal or over two fiscals to enhance training initiatives for the CFS workers who support the system.

* (10:50)

We've also introduced—and the advocate had mentioned COVID, and the challenge during COVID for in-person training was just eliminated. And so what we did is we moved to a virtual platform and introduced new abuse and investigative training initiatives that was a hundred per cent trauma informed. And that has been rolled out, and so I look forward to future reports that would capture the shift with this new training initiatives involved.

And then, of course, working with the department's—the department is working with the authorities to ensure enhanced initiatives. We know that the funding model and the entire child-welfare transformation has moved towards greater control at the local level, and we really thank the work that our authorities are doing in this space. And we're working very closely with them to ensure that the upcoming legislative changes that would be required to enhance the CFS act is taken in a more collaborative approach.

I know I've heard very loud and clear from a lot of the Indigenous authorities—and those who work in the CFS space for an Indigenous authority or agency have said loud and clear: we don't want legislative changes coming from the Province of Manitoba, and we don't want specific directives tied to funding from the Province of Manitoba anymore. We want to have a seat at the table, and to—to use that analogy a little bit further—actually be driving the change.

And so, very productive meetings recently with my leadership advisory council, which includes the heads of Indigenous governing bodies and Indigenous leadership, on legislative changes that will be introduced very soon to really accommodate greater local autonomy and authority as self-determination expands in the province of Manitoba.

Mr. Chairperson: Just before I give the floor back to MLA Fontaine, I wanted to remind everybody there's about 10 minutes left in our time, and we'll need a minute to vote on the reports.

MLA Fontaine, go ahead.

MLA Fontaine: This will be my final question, just in respect of the timeframe.

I do just want to put this on the record that—so again, once again, miigwech for all of the work that you do, to all of your leadership team, to all of the staff, to the elders council, to everybody. It is important work, it's critical work.

And then I just want to put on the record here, I love that our languages are part of the final reports. You know, it is an act of decolonization and an act of deconstructing those systems that contribute to why we are all here discussing the things that we are discussing to take up space and to take up as much space as we need. And so I do want to acknowledge that. I know that that would be a lot of work to get the language interpreted and recorded, so I want to acknowledge—I don't know who does it, but please pass along that, on this side of the table, we absolutely

love it, and we lift them up for that work, whoever does that work.

My final question here is: In 2019, the member for Spruce Woods (Mr. Cullen)—and this would be directed to the minister—then-minister of Justice said that, and I quote, a comprehensive review, end quote, of Manitoba's youth justice and child-welfare systems are—was under way, and that a provincial strategy was to be released before the end of that year, 2019.

It's been three years since then and certainly we haven't seen the report or the results of said. Would the minister be able to update us on the status of that review?

Ms. Squires: Thank you for that question, and I will just read into the record the information that Justice has prepared in regards to that.

The department, in 2021, had created the Youth Justice branch within Correctional Services Division to provide dedicated focus on advancing youth justice priorities, including supporting a whole-of-government approach to youth at risk of involvement with the justice system, for advancements of strategic priorities and initiatives to support at-risk, high-risk youth and leading the youth justice review.

Complex and multi-faceted issues are the true origin in the overlap of child welfare and youth justice involvement. This work is a priority and remains—and we remain committed to undertaking this review. We recognize the need to work across government

through consultation and collaboration with community to address root causes that contribute to a youth's involvement in both the child welfare and the justice systems and create positive pathways and healthier outcomes to supporting youth in ending cycles of crime.

The youth justice review was delayed by the impacts of COVID and staffing changes within the youth justice branch; however, the department does look forward to launching the review this spring.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, seeing no further questions, I will put the question on the reports.

Annual Report of the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021—pass.

Annual Report of the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2022—pass.

And before I ask the question, I just want to say thank you to everybody at the table for what I think was a collegial and productive meeting this morning. Thank you.

The hour being 10:57 a.m., what is the will of the committee?

An Honourable Member: Committee rise.

Mr. Chairperson: Committee rise.

COMMITTEE ROSE AT: 10:57 a.m.

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