



**HALIFAX, THURSDAY, APRIL 6, 2023**

**SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUPPLY**

**11:09 A.M.**

**CHAIR**  
Lisa Lachance

**THE CHAIR:** Order, please. The Subcommittee on Supply will come to order. It is now 11:09 a.m. The subcommittee is meeting to consider the Estimates for the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture, as outlined in Resolution E10.

We will resume the Liberals' first round of questions, with 18 minutes remaining.

The honourable member for Clare.

**RONNIE LEBLANC:** Thank you, Mx. Chair. Maybe I'll start with a question on the budget. We saw that there was a cut to the budget. I'm just wondering if you could expand on if it was operational or if there were programs or projects that were cut.

**HON. STEVE CRAIG:** Thank you, Mx. Chair, and thank you to the member for Clare.

To ask me why a decrease in my very substantial budget of \$16.6 million - the smallest budget, I would add, in the government - yet we punch way above our weight. That's probably the most I'm going to comment along that line.

Essentially, it was a program. The Atlantic Fisheries Fund was a program that we had, and we have chewed into that program. It's due up at the end of 2024, I think it is, and we're down. It was the Atlantic Fisheries Fund, primarily, that resulted in that decrease. It was planned spending. The spending's being done. It's continuing, but the amount of money yet to be utilized - we're using it. Because we used it, it's not appearing in the budget, and it is quite rightly showing a decrease from \$17.7 million in 2022-23 to \$16.6 million in 2023-24.

RONNIE LEBLANC: In your mandate letter - and I think the minister did reference it yesterday in his opening remarks about the Nova Loyal Program. I'm just wondering, you did say yesterday that the fishery is complex, and I agree with the minister on that point.

I'm just wondering if the minister could maybe elaborate on how he intends to implement the Nova Scotia Loyal program within his department, as the mandate said that the minister would support the Minister of Economic Development in delivering that program.

STEVE CRAIG: I believe we have a significant role in Nova Scotia Loyal. Under the leadership of the Department of Economic Development and in partnership with the Department of Agriculture, we continue to work collaboratively to engage and support the development of the Nova Scotia Loyal program. We have joined in meetings with major retailers - Sobeys, Loblaw's, Walmart, for example - to assess feasibility and operationalize emerging Nova Scotia Loyal strategies.

We're advising Nova Scotia Loyal of the seafood industry, and the opportunities and trends while connecting with them, and them with key industry contacts, initiatives, and events. We work with the Department of Agriculture to jointly support some of our great local initiatives, that you may have - well, you know about oysters. I think everybody knows about oysters. We have the Oyster Festival here in Halifax.

We have monthly meetings with Nova Scotia Loyal and Department of Agriculture to receive regular status updates and provide input to bring a seafood lens to discussions around Nova Scotia Loyal implementation, timelines, and deliverables.

I was even asked when we were going to provide bacon-wrapped scallops for this meeting, and I did indicate that we would do that tomorrow at noon.

We have also provided opportunities for institutional products, whether it's hospitals, whether it's universities, that type of thing - looking at redfish, silver hake, grey sole. It's very well known that we can go to just about any roadside fish truck and purchase seafood. We can purchase on the wharves. You don't need a buyer's licence for that, by the way. Anybody can go and they can do this purchasing.

We have Clearwater, who has their own stores where you can go and purchase seafood. We have Fisherman's Market as well. These are all local companies that specialize in this particular area, and it's readily accessible.

What we're doing, and we have done for some time, is we've taken a look at how we can go and buy local promotions and programming. We do that. We have had initiatives in the past years around seafood - Nova Scotia Seafood. We are supporting Nova Scotia Loyal with that, as well as some other initiatives, but certainly Nova Scotia Loyal - we are

very much part of that team, under the Department of Economic Development and the Department of Agriculture.

[11:15 a.m.]

RONNIE LEBLANC: The reason I asked the minister the question is that I do understand that at the retail level it might be easier to implement, but when you start really digging into the fishery, like you said, it is very complex. There are a lot of transactions, and it will make it extremely difficult to try to track that. If it is a points program, it will create a lot of, I'd say, burden on some of the industry to try to figure that out.

That's why I'm asking. Maybe a bit of clarification from the minister, if he is able to provide some.

STEVE CRAIG: The Department of Agriculture, I understand, has engaged a consultant to take a look at economic modelling - how we're actually going to measure some of these things, and evaluate the success of the buy local program and the initiatives, based on the impact and return on investment. The draft report, I understand, is being finalized, which we'll get into more detail.

The interesting thing about this whole area is that it's to the consumer end. Really, it's the end consumer who's purchasing here that we're interested in. We do have a substantial amount of seafood that is harvested and produced and goes outside of Nova Scotia. We've got economics data on how much that is: \$2.6 billion, for example.

What we have less of a line of sight on is what's actually consumed here locally, whether it be on the roadside or at the wharf, or whether it's at another Fisherman's Market or whether it be at a Sobeys or a Walmart. This is being looked at - how we're going to measure these things.

We know intuitively that a lot of Nova Scotians consume a lot of seafood. There's no doubt about that. The question is, how do we measure that? That's what's being worked on.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I appreciate the answer. I know I'm jumping a little bit everywhere. I did have aquaculture questions, but I know the member for Halifax Chebucto will be laser-focused on that issue, so I'm trying to get some of the other questions on my list.

One question that I have is - and I had it for Estimates last year, but I can expand on it - in last year's budget, enforcement went from the Department of Environment and Climate Change to NRR. It's been a year since that change happened, so I was just wondering if you could speak a little bit to why the change.

Since we've had a year to look at it, as Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture, does the minister feel that it was a positive change? Are there any statistics or modelling to basically give us some information on if that was the right way to go with enforcement?

STEVE CRAIG: The enforcement section was moved from the Department of Environment and Climate Change to the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables last year. The reason for that, I don't know particularly. I do know that from an internal organizational point of view, where you can get a centre of excellence, if you will, where you have a less fractured enforcement agency that can look at - from an organization point of view, from a management point of view, it makes sense that it would be all in one location.

We continuously work with the operational planning side of it. My staff is in lockstep. Over the last year, we've certainly asked for an increase in awareness around compliance issues - whether that be buyers and processors or whether it be aquaculture - to be able to see whether our rules and regulations were being enforced, and to the point where if they're not being enforced, charges laid - looking at that. Part of the complexity - so that's happening. Perhaps the minister at another time can elaborate on the actual workings.

From my point of view, though, we have brought together - through the Department of Justice, through the RCMP, through the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture - a number of the people responsible for compliance in different areas in this complex industry. There are cases where if, for example, fish is illegally purchased or sold, charges - depending on the nature of it - could be laid either by us, the Province of Nova Scotia, or by the Canadian government, Fisheries and Oceans Canada. So there's a continuous working back and forth on that and taking a look at it.

Since I've taken this position, I have signed off on enforcement, signed off on consequences to licences. That is welcomed by industry players, and communities as well.

It's very collaborative, the work that we do with DNRR folks, to ensure that we are having people - whether it's a fishing licence that's required for sportfishing, or whether it's an area of a processing plant that is not adhering to the regulations under which the licence was provided, or a buyer who purchases illegally caught harvest. Illegal, in this particular case, would be something that we use, and that's DFO. DFO has the responsibility and the authority to license fisheries. If you haven't had illegally caught fish, as licensed by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and you buy it, then we're able to put consequences on the licence.

Further to that, though, we also have the ability to fine people. If, let's say, I was to go out and do something illegal, I could be fined. The department can't take a licence from me because I don't have a licence. However, there is the ability and the mechanism to fine, whether that be through DFO or DNRR, based on the regulations and the legislation.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Just to close this off, we can't enforce what DNRR and others don't know about. We urge - and this is a complaint I've had from Day 1: "You're not doing anything. All this is happening out there. You've got to be doing something. You have to step up to the plate."

That's true, and we are, yet others have to as well. Members of the public and others call the fisheries and coastal resources compliance and enforcement folks under DNRR toll free at 1-800-565-2224. It's staffed 24/7, 365.

It is important that we have a well-managed industry and that we enforce the regulations that we do have. If the regulations are not enforceable, then we ought to do away with them. But as long as we have regulations that are appropriate, they ought to be enforced.

Mx. Chair, that's what I have to say on that.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Clare, who has about 20 seconds left.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I'll just say quickly that the reason I raised that point to the minister - it is something I hear quite often. I just wanted to bring that to the attention here, that it is an issue. I hope that the minister puts a lot of priority on it. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time allocated for the Liberal caucus has elapsed.

The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: Thank you very much. I would like to thank my friend, the member for Clare, for coordinating our questioning together.

I would like to focus some of our thinking this late morning, or early afternoon, about this. I think, minister, you described the Davis Pier report as a milestone in your opening remarks. I think that's true.

I have a few questions about these three defining areas of the report: public participation, transparency, and regulation. First, about public participation. It's certainly a major focus of the report, and it's understandable that it would be a major focus, since this is a policy and regulatory area where the question of social licence and community presence exists in a very sharp way, and has for a long time, going back to Doelle-Lahey.

One thing about the public participation part of the report is that there are things that are included in the *What We Heard* part that aren't in the report-report. One in particular that struck me as being curious - in the *What We Heard* document, the suggestion is laid out from the consultations that in the formal adjudicative structure, the decision-making process would be made much more community inclusive and community friendly

if the requirement for legal counsel were eliminated. I don't think that this point from *What We Heard* is present in the final Davis Pier.

I want to ask the minister if he doesn't think that, from the point of view of community engagement and community social licence, this would just be a plain good idea.

[11:30 a.m.]

STEVE CRAIG: Great question. It's one that I've thought about from Day 1 when I got here: How can we make engagement easier rather than tougher in the regulatory process - not only at the actual hearing at the ARB, but the process leading up to it.

My understanding is that the report did indicate taking a look at the ARB process. I'm coming from the position that your question is around the ARB itself and legal representation. Not everybody requires legal counsel at the ARB. Some people opt to have that, but there's not the requirement. That's my understanding. The proponents sometimes will have legal counsel. The general public is able to provide comment without legal counsel.

If there's more of a specific area that he'd like me to address, I'd be happy to do that, but in general, there is no legal requirement to have legal counsel present.

GARY BURRILL: Thinking further along this same line of, as the minister puts it, how we can make participation easier rather than tougher, another suggestion that I know citizen groups have brought forward is that the process could benefit from doing what is done in the federal environmental assessment system. Financial support is provided to civil society organizations for the development of their presentations and their participation in the decision-making process.

Again, in an area where community social licence is so much at the front and centre - in this decision-making process, why wouldn't this be a good idea?

STEVE CRAIG: I'm not familiar with the federal level that the member has talked about. I'm not aware of any funding that the government does to individuals in this area of adjudicative nature at all. Throughout all of government, I'm actually not aware of that. My municipal experience when it comes to public hearings and so on is that there is no funding provided to individuals or groups to prepare their presentations or to do that. We are not looking at that in particular - although there is recognition on Recommendation 17 to increase funding for small- to medium-sized operators to enable growth and innovation in the sector, there hasn't been anything in there to indicate that individuals or those who are not small- to medium-sized operators that I'm aware of.

GARY BURRILL: I'd like to ask about transparency. It's another big focus of the report. I don't think anybody could say that the report has been overly detailed and prescriptive about this, that its recommendations are on the broad end of broad, I think.

I'm wondering, why wouldn't it deal straightforwardly with this long-standing concern so central to Doelle-Lahey and critical in Davis Pier? Why wouldn't it be better to simply embed in law that there shall be regulations introduced under the Fisheries and Coastal Resources Act, that all of those areas where companies are required now under their agricultural management regime to have information about pesticides and mortality, escapes, disease, and some of these related areas - that that information ought to be made public in a regular and timely way, and shall be, as a matter of law?

Why not simply address the concern - a big concern in Doelle-Lahey, a big concern here? Why not address it that way?

STEVE CRAIG: Transparency is one of my tenets - to provide information and make information available that can easily be made available, and if it can't easily be made available, figure out a way to do it.

My starting position in everything is that everything is made available for transparency's sake, whether it's the initiation of a process, an application, where you are in the process, what the supporting materials are, when the meetings are, all of these types of things. That's my starting position. There ought to be a reason not to do it, and that should be considered in everything.

Since Doelle-Lahey, there have been steps to provide information, and there are a couple of sites - the ARB has one, and my department has one - where information is readily available. It's readily available on the internet. DFO provides information relative to aquaculture on their sites as well.

One of the areas that was suggested in the Davis Pier report was to establish an online public registry for information specific to each aquaculture site, and to look at plain language for public information. I'm a great proponent of that one. Give me something in plain language, it's great. Create a list where you automatically email subscribers of notifications.

All of these types of things are being looked at. I want to assure all members that transparency is very important to me. It's important to our industry. It's important to our citizens. I do believe that the fundamental tenet of being open and transparent - it is incumbent on us to do. If we have that information that's available to communities in an accessible manner - and one might argue that the information is not readily available, that you might have to do a search and do multiple searches on the internet.

I know a couple of members in the room here are of the age before the internet, and we've tried to figure out what's fact, what's fiction - the advance of technology and the ability to use search engines, from Napster to other Google search engines that are out there. But somebody ought to be able to access information in a few keystrokes. Pure and simple. That is something that I had a brief conversation with our Communications Nova Scotia folks about how do we make information that's out there and we haven't published or put in a form or a format to be accessible - how can we make that happen?

We do have GIS mapping now. You can go and you can click on an icon, and it will tell you the site, what its licensed for, and all of those types of things. That is there now. There is a lot of information that's available.

It has been mentioned - Doelle-Lahey, which admittedly is what, nine years old now? Technology has moved quite a bit since then. We have done the first review to this stage, and it is a milestone. By "a milestone," I don't mean to say that we've completed something, period. The actual completion of the regulatory review will be that we've actioned these things and that we've made decisions, and we've concluded that the review is complete. This is a milestone insomuch as it is a document that in and of itself was open and transparent - the process that we had there to get 988 people to comment through a very open process is substantial. People were interested in commenting, and they did that, to the point where I'm going to digress just a wee bit.

The feedback I got at one point from the regulatory review committee was that we ought to engage more people. I said, "Yes, absolutely. Who should we engage with?" That's the direction I gave back, and the members gave information, and we increased the budget to allow Davis Pier to do that. I wanted to be able to sit here at an occasion like this and say that we did everything we could to make this as open and transparent and allow people to contribute as possible. I can put my hand on my heart and say we did that.

It was further told to me that the names of the people who some of the members had given had not responded. I said, "Oh. Then you go back to the members of the committee who gave you those names and tell them that the names they gave have not responded." That was done, and the participation rate, we found, went up. We found that some had not known about it. Some people, the email had gone to junk mail and those types of things.

Openness - transparency - is fundamental, I believe, to everything we do. There has to be a reason not to provide it. Yes, that could be a technical reason, that the technology's not available there and somebody doesn't have the budget to have somebody work on a webpage or what have you. But once that's there, then we ought to be able to provide the information in a timely fashion. That, to me, would be more representative of moving the yardstick to have people get the information when they want it, when it's available to them in an easy way. I think that would contribute to at least people having the same information that everybody else has access to.



[11:45 a.m.]

GARY BURRILL: It's put in a wonderfully simple way in the Doelle-Lahey Report, that "understanding the operation and effectiveness of the regulatory process," information about that "should be readily available to the public." I think that when you talk to people who are engaged in this question - communities and citizen groups - if you said to them, is that standard today being met on pesticides? Um, I don't think? Is it being met on antibiotic use? Is it being met on mortality? Escapes? Seabed contamination? Is it being met on disease? I would say that there's a pretty broad field that that standard, that information about the effectiveness and operation of the administration is readily available to the public - that we're falling short.

What I want to press a little bit about is since social licence and community licence, public trust, is so at the forefront of this whole world that we're talking about, why not put the matter into law? Why not say that the information in these key areas that companies presently hold shall be presented in a timely and readily available way, and this is the law in Nova Scotia? Why don't we take that approach?

STEVE CRAIG: I don't know if we're going to do that yet or not. I'd indicated last evening that we are in the process of taking a look at the recommendations and doing that thorough analysis, and this being the first one. It's the first one. We've learned a lot over the last number of years - since 2015 and the current regulations - as to what's going on.

In the analysis and looking at these things, everything that has been mentioned, if that data is available - if it's easily, readily available, or if we can figure out a way to make it available - there ought to be no reason why it should not be available. We are in agreement.

Mx. Speaker, through you to the member, the member and I are in agreement there. What my department is charged with is taking these recommendations and - I did not move on anything that was suggested until we went through this engagement of the Aquaculture Regulatory Advisory Committee. I did not want to pre-empt what would have come out of that. I did not want to interfere.

In fact, it got to the point where people were asking me to replace people on a committee and that, and I said no. The previous administration had made these decisions. Everything's done. I am going to hold pat on everything. We're going to be true to what was established before and people who had worked on this, worked on it hard, and were in it for very good reasons and had made the commitment. I was going to honour that commitment.

We've gone through that, and now we have their work. Now we are taking a hard look at it.

The details are yet to come. The analysis - the thorough analysis - is yet to come. The questions that the member has raised are the same questions I've been asking for a while, and we will continue to ask. I would say that we're going to look at what can be done administratively, and done easily, which may include some of the commentary that the member has raised. Without regulation, we're going to do it. If there are areas that require regulations, we will look at that as well as legislation.

The intent for me is by this Fall, the next session, we, subject to other government priorities, will have something to bring forward to the Legislature - if it's required. I don't believe in legislating something for everything. If it's already being done, and if it's being done well, then if that's the objective and we meet that objective, that's good.

There are some things, though, that we need to be able to instill in legislation. We will. Industry reports to us now through mandatory reporting in regulations that are now on escapes and mortality. That was brought up. We have that information. The question is, is it open? Is it transparent? Is it readily accessible? Those are the areas that we're focusing on.

GARY BURRILL: Thinking too about Chapter 3 of the report, about regulation - the other dimension. I'm thinking in particular about that recommendation to do with the fee structure. There's a general sense, I think, coming out of the report that our fee structure is too far on the low end. I think the phrase that's used there is something about when we think about the use of a public resource for purposes of a private business. This needs to be examined.

We know that there are some jurisdictions prominent in the world of open-net pen finfish aquaculture where there are much stiffer lease fees, and that they fund an entire effective system of regulation through being higher on the lease-fee end.

Is the general train of the minister's thinking that this recommendation really is right, that lease fees in Nova Scotia need significant upward revision?

STEVE CRAIG: Recommendation 6 asks us to do a jurisdictional scan to review and align our fee structure. We're going to take a look at that. We're going to do that. I do recognize that in Norway, for example, they recognize that public waters and licensing of companies has gone quite high. I know too that in particular areas, provincially, for the most part, the fees are set to cover costs. However, we have a resource here that is admittedly relatively free. That's the question. What's the value of a public resource, and ought that be paid for by whoever utilizes that? I suppose you could also take that question to harvesters - to fishermen, those out in the sea. Those who get lobster. Those who get haddock. Should they be paying for that? That's a question that, when you do a jurisdictional scan, you have to take a look at the whole environment, the whole universe there.

In doing that jurisdictional scan, I'd also be looking for different factors to be analyzed. That is in a public resource, and what happens in mining - what happens in extraction of ores? What do you pay for it? - just to understand that and get a sense. If it's fragmented all over the place, then it's okay. It's all over the place, we'll make a decision along that line.

I do not hold to what some people would say - well, it's always been done that way. I'm not one of those people. I'm not one of those people. I'm also not one of those people who'd say right now that the member for Halifax Chebucto and I would agree on the point that he raised, that we have to provide more value to this, and therefore it ought to be charged in a different way, at a higher cost, and then add to the cost of the production, and right through to the end consumer, that cost would be carried through. I'm not there are this point.

Where I am, though, is that in the report, in the recommendations, it does ask us to take a look at a jurisdictional scan. A jurisdictional scan doesn't always get you into the whys - why is it they do that? How do they do that? Part of my experience is profit centre management costing systems in my career, and in jurisdictional scans, knowing that the costing systems and the business systems in one jurisdiction may not be the same as yours. How do you normalize that? That's a critical view that we will take in looking at that.

It may end up where the member suggests. I don't know at this point, because we haven't really thoroughly looked at it.

It's a very good question. It's one that will be addressed in our analysis and final decision.

GARY BURRILL: I'd like to ask a more general question about the report and the frame of mind of the report, and this general moment of the report as far as this important sector is concerned. I think about the moment - it's a moment of really dramatic international developments in this sector - dramatic financial corporate concentration taking place around the world, and pretty dramatic things happening from a regulatory point of view around the world. We've got the exclusion of Cooke Aquaculture from Washington State. We've got the transition out of open-net pen salmon aquaculture in B.C. as a policy path by the federal government.

When I think of this as a foundational document shaping the department's work and the minister's thinking, I found it odd that this big moment internationally for the sector is not really taken account of in the document. There's one place in the report where it says something like, we tried to get hold of people in Norway and Scotland, but we didn't get any answer. I feel if I had tried that with any professor, I don't think it would have gone very well. I mean, these are pretty important matters.

I want to ask the minister - I know the report says that they have conducted analysis of other jurisdictions, but I think it's a pretty fair comment on the document that that analysis does not show up in the text, does not show up in the discourse of the document.

Does the minister agree with me that if we're going to have a regulatory system, we need - in this increasingly multinational industry, we're going to have to deeply take account of what is happening with open-net pen finfish aquaculture around the world?

[12:00 p.m.]

STEVE CRAIG: Great question. The scope of the work that was done for the regulatory review was around the regulations. That was the scope. That was the task. That was the mandate to look at. Now, having said that, that's what the purpose of the report was to do. It was to take a look at the existing regulations and to modernize those, change those, what have you.

What I believe the member is saying is that in the last decade or so, the world environment around this industry has provided us with more and more information around aquaculture, and specifically marine finfish, I believe is where the member was coming from.

There are many varying opinions around the value of marine finfish farming. That adds to the complexity of the dialogue around this particular issue.

Going back to the regulatory review and Davis Pier - and Doelle-Lahey, in fact - and Doelle-Lahey suggested, and said, that marine open-pen net fishing was good if the regulations were appropriate. That's where we're coming from: Do we have the appropriate regulations in place?

The other areas that have been brought up - if we had those same regulations applied in those other areas, maybe the outcomes would have been the same. Maybe they would have been different. When you take a look at the federal responsibility in B.C., Discovery Islands, the wild Pacific fishery, which is very big there - sockeye, sole, and others - they are not Atlantic salmon. The Atlantic salmon fishery on the Atlantic coast is commercial. It's not happening.

We're looking at science-based information. We're looking through our regulations. We engage with Transport Canada, DFO, and Mi'kmaw communities. We engage with communities. There's a lot of work that's done, and the science and the licensing decisions are made with those things in mind. We have fish veterinarians on our staff who continuously look at fish health. We have all kinds of people who are engaged in this, not only here but throughout the world. We are watching those things.

We've got a population that is increasingly dependent upon seafood that is farmed. More than half of the seafood consumed on this planet is farmed. We need to be able to also go look at conservation and the impact of that farming on wild or ambient fish populations. When we go through this, that's the question we ask ourselves. Do we have the appropriate regulations, and if we were to have similar situations as in other jurisdictions here, would the outcome be the same, based on our regulations? That's what Doelle-Lahey said. If you do that, then chances are you're going to make good decisions.

Those decisions, once made, have checks and balances there. We can revoke a licence. We can look at something. We can report on fish escapes. We can look at sea lice. We can look at many other things. We can look at the bottom. We can take a look at the fallow period. All of those things - we can do all of that.

We've heard the important voices of Nova Scotians in those 988 responses. There were 43 stakeholder meetings. There's going to be Mi'kmaw consultation coming up very shortly.

It's being made clear that people think we have a good foundation in these regulations. We want to make it better. We want to build up, shore up, that foundation. Openness and public participation are important. Those things lead to what you've called social acceptance.

GARY BURRILL: I just want to ask, then, an international and national regulatory question. In the minister's view, is the level of corporate interest we're seeing in open-net pen finfish aquaculture here in Nova Scotia a reflection, in part at least, of the increasingly restrictive regulatory environment that the industry is facing elsewhere, particularly in the American-Canadian west?

STEVE CRAIG: No, I don't think so. I think the reality is, when you take a look at the science, there are certain environmental conditions that lend themselves to being able to farm fish. One in particular is the fact that you need temperatures in the range - not below 0.6 Celsius, I think it is. If you have something like that, the fish are dead, period. The maximum upper range is 20 degrees Celsius.

When you take a look at that - and I've not done this, but I suppose that companies around the world that are engaged in aquaculture, and there are many: China, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Norway, Denmark, Scotland. We can go on and on and list all the countries of the world that are engaged in this. We need to be able to look at a strong, sustainable fisheries and aquaculture sector. We want to engage businesses in that. We are undergoing a coastal classification system exercise now to sort of help indicate where the probability of allowing - at the front end of the adjudicative process - where we might have better success of putting leases out there. Again, based on what I've seen, it comes down to if you look at our 13,000 kilometres of coastline in Nova Scotia. Realistically, there might be less than 1,000, less than 800, less than 500 kilometres where this would be

possible. This is nearshore. We haven't even begun to talk about offshore, which is a good possibility as well.

As far as in the marine environment, that I believe - going back to the member's original question - is why companies are looking at Nova Scotia. The companies are looking all over the world for those conditions that would allow for the production of fin fishing - in our particular case for the most part, Atlantic salmon. Although we do have trout as well.

The proximity to markets is an issue for people deciding. Of course, Nova Scotia is positioned for central Canada, but one of the biggest markets in the world, the United States of America - so very close to that. The logistics of moving the products is pretty high. We've got cases where companies not only have to take a look at that, but all the support infrastructure around to do the work.

The hatcheries: Where do you get your eggs from? How do you grow them out? When do you grow them out? Do you use land-based facilities until they're post-smolt and they're a larger-sized fish, and then you grow them out, if you will, in an open marine environment?

So in answer to the question, no, I don't think that companies are looking to Nova Scotia because of differences in regulatory environments to establish businesses here to farm.

GARY BURRILL: As the minister knows, this whole area that we're talking about open-net pen salmon aquaculture - is one highly contentious area in Nova Scotia. I'm sure the minister is aware that there are many communities in the province where there is a very considerable body of opinion that this is not an appropriate path for the fishery in Nova Scotia.

I think one of the reasons people might quite reasonably think in this kind of way is the difference in ways that this form of aquaculture is being dealt with in B.C. and here. We go through the last election, and we hear the party that won the election - the federal Liberals - committed to moving completely to closed containment in B.C. by 2025.

I want to ask the minister if he doesn't find it reasonable for people to be troubled that as this industry continues to push to expand in Nova Scotia, the federal government is actually committing to shutting it down on the other coast.

STEVE CRAIG: That's what makes this so interesting - the various differences in regulatory environments throughout Canada and the west coast, which is under the federal responsibility. It used to be provincial, and it changed in part and changed in part because of the Cohen Commission and the work they did. The federal government has taken a stance, right off the top, that this is what will be done - and their environment is completely

different than ours. It's completely different. So that's out there. It's completely different if you look at it, and I've looked at it, and I've talked with Minister Murray about it as well.

[12:15 p.m.]

On the East Coast, again, it's under the authority of the provincial ministers - the Atlantic Canada and the Quebec ministers. So two completely different regulatory environments, which allows me to go back to our jurisdictional scan again, which we talked about earlier, and that is to understand what the differences are.

What we find is that this is very confusing for people to wrap their heads around. Nobody argues with the fact that we need to feed people. It's reasonable that we do take a look at, and in some way be able to communicate the differences. The question becomes: Whose job is that? Is it Minister Murray's job to say: Hey, here are the Atlantic Provinces, they have this and so on. Well, she does not do that in her communication.

She does not state that she's doing anything in Atlantic Canada, because she's not. But she states British Columbia because it is different. The circumstances are different. We need to be able to go back and look at those jurisdictional scans, and work on the openness and transparency. In a lot of these instances, just how far do you go? I don't know the answer to that. It was very rhetorical.

We do have a regulatory foundation that we are looking at. That was part of the regulatory review that we are in the middle of, and that is to take a look at the science - to be open and honest and transparent in what we do, to engage communities, industry, and Indigenous. It is absolutely an area with varying opinions on every aspect of this, which makes it even more important that we consider everything to come up with the decision that was mentioned yesterday.

I remember that they're neither on one side of an issue or another side of the issue. In this chair, you have to make a decision. We've often heard in politics about kicking it down the road for somebody else to make a decision, and to make a difference, to make a change. I'm not that guy. I'm very deliberate and will be very knowledgeable. I'll look at all sides of an issue, open to talking with anybody reasonably about anything, and to come up with what I think is of the best value for Nova Scotia and Nova Scotians.

I'm not one who holds perhaps, a particular view, nor somebody else who might hold a completely opposite view, but to come up with and have very in-depth knowledge of the issue and make a decision on where it is.

The recognition that people are reasonably confused because it appears different because it is different on one coast versus another coast of Canada, yet we have three coasts. It's not surprising to me that there are people out there who are confused and would think that you should do this versus that.

GARY BURRILL: The minister refers to the Cohen Commission. One of the strong recommendations out of the Cohen Commission - and it was also a Doelle-Lahey recommendation - in this universe of social licence, public trust and so on, I think it's very relevant still. That's the recommendation that the regulatory and promotional aspects around fin fish aquaculture ought not to be housed within the same department.

Does the minister agree with this logic that public trust, public confidence would be enhanced if the finfish aquaculture promotion and finfish aquaculture regulation were to be separated in the Government of Nova Scotia?

STEVE CRAIG: I've heard that comment being made quite often. No, I don't believe it. I believe the objections would still be there. That's my true belief. I don't think the issue really is around promotion - in the department, promotion versus regulation. We could have promotion under another department, under the Minister of Economic Development, and we would still get the same concerns. That's my belief.

The idea, though, that you would extend that - we currently have that now in my department and nobody's ever said to me: You don't do that. Nobody's ever said: Do not promote seafood. Do not walk away from \$2.6 billion that we export, in fish, scallops, and lobster. I have never heard anybody say: Don't do that. Because you also regulate buyers' licenses and processors' licenses. I've never heard that once.

I do believe that you can do both - absolutely. What you're doing is you're helping promote a product that's of value to Nova Scotia and Nova Scotians, while at the same time ensuring that product is of a high quality, and the rigor and processes around it are sound. By putting those two together, you're truly vested in it. I would say that would be an advantage of keeping it together. Not to say that there are some other jurisdictions where that might not happen, and depending on the size it may happen. But certainly, we have a strong growth and sustainability mindset, believe in competition, believe in promoting Nova Scotia's seafood.

There was a question yesterday about a decline in our exports. Seafood did not decline - \$2.6 billion in 2022, a 4 per cent increase over 2021, more than 60 countries. I don't see anybody else around standing up and saying we need to do more - more travelling and working with governments, supporting and standing side-by-side businesses to promote the industry and their products.

Part of what I do, too, is work as an advocate on the industry's behalf, with the federal government, and my other colleagues around here. If I wasn't out there promoting, or if the minister wasn't promoting that, then I think we would have a much different conversation.

Why wouldn't you do that? Again, rhetorical. Not looking for a response; I'm not soliciting one. I would not be comfortable saying, I'll put the regulations in, and I'm not



going to promote Nova Scotia and Nova Scotian companies, which the Mi'kmaq, too, are very heavily engaged in, in aquaculture. I would not be comfortable with saying: No, not my job.

THE CHAIR: With approximately 1 minute and 10 seconds, did you have any more questions MLA Burrill?

GARY BURRILL: Well, I would just maybe take a second to thank the minister and the staff for being so attentive to these questions, most of them coming out of Davis Pier's work, which is such a big matter at the moment. Again, I want to thank my colleague, the member for Clare, for co-operating with me to try to present the most constructive questions together we could for the time of Budget Estimates.

THE CHAIR: I believe the Liberal Party has indicated they're through their questioning. Minister, I'll invite you to do closing remarks.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: Thank you, Chair. My sincere thanks to the member for Clare and the member for Halifax Chebucto, two gentlemen that I've come to know in this House, and greatly admire and respect. Certainly, this is not the last conversation we're going to have around these topics.

We are all here for the same reason, and that is to do the very best we can for Nova Scotia and Nova Scotians - industry or citizens, our communities, rural and coastal communities. That holds true for all elected officials. I just wanted to say that I find it an extreme pleasure to be an elected member for Sackville-Cobequid - privileged to be around the Cabinet table.

I was in church the other day. I'm a lector at the church. I was doing something, and afterward a fellow who had worked with my dad, who's been passed away for some time, came up to me and said: "Your dad would be right some proud of you."

To put this into perspective, elected officials are here because of our democracy and the people who elect us, and yes, we fight like hell to be elected. So, it's a job that nobody just gave to us, we worked for it. (Interruption) Could be the Premier telling me to shut up. No, he would never do that. We work for it. Then when we get it, we are in a privileged position. The privilege is to take a look at our province and ask: What's best for our province in our opinion at this particular point in time? Nothing stays the same forever. We have to be fluid in our decision-making and open to change.

It's a true privilege to work with those who actually do the work for the long term, and those are the people who are at this table and behind me - the professionals who give of their time and their talent to Nova Scotians. I've heard a number of ministers say they've got the best staff. Well, I wouldn't say I have the best staff, and I wouldn't say they have the best staff. I'd say Nova Scotians have the best staff.

Collectively, they do the work. They are the foundation. We are the ones who come in for a short period of time, and hold on and see if we can change some direction because of whatever mandate we were given, and because of whatever platform we went on. Yet at the same time, government operates.

That institution is sound. It's firm. I'm very pleased to have been privileged, and am privileged to work, to with the people around me in this department, and others in government. Truly, I want to let Nova Scotians know that we have a great civil service, and that we need to be able to, as elected officials on behalf of the public, ensure that we keep that civil service highly professional and engaged. If we see something that needs to be changed, then let's not be afraid to do that.

[12:30 p.m.]

I recognize that we are a small department, and we play a big role in driving the province's economy through seafood exports and providing a healthy, local, sustainable food for Nova Scotians. We recognize these are challenges. Through the questioning, the members have brought up a number of issues that are very pertinent to today's environment.

We're working hard with our colleagues to look at climate change and what it means. We're tackling it dead on. We are focused, our sleeves are rolled up, and we're doing that. Deputy Minister Howe is leading the team to do that. I'm very confident in the ability of the team. Although somebody out of the minister's office left the lights on last night. When I got in first thing this morning, the lights were on and I'm looking around to see who's there. There was nobody there, so somebody - I'm told it's Shawn, but he denies it - left the lights on.

THE CHAIR: Shall Resolution E10 stand?

Resolution E10 stands.

We'll take a brief recess here while we get set up for our next Subcommittee on Supply. We're now in recess.

[12:32 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[12:39 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. I call the meeting to order. The Subcommittee on Supply will come to order now. It is now 12:39 p.m. The subcommittee is meeting to consider the Estimates for the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, as outlined in Resolution E13.

**Resolution E13 - Resolved, that a sum not exceeding \$206,236,000 be granted to the Lieutenant Governor to defray expenses in respect of the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, pursuant to the Estimate.**

THE CHAIR: I now invite the Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration to make some opening remarks, which can last up to an hour.

The honourable Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

HON. JILL BALSER: Thank you, Chair. I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are in Mi'kma'ki, the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq. It is a pleasure to speak to you today about the important work that the dedicated team at the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, our programs and our plans for 2023-24, as outlined in the budget and our business plan.

There are several members of the team here with me today, and I would like to introduce them now. Joining me at the table are Ava Czapalay, Deputy Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration, and Wanda Fletcher, Executive Director at the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. Also here today is Associate Deputy Minister Nicole Johnson Morrison.

Several members of the LSI senior leadership team and Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency are also available to assist us today, representing the many branches of our department: Skills and Learning Branch, Marjorie Davison, Senior Executive Director; Safety Branch, Gary O'Toole, Senior Executive Director; Labour Services Branch, Cynthia Yazbek, Executive Director; Immigration and Population Growth Branch, Jennifer L'Esperance, Senior Executive Director; and Peter Conlon, Interim CEO, and Kim Kennedy, Chief Operating Officer at the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency, which also plays an important role in the department's work and mandate. We all work together to ensure every Nova Scotian has an opportunity to thrive.

On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, government tabled the 2023-24 budget: More Healthcare, Faster. The budget focuses on three main areas: action for health care, our strategic plan to grow the health care workforce to get Nova Scotians faster access to the care they need, and a healthy economy, which helps to pay for the health care system Nova Scotians deserve and lays the foundation for our thriving province. Healthy communities, by addressing the factors affecting people's health and well-being like child poverty, housing, inclusion, and education, we can help improve the quality of life for all Nova Scotians.

As you heard on Budget Day from the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, in the last year we have experienced the fastest annual population growth since 1926. That's almost a hundred years ago. We are seeing the tightest labour markets since the early 1970s, with unemployment rates falling as low as 6.5 per cent.

Nova Scotia has felt the effects of the opposite of growth too many times. I, too, would much rather be dealing with the opportunities that come with growth than the challenges that come with decline. Growth brings in a new investment, new ideas, new perspectives. It opens doors for entrepreneurs who want to start a business, and for the business owners who want to grow and venture into new markets.

Growth has meant increased revenues for the provincial government, giving us capacity to make the significant investments we are making to fix health care. The Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration has an important role in helping to fix health care and grow our economy. I am pleased to be here today to discuss our budget and our work. LSI's work is broad and diverse. I will take a few minutes to give you a description of each of our branches within the department.

The Engagement, Equity and Belonging Branch leads the transformational culture change that prioritizes equity, inclusion and belonging, and champions this work through inclusive communication and employee engagement opportunities. We need our workforce to be representative of the communities we serve, and ensure our working environments are safe, accessible, equitable and inclusive for all employees.

The Corporate Policy and Services Branch helps ensure the department aligns with, and adheres to government priorities, policies, and processes, and in turn supports government decision-making.

Our Safety Branch aims to positively impact technical and occupational health and safety throughout Nova Scotia by setting, promoting, verifying, and enforcing safety requirements that prevent injury, illness or death, and decrease the occurrence of hazards that result in harm to people or property. The branch delivers effective and efficient regulatory management to enhance the protection of the public and worker safety through education and outreach, inspection and enforcement, and the insurance of equipment, registrations, permits, and licenses.

As the minister responsible for safety, I also have oversight over the Workers Compensation Act, Part 1, which provides the legal framework for the administration of workplace health and safety standards.

Our Labour Services Branch provides fair, accessible, and responsive dispute resolution services to Nova Scotia workplaces. This includes conciliation and mediation services, legal assistance, advice and representation for injured workers and their families, administration of the Labour Standards Code, including foreign worker protections, and administrative support to the Nova Scotia Labour Board, and independent adjudicative tribunal.

The Skills and Learning Branch supports the development of a highly skilled balanced and inclusive labour force. It does this through the provision of foundational

programs and services for Nova Scotians to prepare for, and secure work, through work experience programs for youth, the completion of the high school diploma or equivalency, academic upgrading, and the skills training that helps to meet the evolving skills needs of today and the future.

[12:45 p.m.]

In addition, the branch funds and oversees employment services to help people plan their careers, find employment and gain new skills in their work experience. Labour mobility and foreign credential recognition are also supported through the branch and play an important role in filling labour market needs, and helping our skilled newcomers work to their fullest potential in their professions.

Finally, the branch also helps employers and industry sector councils in areas of recruitment, retention and training through direct support and programming, including hiring incentives and funding to support their employees to become more productive and innovative.

The Immigration and Population Growth Branch provides leadership for the province's population growth mandate, and for immigration at the local and national level, including the Nova Scotia Provincial Nominee Program and the Atlantic Immigration Program. This branch supports economic immigration programs and works closely with departments across government to ensure we have a planned and strategic approach.

The Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency is an industry-led training system leading to certification and rewarding careers in the skilled trades for all Nova Scotians, including equity deserving groups. The Apprenticeship Board advised the agency to ensure that our training system represents the needs of industry.

In these ways, the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration works to create a thriving province that welcomes and retains greater numbers of people and contributes to the competitive workforce by making strategic investments in people, programs, services and partnerships. These investments will directly support the prosperity of the province, where people will find welcoming communities, welcoming safe workplaces, have access to sustainable jobs, and are empowered to contribute to a stronger Nova Scotia.

We are committed to working collaboratively across government with our federal, provincial, and municipal partners, as well as with our stakeholders in the private sector. In 2023-24, LSI will advance the following strategic directions. We will create opportunities for sustainable population and economic growth. We will advance inclusion, learning, and employability for all. We will enable safe, fair, diverse, welcoming, and productive workplaces. I encourage all members to see more details of our Strategic Directions in the department's business plan.

By first outlining our work in our Strategic Directions, I am now pleased to highlight the budget for the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, which contains new investments that will help us achieve our priorities. The budget highlights include:

- \$13.2 million to provide funding to small and medium-sized employers to hire first year apprentices in Red Seal trades;
- \$943,000 more as part of a multi-year plan to modernize Nova Scotia's apprenticeship system;
- \$1 million more to expand the team that supports immigration and population growth;
- \$200,000 more for a total of \$1.6 million for community-based settlement service organizations to support a growing number of newcomers;
- \$138,000 to create a new immigration specialist position dedicated to support health care workers from international markets.

The department has added 20 new full-time equivalent positions this year, related to the government's priorities in health care and skilled trades. The new positions include 12 FTEs to increase the staffing of the Immigration and Population Growth Branch, and 8 FTEs for the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency.

Growing our population is part of our plan to grow the economy and fix health care. People are part of our plan. The newcomers from across Canada and from around the world, who we will welcome in the years ahead, will help to build homes and provide the health care and child care we all need. They are being hired for hard-to-fill jobs, and in some cases, they are creating jobs with new businesses.

Immigration and population growth is a top priority for the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration. Make no mistake, Nova Scotia is a province on the move. We have committed to growth of our province to two million people by 2060. We continue to benefit from record-breaking population growth. In fact, 12,650 permanent residents came to Nova Scotia in 2022. That's another all-time high that has surpassed the 2021 total by an incredible 38 per cent.

We work in close partnership with the federal government to bring immigrants to Nova Scotia. There are four ways immigrants come to our province. They come with a job offer through one of our immigration streams; they come as a family member of an immigrant; they come to Nova Scotia as refugee or asylum seeker; or they come as international graduates. We're pleased to welcome all through our immigration process.

If we include all the migrants to Nova Scotia, not just immigrants, we've already added more than 42,000 people since breaking the one million milestone in population growth - at least that's what Statistics Canada's population clock has tracked since December 2021. That's like adding a Sydney and a Bridgewater to our province.

It is quite the change from when Nova Scotia was experiencing decline in its population. It's a welcome change from when schools were closing, and people were moving away to find work. We welcome change to go from an aging population to a population that is getting younger, as we attract more working-age newcomers and their families, and as we have more opportunities for our youth here at home. The Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration is laser-focused on making sure this growth is targeted and strategic.

As our population is growing, so is our demand for more infrastructure and services. Through our economic-based immigration programs, newcomers arrive in Nova Scotia with a job offer in hand, ready to fill our labour needs and contribute to Nova Scotia's bright future. When newcomers arrive with their families, they will come with the same aspirations as any family would - to live, work, and thrive.

Part of the work done by our settlement services is to provide wraparound supports for all family members, like connecting spouses to work, connecting children to schools, and other supports like language training and connection to community. Through our Nova Scotia Works providers, we're focused on connecting people to jobs, and jobs to people. There are more than 50 Nova Scotia Works centres that deliver employment and career services throughout the province.

No matter where people find themselves in life, or in a job search process, there are passionate staff in every region who can help connect people to meaningful work. We continue to host job fairs all over the province through Nova Scotia Works, with all employers eager to hire the talent they need for their businesses.

Last July, our department hosted a one-stop job fair that connected newcomers to employers in a variety of sectors. We had over 40 employers and 476 registered attendees that day, and several newcomers were given a job right on the spot. I attended this job fair and was struck by the excitement in the room. Nova Scotia's employers were excited to meet newcomers with the talent they need, and newcomers were excited by the opportunities and the warm welcome.

We're focused on attracting the talent we need to support our health care sector and grow our skilled trades sector - people who will build houses and help create the infrastructure we need to support our growing population. We partner with the Association of Industry Sector Councils that represents 14 of our province's industry sectors, including the Health Care Human Resource Sector Council to support small and medium-sized employers as they work to attract and retain the talent to build a robust Nova Scotia.

We continue to work with the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency to find solutions to meet our labour market needs, and grow a strong, diverse, and highly skilled workforce. Demand for skilled workers has never been greater - for example, the demand is great in the construction sector for large infrastructure projects to the trades needed to support a growing population. Immigration is one way to find skilled workers to fill those gaps.

For example, we encourage employers to use the Nova Scotia Provincial Nominee Program and the Atlantic Immigration Program. We also encourage intercultural competency training and other settlement tools to create welcoming workplaces. It is not enough to attract new talent; we have to retain people as well.

Another unique program is the Work-based Trades Practical Assessment Program, delivered in partnership with the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia. Newcomers are matched to employers who assess their skills while working in their trades - the skills that would be recognized by the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency. Over 95 per cent of newcomers in this program have been hired and have begun their journey to skilled trades certification.

I want to share with you some of the work the department is doing to make sure Nova Scotia attracts the young talent we need through the MOST program, creates welcoming communities, and safe workplaces. One of the first things we did in the new department was launch the Live in Nova Scotia marketing campaign. The campaign was launched in December 2021, and just completed its second phase in March 2023.

The purpose is to have a campaign that strategically targets workers and skilled trades, as well as health care workers. We want these workers to realize there is a place for them here in Nova Scotia, and that this is a great place to live and work. To help ensure the campaign's success, we hired navigators to help people find the right community for them. They provide real, in-person service, and answer their questions on housing, the job market, places for their children to study and to go to school - whatever they need to know to move to Nova Scotia.

Employers are stepping up too. The province led a trip to a Kenyan refugee camp in partnership with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Health Association Nova Scotia and the MacLeod Group, which provides senior care across Atlantic Canada, as well as two refugee-focused charities, the Shapiro Foundation and RefugePoint. The trip enabled us to recruit 65 continuing care assistants with the potential for more to follow.

This led to another mission in Jordan where refugees were interviewed for health care and construction opportunities in Nova Scotia. They were recruited to work in Nova Scotia through the federal Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot, which identifies refugees with much-needed skills, who meet regional and provincial immigration requirements.



When I say employers are stepping up, too, as an example, the MacLeod Group is not only offering employment opportunities, but they are also providing housing.

The Immigration and Population Growth team has been busy recruiting newcomers to fill our labour market needs. The team has hosted and participated in 23 Canadian international events in 2022, including 20 in-person events and three virtual events. IPG gathered 3,852 contacts. I joined the team at the Destination Canada Mobility Forum in Paris and Rabat, Morocco, in November.

The Regional Enterprise Networks also met with interested candidates and received thousands of job applications. Other provinces are also trying to attract health care and skilled workers and trades professionals. So we need an extra edge, an added incentive. That's why the province introduced More Opportunity for Skilled Trades - the MOST program - last year. This tax-free fund targets skilled trade workers under the age of 30. It offers a return on the provincial tax income tax on the first \$50,000 of income earned. Apprentices and tradespeople in our most in-demand occupations like carpenters, truck and transport mechanics, roofers, and plumbers to name just a few, are eligible for the MOST program.

Recruitment is an important part of our plan. The other part is we need to make sure that when people do come, they feel welcome to stay. We all have an important role to play in this. We need to work together to make sure that our workplaces and our communities are truly welcoming. If newcomers feel they are welcome here, they will settle, and they'll stay. As the demographics of Nova Scotia change, we need to focus on ensuring that our workforce at all levels reflects Nova Scotia's diverse population.

For example, we can help people see themselves in skilled trades occupations that they didn't previously see themselves in. We are creating more opportunity in the trades in important ways. We are working hard to ensure young people, women, and equity-deserving groups know about and consider a career in the skilled trades. Just last year, nearly 70 more women began their journey to certification.

We have increased the number of apprentices who can be trained by journeypersons. In most trades, the ratio is now 2 to 1 apprentices to journeypersons. Our preliminary information shows approximately an increase of 500 apprentices over the previous year. We are working closely with industry to attract and retain workers.

Recently we met with the construction sector. We discussed the urgent need for housing and skilled workers as they work to build the infrastructure we need to support a growing population. The sector is working hard to attract skilled trades workers to respond to Nova Scotia's growing infrastructure needs. We had a great discussion and listened to their ideas. Together, we can find solutions to help the sector.

For example, we have been on recruitment missions with the construction organizations. Our colleagues in the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing recently announced that there will soon be more modular housing for health care workers and skilled tradespeople in communities where housing options are limited.

[1:00 p.m.]

The province is making investments to provide more affordable transitional housing to support recruitment and retention of health care professionals and skilled trades workers. Strong relationships create innovative ideas and solutions that allow our province to succeed. For example, the Construction Association of Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency work together with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to delivery the Building Futures for Youth program.

This program gives high school students a five-week paid work placement with employers over the Summer in the skilled trades. What better way to introduce youth to the construction trades. Youth learn and work with skilled trades professionals and connect with employers in the trades. They can even become registered youth apprentices and start their career while in high school.

In addition to construction, three other key industry sectors - motive power, service, and industrial manufacturing - have forged strong relationships with the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency. There are over 70 skilled trades occupations designated under the Apprenticeship and Trades Qualifications Act for certification and apprenticeship.

The Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency has worked hard to promote skilled trades. This apprenticeship and trade system is used all over Atlantic Canada and throughout the country. Many of the trades are harmonized, providing greater mobility of apprentices and journeypersons. Those skilled trades professionals who we are recruiting from across Canada can immediately begin contributing to the skilled trades workforce.

We recognize how vital skilled trades workers are to the province's growth. With growth happening quickly and everywhere in our province, Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency is working hard to help. Apprentices bring vibrancy and energy to a workplace. They learn while they're at work. They are the future leaders of the sector and play a vital role in replacing older workers who want to retire.

We know it is an investment. We also know employers need resources to bring on apprentices. We can help. There are financial incentives in place to help employers offset those costs. Earlier I mentioned in our budget highlights a \$13.2 million investment to provide funding to small- and medium-sized employers to hire first year apprentices in Red Seal trades.

As announced last Summer by the federal government, the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency signed an agreement with Employment and Social Development Canada to administer the Canadian Apprenticeship Service program. The program is fully recoverable. We strive to give first year apprentices the support they need to succeed in skilled trades and increase the participation and success of equity-deserving groups. The investment from Employment and Social Development Canada will help Nova Scotians meet labour market needs and grow a strong diverse and highly skilled workforce.

Technology plays an important role in how we retain apprentices and support employers. In partnership with other Atlantic provinces, we are continuing the implementation of the Apprenticeship Management System, and that will provide easy online access to employers and apprentices to follow the journey to certification. The system will go live in 2024. We have also partnered with EduNova to provide digital identification for skilled trades professionals in the next few months.

As I mentioned, we need to help more people see trades as a great career where they can thrive. Employers can do their part by creating a welcoming workplace. To empower employers, we created a Welcoming Workplaces toolkit. It is a free online tool that helps employers create a more inclusive environment. This is an important part of retaining a skilled workforce too.

Our department has services, programs, online tools, and partnerships that are helping employers plan, train, and retain a skilled and adaptable workforce. Programs and services such as: Employer Engagement Specialists funded by LSI and placed in Nova Scotia work centres across the province, who can work as a trusted guide and support employers with their recruitment and retention needs; Workplace Innovation and Productivity Skills Incentive program to help small and medium companies reskill their workforce; Workplace Education Initiative, which supports education and workplace skills development; and SkillsonlineNS, an online upskilling portal that provides thousands of free online courses for in-demand skills. These offerings are all designed to help employers and their workforce to adjust to the changing labour market and acquire the skills and tools they need to succeed.

We know that a welcoming community is why people come to Nova Scotia and why they stay. Another example to share is an orientation program called the physicians' Welcome Collaborative to support the success of physicians trained outside of Canada. We have provided \$1.3 million to the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia to develop and deliver this program. The program will help welcome and settle 140 doctors trained outside of Canada over the next three years. It will provide support, mentorship, and a sense of community. The program will also bring community partners together to support new doctors prior to or shortly after their arrival as they begin to practice here.

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia has developed the program to be delivered with physician leaders, Nova Scotia Health Authority, Immigrant Services

Association of Nova Scotia and Doctors Nova Scotia. It recently held a pilot session with eight newly licensed doctors. The program will be evaluated to ensure it can be successful over the long term. This program will help internationally trained doctors adjust to practicing in Nova Scotia, which means they will be able to better support the patients who need them.

When it comes to the skilled trades, we are also working with our sector councils to support workforce planning efforts. This includes expanding learning resources for employers in the area of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. This is critical to successfully retain a diverse workforce, identify occupations that are in demand, and create a succession planning tool for business communities and the aging workforce.

While doing all of this, we want to make sure that workplaces are safe. The Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration has regulatory oversight for workplace safety. We work with employers and employees to ensure workplaces are safe. We inspect and verify that safety rules are being followed and we enforce requirements where necessary - however, safety is a shared responsibility. Our legislation in Nova Scotia is well-aligned with others in Canada that use an internal responsibility system approach that everyone in the workplace has a responsibility for safety.

The Safety Branch focuses on helping educate employers and workers on how to work safely. Over the past year, the safety branch has continued work to implement its strategic plan that serves as a road map to guide their work going forward. Our vision is that health and safety are valued, prioritized and lived in Nova Scotia. The team has set three strategic goals to increase safety through service delivery excellence, develop a positive workplace culture, and build collaborative partnerships and relationships. These goals are a multi-pronged approach to achieve better safety outcomes for Nova Scotia.

We all have a role to play in keeping workplaces safe in Nova Scotia. At LSI, our role includes investigating when a tragic accident occurs, or we can ensure our prevention efforts are focused. This strategic plan will help keep the Safety Branch focused on our main mission to support and positively impact technical and occupational health and safety throughout Nova Scotia, by setting, promoting, verifying, and enforcing requirements. We encourage anyone to reach out to our toll-free 1-800-9LABOUR number with any questions or concerns about safety.

We have translated key safety resources into a variety of languages that ISANS has told us are more commonly used in Nova Scotia. This work will ensure that immigrants in our province are aware of their rights and have access to information that can help keep them safe at work. We have implemented a resource that is available to safety officers with the department to ensure they can access life interpretation services in the field during their inspections, for any worker who could benefit from interacting with an officer in their language of choice.

We partner with the Workers' Compensation Board of Nova Scotia to promote workplace safety. Please check out the Work Safe for Life site, social media, and marketing campaigns throughout the year for safety tips. LSI will continue to work closely with the WCB, employees, workers, and industry to ensure we have a well-funded, sustainable workers' compensation system for all Nova Scotians now and for generations to come. We want you to work safe and come home safe every day.

The safety message is extremely important to teach our youth. We are changing the safety culture in this province. Starting this important focus on safety early will help keep them safe throughout their careers.

Attraction and retention of young people is critical. When our youth see themselves in safe, meaningful careers and are connected to jobs, they are more likely to stay and build their lives here.

Earlier we mentioned the MOST program, offered by our colleagues at the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. At LSI, we provide several programs aimed at connecting employers with young people. The Student Summer Skills Incentive and Co-operative Education Incentive are supporting full-time work experiences for students that help them hone and apply the skills they are learning in the classroom, and connecting them with employers in their field.

Graduate to Opportunity and Innovate to Opportunity are supporting permanent full-time jobs for recent grads here in Nova Scotia. More than 80 per cent of the grades hired through GTO are still working in the province two years after they began.

Together with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, we partnered to support students, families, teachers, and school counsellors to strengthen career decision-making for public school students. Increasing youth participation in the skilled trades through the apprenticeship pathway will help attract and retain young people in communities throughout the province.

The Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency has invested in Building Futures for Youth in the construction trades, TestDrive in the automotive trades, and Serve it Up! in the culinary trades. Summer youth and family boot camps help to attract youth, and increase diversity and inclusion in the skilled trades.

The Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning offers tuition-free programs to help adults earn a high school diploma or equivalent. There are also opportunities to upgrade marks and skills to support further education and training. Currently, more than 50 per cent of the adults taking advantage of these programs are under the age of 30. The support of the programming available through NSSAL can be an important stepping stone to fulfilling a career here in Nova Scotia.

I've talked a lot about our priority of recruiting and retaining newcomers to this province. I'm proud to say that we are also here to support people in need. Nova Scotia has a longstanding history of helping people, and welcoming those who have come to our province, and we are better for this.

More than 2,500 Ukrainians have moved to Nova Scotia as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We continue to work collaboratively with the Nova Scotia branch of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress. We are working together to share information on ways that we can best help Ukrainians. We are working closely with our settlement partners to see how we can support the Ukrainian community here in Nova Scotia during this difficult time.

To further support Ukrainian nationals, the province is providing settlement supports, and we continue to work closely with our federal partners. The Province of Nova Scotia, along with its settlement partners, has successfully responded to other international crises in Syria and Afghanistan to support the resettlement efforts in Nova Scotia. We anticipate building on this strength and lessons learned quickly to mobilize resources.

We have also recently welcomed 164 asylum seekers. Asylum seekers are fleeing troubling times like persecution, natural disasters or even war. That decision to uproot your life and move to a new country can be very difficult. Our goal when asylum seekers come to Nova Scotia is that they are welcomed, and that we connect them to communities, the supports they need and job opportunities so that they can successfully settle in this province. The province has a close working relationship with the federal government, and we are helping to support an urgent need. LSI focuses on equity, diversity, and inclusion in many ways.

Before I conclude, I want to take a moment to discuss the cost of living and the rising cost of inflation. This is a challenging time for Nova Scotians, especially those living on a lower income. In my department, we continue to be focused on supporting people as they look for work, upskill for new opportunities, and train for emerging labour market trends.

We continue to have key funding programs like that of the Skills Development program through Employment Nova Scotia, which supports over 500 unemployed individuals a year who need the skills to gain employment by accessing non-repayable funding for required occupational training. This funding not only provides funding contributions for the cost of training, but also living allowances, child care benefits, and other supports to help individuals move toward success in their training, and eventually being hired by employers in Nova Scotia, and putting them on the road to greater financial stability for them and their families.

Programs like the Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning, the Workplace Education Initiative, the Workplace Innovation and Productivity Skills Incentive, and

SkillsOnlineNS that support working Nova Scotians in their continued learning and ever-changing work environments.

[1:15 p.m.]

We are moving faster to a \$15 an hour minimum wage. On April 1<sup>st</sup>, the minimum wage increased to \$14.50, and it will increase again to \$15 an hour on October 1, 2023. Then starting on April 1, 2024, the minimum wage will be adjusted on April 1<sup>st</sup> of each year by the percentage change in the projected annual national Consumer Price Index for the previous calendar year, plus an additional one per cent.

The rate increases I just referenced were recommendations made by the Minimum Wage Review Committee. The Minimum Wage Review Committee is mandated under the Nova Scotia Labour Standards Code to conduct an annual review of the minimum wage and submit a report to me as the minister.

The Minimum Wage Review Committee is made up of two employer and two employee representatives. This is important because the minimum wage rate affects the lives of many workers and businesses. The Minimum Wage Review Committee put forward a balanced plan that represents the interests of both workers and employers, and we have acted on their recommendations.

Thank you for giving me the time to talk about some of the work under way at the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, and at the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency. I'm honoured to be the Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration. We have an extensive mandate that touches on many of the government's priorities.

Since our population reached one million in December 2021, we have added more than 42,000 people to our population. People are seeing what we have always known, Nova Scotia is an incredible place to live, work, and raise a family. We will continue to grow in a planned way. We will address the challenges before us. This budget makes vital investments in capital projects and local economies, helps make the labour demands of our economy, and makes it possible for current and new Nova Scotians to live, work and build a thriving life here in the province.

I want to sincerely thank each and every one of the people at the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration and the Apprenticeship Agency. I am so proud of the work that they do each and every day. I'm extremely pleased that they're all here to support me as well today. Thank you, Chair.

THE CHAIR: At this point, we will turn to the Liberal Caucus for their first hour of questioning. Each caucus will take approximately one hour. We do ask that the minister be the only person to respond to questions.

With that, I will recognize the honourable member for Bedford Basin.

HON. KELLY REGAN: Thank you, Chair. Because we only have a couple of hours, and I'm sharing my time with my colleague who will be asking the minister questions on immigration, mine will probably be pretty quick questions.

Perhaps right off the bat, given the labour shortage, can the minister answer why we have seen a cut to this department's budget in the middle of a labour shortage?

JILL BALSER: Within the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, it would look like a decrease in our overall budget, but that was actually from our labour transfer market agreements with the federal government. We did see a decrease in that funding, and that would be the reason that you would see that decrease in the overall budget.

However, on a positive note, we do know in the recent federal budget that was tabled, there is money for labour markets for transferability, and we're looking forward to seeing what that information is going to look like. We're hopeful that there will be an increase coming our way.

KELLY REGAN: Under Programs and Services, Skills and Learning is down by \$60 million. Can the minister please explain why.

JILL BALSER: To the member, that would be the same reason. We did see an expiration in the incremental funding over at Skills and Learning, so the Labour Market Transfer Agreement would have been that funding to Skills and Learning. Even though it impacted the overall department, that's where you will see that decrease. So pretty much the same response as the first question that was asked.

KELLY REGAN: We're in the middle of a skills shortage. Not long ago, I visited Cole Harbour District High School with my colleagues, the members for Cole Harbour and Cole Harbour-Dartmouth. We met with the administration there, and we met with a trades group, and they were very blunt - there is room at that high school to take on more students. I recognize you're not the Minister of Education, but you are the Minister of Advanced . . . (Interruption) No, you're not the Minister of Advanced Education. Darn it.

Anyway, what we have is space at that school. That school has 400 students in it. Its capacity is well above that. We could add another teacher there. There's space available in the motive trades, in the manufacturing trades, et cetera, and it's sitting there empty, or not fully being utilized at a time when we need to make sure that we have more young people going into the trades. There are a number of good programs, Building Futures for Youth, TestDrive, Serve it Up!, et cetera, which I'm familiar with.

Has the department been looking at the underutilization of skilled trades in our high schools? Are we contemplating something like what Ontario just did where they said you



didn't have to do Grade 12 if you were doing a skilled trade? I'm just wondering what the plan is here.

JILL BALSER: Thank you for sharing that information too. I know with my colleagues in the Department of Advanced Education, as well as the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, we all share a passion to see young people thrive in this province, and to also know that there is an opportunity to utilize some vacant spaces.

It was one of the reasons why we - I, as minister - struck up a pre-apprenticeship panel to talk about the different pathways that there are through to completion. We have folks from NSCC, the department, and industry talking about these exact things. We also want to look at what other provinces are doing, because if there are ways to make that work here, why not adopt some of those models.

I think there really is an incredible opportunity for all three departments, of course with the sector, to address some of those needs by doing things differently. If there are spaces, as the member has indicated, and if there are more that the department needs to be aware of, of course we'll have those ongoing conversations. I do think the overall goal of making sure that more and more people who are seeing themselves in the trades are successful through to completion.

The reason why we made some of those early changes in the ratios - we had our MOST program as well as our marketing campaign - is all to help with that. But the focus on education and making sure that young people - as early as elementary school or into high school - see those successful pathways, and we can utilize infrastructure to make that happen.

KELLY REGAN: The NSCC is viewed as the training arm of government, et cetera, but I still think a lot of people don't understand that when they go into a carpentry program at the NSCC, for example, they're not coming out as a journey person. They're doing a pre-apprenticeship program.

Has the NSCC in any way altered their programming? Well, I'm aware of one way. I know there's one carpentry program that instead of a two-year program became a one-year program, and you could do a second year if you wanted to. To me it seems that what we need is people moving through these programs much quicker than they are now, and I'm not sure we're seeing that. I think that people need to understand that there are other paths into the trades, other than doing a pre-apprenticeship program and then doing an apprenticeship.

I'm wondering, do we see NSCC doing any short courses to get people ready to begin their apprenticeships, instead of doing these one- and two-year courses that eat up valuable time? The clock is ticking, and we need those tradespeople.

JILL BALSER: I think it is an incredible opportunity in the province. We want to make sure that all families and all individuals are aware of all the different pathways that exist. I think there is an opportunity for us to encourage people who are in high school and onward to completion that there is that direct entry.

Another reason why we struck up that pre-apprenticeship panel is to make sure that the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency and NSCC are stewards of the Act. This is really an opportunity for us to do things differently - look at the different ways of which, if a young person is not going through to completion, why is that? We really are focused in on modernizing the agency, working collectively with our partners, and working with NSCC so that people know what their options are as well.

If they want to go into NSCC and understand the pathways of how they can navigate through to completion, that's one option. In my address, we had mentioned opportunities for youth - being youth apprentices - so how many youths are utilizing that pathway as well. I think there's a lot more that we can do. We have a focus on this. Again, working with the Department of Advanced Education, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, we can make sure that anyone in the province who wants to work in the skilled trades can understand all the options of how they can do that.

KELLY REGAN: Thank you for that answer. I think what concerns me is that people don't understand what their options are. I don't think kids get a lot of career advice in high school - or even elementary, they don't start thinking about it. I don't think they really understand what the options are. I don't think they understand how rewarding a skilled trade can be. I mean that in both the existential way and also in the financial way.

I have long felt that we need to do a better job and perhaps be a little more like Germany where those skilled trades are honoured and are the norm, rather than everyone going to university just because that's the default option.

In terms of underrepresented groups in the trades, back when dinosaurs roamed the Earth and I was the Minister of Labour and Advanced Education, we had programs for women, for African Nova Scotians, and Indigenous Nova Scotians at the shipyard to introduce them to trades in shipbuilding. I haven't heard anything about those in some time. I'm just wondering, do they still exist? Are they still ongoing? How many cohorts have we had? I haven't seen anything on them in ages.

JILL BALSER: I know that in your time, you'd have lots of knowledge that you can also share with me at some point. I know that this is a program that would be familiar to you.

Just in sharing some of the information, we know that when groups can work together as cohorts, they can be successful. We know that work is continuing. The idea of making sure that this pilot actually moves into a more permanent type of work, we want to

make sure that underrepresented groups, when they are working together as a cohort, can be successful. That work is ongoing and we're going to hopefully see that through to permanency from a pilot phase.

[1:30 p.m.]

KELLY REGAN: I'm wondering if the minister could provide to us information on how many cohorts we've seen go through in the last 19 months. You don't have to do it today or right now, just send it to us.

JILL BALSER: Sure.

KELLY REGAN: Okay. I realize it would take some time if we could do that.

We come to the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency where we have an interim CEO. Could you share with us what his qualifications were - what his familiarity is with the apprenticeship system? The previous CEO was nationally recognized and received the Premier's Award for her work in this particular area, and suddenly was not there anymore. I've already spoken to your deputy minister about this at committee, but I would just like to know what his qualifications are in terms of apprenticeship and his background on that.

JILL BALSER: Knowing that there was a vacancy over at the biggest branch within LSI, with Skills and Learning, as I mentioned in my remarks - to the member's first question, we had Labour Market Transfer Agreements that were being negotiated, so there was really important work.

The leader over at the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency moved a lateral position over to this biggest branch at a time when all eyes are on Skills and Learning in a way that we want to make sure that individuals who are upskilling adult learners have the access that they need to programs and services. But they too can see themselves in skilled trades opportunities should they want to.

Again, that branch is also supporting youth in a variety of ways. Perhaps this is an opportunity where Skills and Learning can work with other branches within the department and the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency in a way that hasn't been done before. That incredible leadership is going to need to lead that work moving forward, if we want to continue to grow the population, and see Nova Scotians thrive in any career that they choose.

Currently with the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency, the search for a CEO is under way. The completion - we can probably provide the timeline on that, but the search is still under way for that position to be filled.

KELLY REGAN: I find it interesting that you took someone out of a position where they were highly recognized and lauded because there was an internal search that was unsuccessful, and yet we're doing a national search for the position they left. You could have done a national search for the position that was now vacant. I will just say I find that interesting.

It appears to fit with a pattern that has been developing with the government - not even suggesting for a moment this has anything to do with the minister - where highly qualified women are being moved out unceremoniously. There was no word to anyone that this had happened. There was no announcement. We found out about it by accident. I will just say it's interesting and will leave it there.

In terms of women in the trades, we have talked about the MOST program in the House. I would just reiterate to the minister that women tend to come to trades at ages that are later than men. The average age for an apprentice is 28. For women, it's older. It's very well possible that women who are interested in the trades will actually miss out on the benefit of that program, which cuts off at age 30. If women are older when they are starting the trades, if they take time out for childbearing, they will miss out on that benefit.

I'm wondering how we arrived at the age of 30. Why is it the same for men and for women when, in fact - and I'm sorry, I don't know the statistics for non-binary persons - it would seem to me that if we were trying to encourage women to engage in the trades, then perhaps we should be looking at ways that we can encourage them beyond the traditional 30-year-old cut off here that we have for men. For example, Newfoundland and Labrador had - I don't know if they still do - an office of women in trades.

So there are things that we can do to encourage women to go into the trades. This is a really underutilized part of our community. Women are good tradespeople. The employers I talked to said women made really good tradespeople. They were meticulous. They cared. They didn't think somebody else was going to finish the job. They stayed until it was done. Women are responsible.

I'm just wondering: What led to the number 30? What else are you doing above and beyond Pathways to Shipbuilding to encourage women to engage in the trades?

JILL BALSER: I know that the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board in Question Period had answered and suggested that for the age of 30, we really want to focus on making sure that younger people in the province do see themselves as an opportunity to come back. We know, based on numbers, the province is getting younger, which is a good thing. It is really the first time that we're trying a program like this, and we want to be able to learn from those who have taken advantage of the program once it launches.

We do know from the Department of Finance and Treasury Board - where, again, they are leading the program - that we expect 7,600 workers to be eligible for this particular

program, but we want to see where it goes. We have expanded the scope of the program to include nurses, as well as the film industry and workers there. We'll see what happens, given the fact that it is its first year.

As mentioned in the marketing campaign, we focused our efforts around MOST, to really call back young Nova Scotians who are living in other provinces to see themselves back here. We know the narrative in the province is changing. For many years, younger people have been leaving because they didn't see themselves here in the province being successful, or they were told at a young age, You have to leave - there's nothing here for you. I can say that's what I also heard growing up in Digby. It was of course, You have to leave to be successful. That's not the case anymore.

I think when we're looking at women in the trades too, there are programs like Techsploration. That's for Grade 9 girls to be able to be in front of women who are doing amazing things. For myself, to be able to go and see - there was a stage full of women working in science and technology. I was in awe of the fact that these individuals are mentors to young girls in this province.

Programs like that can do incredible things. When we're talking also about getting younger people in the trades, that's an example of how we can do that. We also have to look at the needs of changing demographics. The member brought up some really important points. When we're thinking about cohorts, and about employers who are willing to go that extra mile to be welcoming, to make sure that women in the workplace are seen and heard, and that their needs are met.

There's a lot more work that we can do, but again, the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency, working with employers - we're going to make sure that everybody feels welcome when they're in the workplace.

KELLY REGAN: If we could get, when the numbers do come in - because this is the first year that people are eligible - a breakdown on how many tradespersons had applied under that particular program, and a gender breakdown. If we could get that, that would be helpful.

I'm very familiar with Techsploration. In fact, I did a member statement yesterday for my former riding president who was president of Techsploration at one time. I went to some of those events along with him too - all of which are helpful, but money helps women too. I will just leave that there.

I'll just flip over to the Workers' Compensation Board. Looking at the 2022 third quarter financial report, the funded ratio was currently at 90.6 per cent, and that was down from 106.4 per cent. I'm wondering what happened there. How did we end up there? Was it investments? Did we have a lot of injuries come in? Just wondering what happened there.

[1:45 p.m.]

JILL BALSER: We do know that with WCB's rates of being fully funded, it is a scope. In the third quarter that the member had referenced, they are still technically within that fully funded range. We work together to make sure that definition is what's in place. We know that with WCB being fully funded, there really are opportunities for change. We're working with WCB in alignment with what their priorities are, as well as with the departments. I am pleased to see that they do fall within that range of being fully funded, because there is an opportunity for some change.

We also know that part of that fluctuation is on global trends, so when global markets decline, there's going to be a fluctuation there. We're going to see, of course, with the impacts of Ukraine, that's probably another element that weighs in on that fluctuation. But again, they do fall within the current parameters of being fully funded still.

KELLY REGAN: I would just say that WCB and various ministers and staff, et cetera, worked really hard to make sure that organization returned to fully funded status after being just really in rough, rough shape for a while. I just want to underline that point with the minister because I know she will take it very seriously, and ensure that there isn't some mad spending spree that puts us back behind the eight ball once again.

Finally - because I'm now going to turn it over to my colleague who's going to ask the minister some questions about immigration - I will just make a pitch for serious illness leave. People who are facing the fight of their lives should not be worried about money during that time. They should be able to take EI and make sure that they can focus on healing.

I know the minister is well aware of what people face when they're facing a serious illness, so I would just urge the department to pass my bill, or bring one in very quickly that says the same thing. I don't care. I would just really like to make sure that we protect Nova Scotians and ensure that they get this leave. With that, I will pass my time over to my colleague.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

RAFAH DICONSTANZO: Sorry, I was asking questions in the Chamber then rushed here and I forgot my book. I'm going to start with numbers, if you don't mind. I see that last year, immigration and population growth, you spent \$14.41 million, and this year you've budgeted \$13.37 million, so it's less than last year. I also see funded staff has gone up from 43.3 positions to 60 positions. How can we have more staff when we budgeted less money? I'm confused.

JILL BALSER: Overall, within our immigration and population growth, we would have seen an increase in staff, as the member has mentioned, which is an incredible

investment in knowing that in order to meet the demands of our growing population, we need to have a team who's ready to respond. So that increase will allow for faster processing and folks who are dedicated to our immigration strain - so Atlantic Immigration Program officers.

Also, within the budget we would have seen a marketing amount that was for the efforts that I had mentioned that wrapped up in March 2023 - so just this year. There wasn't an increase there, which would be a reason why funding had decreased in the department. Overall, within the branch we would have seen an increase in \$405,000 to the overall budget.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: First, it's 17 positions that I see full-time, or let's say 16.5 positions from 43.5 to 60. You said we've had an increase of \$400,000. That doesn't cover that number of positions.

JILL BALSER: For the overall \$1.3 million, as mentioned, we had 12 new positions within the department, and an additional \$200,000 for settlement. So the overall settlement budget has now increased to \$1.6 million for settlement organizations to do the incredible work that they do.

That together was \$1.3 million, but as mentioned, the marketing campaign would not have been seen in this budget. That wrapped up. It was part of our previous budget, and that had wrapped up in March 2023. That would have been for \$1 million.

RAFAH DICONSTANZO: I think I'm more confused than when I started. You said you've increased it by \$1.3 million, and the marketing was \$1 million. That didn't run this year as well, right? So we reduce it by \$1 million from the \$14 million that we had, but still, 16.5 positions. What was the total cost of those positions - the salaries?

JILL BALSER: To the member, when we're looking at FTEs and funded staff from estimate to estimate, or budget to budget, we will see an increase, so that is those 12 individuals. With that came \$1 million for support to those staff, but as mentioned, it's going to be offset by the decrease in the marketing campaign that wasn't in this budget but was in the previous. That's where the net, I guess, would be seen in the difference.

Of course, when we're looking from estimate to forecast, the department is going to see retirements. We're going to see individuals and movement in that capacity, so we have to make sure that's accounted for. As we know, Immigration is such a unique and special division within the department, and we need to have the right people, so making sure we take the time to recruit - and it can often take a few months to fill vacancies. I think the piece to highlight here, of course, is the expansion of our team and those 12 individuals who are going to be supporting processing within the branch.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Out of the 12, how many have been hired, and how many of them will be responsible for fraud? My next question is in regard to that.

[2:00 p.m.]

JILL BALSER: I think just right off the top, I do want to correct myself. I had indicated the wrong number for the overall settlement budget, which is actually \$8.6 million. It's been increased by \$200,000 in this budget, so I just want to make sure that correction was made.

I'm very pleased to say that we're almost fully staffed and hired those 12 positions, two of which are dedicated to compliance.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Last Fall, the Auditor General released a report on immigration, and there were many things that she pointed out that the minister said she accepted. One of the biggest issues was fraud and that there wasn't training for staff to identify fraud. Has the department started to work on these recommendations from the Auditor General?

JILL BALSER: Within the department, we always had a focus on compliance and making sure that we have a team who's incredible and talented in the field of catching fraud. There's always been training for that within the branch. What the Auditor General wanted us to conduct was documentation, so making sure that we were documenting how that training was being conducted.

I'm pleased to say, of course, that we are well under way to implement the recommendations of the Auditor General in its entirety. I'm pleased to say that there has always been a focus on compliance and fraud within the department.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Maybe I can ask if you can give me four or five top issues that you're working with when it comes to compliance and fraud. What are you seeing the most?

JILL BALSER: As the member is probably aware, fraud comes up in a lot of different ways. We know that often it's either through an individual misrepresenting themselves within an application, or perhaps it could be a business that's misrepresenting. We know those are some of the areas in which we catch fraud within the department.

We're always leading with education. We want to make sure that even employers can catch some of this and help the department, because we want to make sure that, of course, there is compliance within all programs, and that individuals know the information they need to provide in making sure there is accurate documentation when that is happening. One of the priorities and focus is to put in place a new fraud reporting system,



so that we can work with employers to make sure that misrepresentation is caught when it does take place.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: For example, we know that for certain applications, they have to bring in so much money. What processes do you have? I also have heard many stories where they say they have the \$10,000 or the \$20,000, but it's actually borrowed money from friends, relatives, put in for a couple of days. Once they arrive here, there is no money in the account. What system do you have to track those?

JILL BALSER: Through our economic immigration stream, we know through PNP as well as the Atlantic Immigration Program, individuals are coming with job offers. That is an incredibly important part of the immigration streams we do offer. Knowing that when families and individuals choose a pathway that is best for them, that they're coming with the supports and services - they're coming here and attaching to the supports and services.

We do work with the federal government very closely on any application. Of course, they do conduct screening for fraud and for other things, working closely with the federal government.

In terms of other applications, we know that through our entrepreneurial stream there is a certain amount that an individual has to prove that they do have within their bank account in order to be eligible for our programs.

Again, through compliance and our new officers, we'll make sure that we are monitoring that and putting the focus on compliance, so that if there is fraud or misrepresentation, we will be able to catch it.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I wanted to talk about retention as well, but actually what I was focused on is students. In order to come and study here they need so much money, and they are the ones who are showing up and they don't have the money. It is very difficult for them. What is available once they show up as a student, but don't have the money? They're looking for jobs and we're hearing a lot of those stories. That is what I was focused on. Not people with a job application.

JILL BALSER: I appreciate the member for clarifying that. If it is in regard to international student applications, of course that would be with the Department of Advanced Education. We do know that students do need to prove that they have \$10,000 in a bank account in order to be eligible for our programs, but that would be with the Department of Advanced Education. I appreciate the member clarifying her point. Thank you.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Now, if I can move on to retention. We have many - and I've had at least three or four show up at my office and signing for them who are coming with a notary public or whatever signature they needed at the time. They're here from other

provinces, they're international students, but they're coming here because they can get the PR faster. The reputation is that Nova Scotia can give you PR the fastest.

How do we track how many of those are staying? The easiest way - you know if they're staying then they have to submit their tax return. How many of those have submitted tax returns?

JILL BALSER: We know that international students are part of our immigration strategy. We want to make sure that working with the post-secondary sector, and of course communities across this province, if international students are choosing to call Nova Scotia home, they have the ability to be able to do that. We also know that they make wonderful PR candidates as well.

[2:15 p.m.]

When someone has invested time and energy, and of course their education, into this province, we want to make sure that they are prioritized. We recently made a change to one of our EMPP streams that brought international graduates to Nova Scotia. We prioritized and made that change that you had to study in the post-secondary institution here in the province. We wanted to, again, make sure that international students who have studied here in the province are the priority.

We also know that there are incredible partners like EduNova, which I've mentioned, that have programs like Study and Stay Nova Scotia. That actually has an 86 per cent retention rate for students. It's a mentorship. When an individual who is new to the area is looking for those contacts outside of their school life, they can make those through a program like EduNova's Study and Stay Nova Scotia.

It takes all of us. We know that welcoming communities, welcoming schools, post-secondary having that ability for communities to connect, and for students to connect to communities is vitally important for retention. It's important to note that international students are part of that overall growth strategy that we have within the branch.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I want to stay on this, but I only have two minutes, and I have one more question about Cape Breton University. The program you spoke about - it's a very small number of the actual number of students who are coming here. Do we have any way of tracking who is coming just to get the PR because they can get it faster, and moving to other provinces? Is there a system?

THE CHAIR: Order. That would conclude this round of questioning for the Official Opposition.

The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

KENDRA COOMBES: Thank you. I'm glad we get to do this, minister. Let's start with the talk of - I only have so long. Feed Nova Scotia submitted their submission for this year's budget. They provided some things that they'd want to see in the budget. In that, they were recommending that the government support low-income workers by setting a higher minimum wage closer to a living wage.

I'm sure you're aware, as we all are, that the Minimum Wage Review Committee is in charge of recommending those wages each year. We were very glad. It was a very important thing to see that their latest recommendation will see us get to \$15 an hour sooner. I wish we had \$15 an hour a number of years ago, but here we are, and also see the CPI adjustments each year.

With the living wage being significantly higher than the province's minimum wage - for example in Cape Breton it's \$20, Annapolis is \$22.40, the southern region is \$22.55 and northern is \$20.40. I'm wondering if the minister is considering giving the committee a mandate to chart a path to a living wage.

HON. JILL BALSER: Thank you to the member. I'm pleased that we get a chance to do this as well. As the member has mentioned, we had the recommendations of the Minimum Wage Review Committee to set out a pathway to get to \$15 an hour faster. Now, with the rising cost of inflation and taking into consideration reports like the cost of living and other information that the department can provide, we know that they then showed a faster pathway to get to \$15, which we accepted.

We always want to make sure that we're taking a balanced approach, knowing that minimum wage impacts employers and workers across this province in a variety of different ways. So when we have representation, both as businesses as well as workers, they can have those discussions, and the department can provide the information that they would like to see in those negotiations and in those discussions. Again, meeting with the committee, knowing that it is a difficult conversation to have, we want to make sure that the committee has all the resources that they need to be able to come to a decision, and again, provide that recommendation to me as minister each year.

KENDRA COOMBES: As much as I'd like to accept that, what we're hearing from many workers with regard to why they're not into the force, it's because it's actually not feasible for them to go to work because the wage is so low. They want to work. They want higher wages because after all their bills are paid, they're left with nothing, especially if they have to pay for child care.

I think that's a consideration for why we're having a shortage in workers at the moment. I'd like to just put that in the minister's thoughts as well, as they mention this balanced approach. One of the reasons why we're having a worker shortage is because workers don't want to be paid less than what they're worth.

I'm just wondering, what activities is the department doing to work towards a higher minimum wage?

JILL BALSER: We know that the Minimum Wage Review Committee does meet regularly throughout the year to have these ongoing discussions to see what the trends are, to look at the recommendations from before, which is exactly what we saw happen this year. They went back and looked at the recommendations that they had brought forward in 2022, and made a different recommendation based on the global state that we're seeing.

We know that through that recommendation we also took time to hear from Nova Scotians - their reaction, their input, and their feedback - based on that recommendation. We know how important minimum wage is for workers and businesses, and striking that balance. We took a little more time to hear from both sides around how this recommendation would impact them.

It's important for Nova Scotia to also watch what other jurisdictions are doing so that we do have alignment on our minimum wage with the Atlantic Region. Those are ongoing conversations that happen nationally. When I have the opportunity to meet with my provincial, federal, and territorial partners across the country, we can have those types of discussions to see what the trends in minimum wage are across the country.

I think it's also important to note that we also know that businesses are stepping up and providing competitive wages. That's important for Nova Scotians to know - that we also have our Nova Scotia Works centres. If there are opportunities to upskill or reskill or look for a new career or a new occupation, those opportunities exist for anyone who might be seeking that type of employment support.

I just want to acknowledge that businesses are providing competitive wages. It is a competitive market. It is a bit of a different time that we find ourselves in, knowing that we have more jobs than people right now in the province, which is another reason why immigration within the department is so important.

We also know that we have Nova Scotians who need to attach to the workforce, so making sure that they have the services they need to be able to do that - or re-enter, if there's been a period of time when someone may have been off work.

All of that combined is the focus of the department, but of course, making sure that we're seeing what other jurisdictions are doing is important too.

KENDRA COOMBES: Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Quebec, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, British Columbia and the federal government allow automatic union certification after a majority of employees sign a membership card. The threshold ranges from 50 per cent in the federal to 65 per cent in Manitoba. Research shows that this second step in certification type has a hindrance on union certification, so we're looking at

a single step process for union certification. This was the norm in most provinces until governments began to roll it back in the 1990s. Is this department looking at removing this second step, which makes it incredibly difficult for workers to unionize and have the protection of the union?

JILL BALSER: I am also hoping that we'll have the opportunity to be able to discuss the bill that was brought forward too. Knowing that, I think the question is framed around what is in that proposed piece of legislation. Having a chance for a further discussion to better understand the question would be important to me.

[2:30 p.m.]

We also know that if we pursue any decision in that type of direction, we would have to do consultation with many of our stakeholders and communities as well. At this point in time, there is no decision or discussion, but it is one that perhaps the member and I can look at that bill in more detail.

KENDRA COOMBES: I don't think the minister is going to get any pushback from the unions who are looking for this. As I said, that second step is also not the way of union busting without union busting.

The federal government is working on a just transition for workers to create good quality green jobs across the province. Is the minister working with her federal colleagues on this, and if so, what are this province's contributions?

JILL BALSER: Thank you to the member for the important question. We know with the changing skill set and economy that we're seeing, and the focus on new opportunities, we want to make sure that the Nova Scotia apprenticeship curriculum that is offered is also modern and up to standards. Again, as industry changes, we're making sure that sectors are also moving in that direction as well.

We also have programs. The Workplace Initiatives one through the Skills and Learning Branch is a perfect example of how individuals can reskill and upskill into a changing economy. So as new technology and new trades are moving into that direction - let's just say our focus on green hydrogen as an example, being able to introduce the bill that is going to allow mega projects to happen - we know that we need a workforce that's going to be ready to be able to take on that work.

Skills and Learning, being one of the biggest branches within the department, has that focus on making sure individuals see themselves in that type of work, so that if they're moving from one sector of industry to another, we have those supports and resources in place to be able to do that.

It is quite well-timed in the fact that I am meeting with the federal minister, as well as provincial and territorial ministers, in the coming weeks to be able to discuss what labour mobility can even look like. Another opportunity we're very pleased with is within the federal budget of seeing investments in labour, and looking forward to what those details will be with the Labour Market Transfer Agreements.

I think there's incredible opportunity to work with the federal government, and making sure that programs and services are aligned with the needs of Nova Scotian workers and businesses within the province.

KENDRA COOMBES: I guess my question is: Do we have a price tag on how much the Province of Nova Scotia has contributed to Just Transition for workers?

JILL BALSER: We know that, of course, Nova Scotia's economy is growing, our population is growing, our workforce is growing, and we need to make sure that we are making the investments to help support that just transition for workers. Knowing that the focus of Skills and Learning is to be able to do just that, providing programs through our branch, as well as Nova Scotia work sites across the province to be able to help within that work. And Employment Nova Scotia too, has many programs that we can attach individuals to work and employers to help find workers as well.

A focus of the department is to make sure that the workforce is meeting the needs of today and tomorrow and into the future. We will make sure that we're working, again, closely with our federal partners to ensure that that happens in all sectors.

KENDRA COOMBES: I wouldn't be me and I wouldn't be a good labour critic if I didn't ask about paid sick days. Not only has COVID taught us this, but Dr. Strang has said many times in many hearings that people should stay home when they're sick and mechanisms would be a good idea to have in place so that they can stay home. Is the department looking at changing the Labour Standards Code to provide employer-paid sick days?

JILL BALSER: Thank you to the member for the question, knowing this one would definitely be one that the member would raise and has, and passionately so, which I commend.

As with any labour issue, of course, we were always going to consult and make sure that if a decision was to be made to look at paid sick days, we would talk to businesses, talk to Nova Scotians, talk to communities and sectors to make sure that we do get that wholesome understanding of what is possible. As I've mentioned, meeting with federal and provincial colleagues, I know that this is going to be an item that is up for discussion.

I think everyone is sort of looking at, if we are to implement something, how we do this, what other regions are doing and knowing that, that jurisdictional scan will be

really important. Although there's no decision at this point in time, it is one that we're monitoring and we're looking at. Knowing that it is important to the member what comes out of those discussions, I'll be happy to share.

KENDRA COOMBES: I now want to turn to WCB and OH&S, and I know the minister and I have had many, many conversations, and my office has provided her with many, many issues on this. Let's talk about this. We've come a long way in developing our strategies to keep safe at work but we still have a long way to go, particularly in protecting workers' mental health and wellness.

Nova Scotia remains the only jurisdiction in the country without explicit psychological health and safety protections in the workplace. People should not have to face a mental injury at work just to make a living. We see it not only in the private sector but we see it in our public sector quite a lot. I want to start with a few questions about the presumptive benefits for PTSD.

It is great that this protection exists for many frontline workers. Experts and workers have been asking for years for the Workers Compensation update to include child protection workers. That's all workers who fall under the child protective/child welfare banner. The Department of Community Services has committed to making this change. My question is: When will the government make this change?

JILL BALSER: Sorry to the member. I just wanted some clarification. If you don't mind just repeating the question.

KENDRA COOMBES: With PTSD, Community Services has said that they want to put it in the Act for child welfare protection workers. They've made the commitment a few times over the last number of years. I'm just wondering: When is this change going to be made?

JILL BALSER: I will have a follow-up conversation, of course, with the Minister of Community Services just on that point. For any worker under WCB, we know that post-traumatic stress disorder is covered, but with WCB being in an opportunity where it is fully funded, we know that there is opportunity for change.

With the department and the WCB, the alignment around prioritizing mental health, and of course, psychological health in the workplace is a priority and it is important. What we've learned from the pandemic is we know that we have to focus on workers' mental health as well as their physical health. For the Safety branch, we're also looking at ways in which we can work with employers to ensure that they have safe workplaces: being proactive in prevention, making sure that there are safety plans in place, making sure that employees know their rights and employers know that there is a resource within the department to help them with those plans for safety, and that we have a team that is available for anyone who may have questions around safety as a whole across the province.

[2:45 p.m.]

KENDRA COOMBES: I just want to say to the minister the concept is presumptive coverage so that these workers do not have to keep proving that their injury occurred at work. Because they are child protective workers, if anyone has ever had anything to do with child protection, that is very heavy and there's a lot happening there. I just wanted to (unintelligible) on the presumptive coverage part because that is an important aspect within DCS.

For people who fall under one of the frontline worker categories and have a PTSD diagnosis - so these are already our presumptive workers who fall under those - what are some of the reasons that they may be denied coverage?

JILL BALSER: I think it's important. Of course, as minister I can't weigh in on claims or the denial of why someone wouldn't see their WCB claim go through. But of course, as the member has shared stories, we know that there is an opportunity for change within the WCB system. I think the alignment with the Board on our strategic priorities, again, psychological health and the safety, mental health for workers, are some of those priorities.

We want to make sure that if we are to look at ways in which the system can be improved, we do that with a thoughtful approach that includes employers as well as employees. We have to make sure that this system in its wholeness is intended to do what it needs to do, and that is to support workers as well as employers.

We'll take this opportunity to share that under the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, we are conducting a review and working with stakeholders who will represent workers as well as employers, the department, WCB on a review of the whole system, knowing that the last time WCB was looked at in this way has been quite some time ago.

We do know some of the issues and we know what some folks are going to bring forward, but there will be an opportunity for individuals to weigh in on what they see as improvements and possible improvements. That work is going to be conducted in the near future, but I think it is an opportunity to really dive in and hear from Nova Scotians on their concerns with the overall system.

KENDRA COOMBES: The minister just mentioned conducting a review. I'm just going to skip over a few questions and get to this one. Do we have a process set yet? Do we have timetables? Do we have target dates? Has there been a start of a list of stakeholders who they need to be in consultation with?

JILL BALSER: The work is really in its really early stages at this point in time. Knowing that this is an opportunity where WCB is fully funded, we want to make sure that



we have a review committee that is representative of employers as well as employees. We'll have folks from the department as well as WCB on that review committee to look at issues and opportunities all at the same time for that future change.

It is still early stages. Timelines are going to be set. We're taking this work very seriously, knowing the priority and the urgency that we're feeling within changes that need to be implemented. When there's something to report, I'll be sure the member knows at that point in time.

KENDRA COOMBES: My next question on this topic, because I understand it's in its infant stages: Is there a commitment in the budget for this work? Is there money put aside to do this type of work?

JILL BALSER: If there are financial costs to this work, it will be absorbed within the budget.

KENDRA COOMBES: Could the minister just clarify something? Did you say that the review began in 2020? Did I hear that correctly?

JILL BALSER: If I get the name of the report wrong, I think the WCB, the first time it was - it would have been 2022, I believe. If I had mentioned 2020, that would have been a mistake.

KENDRA COOMBES: I was going to wonder why it was still in its infant stages three years in. What's been going on for the last three years?

I want to go back now to denials, because you sent me down my rabbit hole of one of my favourite things, and that's looking at WCB review. What is the per cent of applicants in the category of frontline workers with PTSD diagnoses who have been denied coverage? Do we have - and if we don't, that's okay, if you can get it to me - if there is something, table it before the end of the sitting.

JILL BALSER: I'll have to see where we can get that information. I don't have it for the member right now. We'll get that information for the member.

KENDRA COOMBES: Let's continue on psychological harm. Nova Scotia is the only jurisdiction without psychological health and safety protections in the workplace. It's good to have policies, resources, supports, education - but the fact remains that without protection enshrined in law, employers are not required to guard against psychological injury, and employees are not entitled to protection should an injury occur at the workplace. What will the government do to make these changes to our Occupational Health and Safety legislation, and when?

JILL BALSER: As the member mentioned, there is no protection within Nova Scotia at this point in time, but that work will be part of the review committee's responsibility. We do know that if change is going to be made, it will require legislative changes. Knowing that the review committee's work is a priority, we want to make sure that it's conducted thoughtfully with as many stakeholders and individuals as it needs but legislative changes will have to take place. We don't have a timeline at this point in time, but we know that this will be a discussion the review committee will be having.

KENDRA COOMBES: We know that one significant site of psychological harm at work stems from systemic racism and discrimination in the workplace. What work is being done on this?

JILL BALSER: Thank you to the member for this important question. I think the emphasis on making sure that workplaces are indeed welcoming, but truly welcoming. When we're thinking about our growing and changing population, employers also come forward to the department and ask those types of questions. If I'm hiring someone from a different country, what does that look like in practice?

We want to make sure that employers are aware of cultural competency training that the department offers, but we really need to go a step beyond to make sure that when individuals are coming to Nova Scotia, that they feel welcome in every way possible. That starts with making sure that that's being seen and felt in the workplace.

We have a focus on making sure that employers have that information, communities are welcoming, and that we're doing everything we can to make sure that individuals connect to employment and have the services and supports they need.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm moving on, but I just want to make this comment to the minister: Just remember that it's not just newcomers who are immigrating to our country, it's Nova Scotians who face this every day. I'd be remiss if I just didn't put that out there.

A Workers Compensation Appeals Tribunal's - the WCAT, as I know it - decision in 2019 found that the exclusion of gradual onset stress claims from the definition of accident in the WCA infringes on Section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Currently compensation is provided only for acute traumatic stress. Will the legislation be updated to include gradual onset stress?

JILL BALSER: We are looking into that right now. That is something that we are looking into.

KENDRA COOMBES: Is there a timeline to when we'll see something?

JILL BALSER: If changes are made within that scope, we want to make sure that it is aligned to the review committee's work. We don't have a timeline at this point in time to be able to share. Again, it will be another topic for the review committee to discuss.

KENDRA COOMBES: Going on the same kind of category, with regards to some workers and psychological injury, gradual onset stress, PTSD, are there any conversations around eliminating statute-barred? You might need it explained. Statute-barred is basically if a person who has been diagnosed with PTSD or other mental health stresses only have so long to actually submit forms. As you know, some people are healing in that time that they get their diagnosis or coming to terms with their diagnosis. Just wondering if that has been a conversation.

JILL BALSER: Thank you to the member for that question and also that explanation. I think it's another important topic that we can bring forward to the review committee for further discussion.

KENDRA COOMBES: The minister just now mentioned the review committee. I'm wondering if the minister could tell me who is a part or what organizations are a part of this review committee that keeps being mentioned?

JILL BALSER: The intention behind the review committee, of course, is it's going to have representation from employers as well as employees. We know that we're going to have stakeholders who are also going to be involved who are close to this work, department members as well as WCB. We will be happy to share when all that information is ready to be launched. I will make sure that the member is aware when that time does come.

KENDRA COOMBES: Has the committee been formed yet? This is just an idea. I'm just trying to get a sense here - I'm not trying to be facetious - but has it been formed, this committee?

JILL BALSER: Government has given the direction that this is an opportunity. We can strike up this review committee to be able to look at possible WCB changes. We are going to make sure that it's going to be comprised of employers, businesses, WCB, but it's still in its very early stages. Given the direction to be able to move in this way is important.

We know that actually other jurisdictions have done something very similar and seen success. Being able to mirror that work, we know that there are opportunities for change. Hearing stories from constituents and knowing that, again, that's the type of information that can be brought forward to the committee for discussion, it's going to be robust. It's going to be a lot of work, but it is very important and timely that we get it done and get it done right.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm just going to assume that it's not fully formed yet. I'm just going to go under that assumption and so I'm just going to move along.

[3:00 p.m.]

Our office received a Freedom of Information that contained a briefing note from last year that the Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration - about psychological health and safety. The note explains: "The International Labour Organization, which Canada is a part of, Convention 190, recognizes the right of everyone to a world of work free from violent and harassment." Much of the note is redacted, but it appears to suggest that Nova Scotia's lack of workplace psychological safety policy is inconsistent with Canada's work to ratify the convention and may even be hindering the work.

Can the minister respond to that concern, that our federal government is attempting to align with the international work on workplace mental health and safety while Nova Scotia is lagging behind?

JILL BALSER: The federal government has confirmed that Nova Scotia is in alignment with this and it is going to be a topic of discussion at the upcoming federal-provincial-territorial meetings. Just to also emphasize the importance, of course, of safe and welcoming workplaces for the department as well as the Province.

KENDRA COOMBES: Going on this type of review and what this type of committee is going to be looking at, there's a broad range of issues with WCB framework. The minister and I have discussed these quite a bit and have seen many e-mails from me on these topics. I'm very passionate about it.

There is this issue with subcontractor coverage where subcontractors are required to purchase their own coverage, but it is not expensive enough to provide adequate insurance in the event of an injury. This can condemn an injured subcontractor to a life of basically poverty. I'm just wondering: Is the department working on this issue?

JILL BALSER: I know the member is passionate and I feel the member could provide a list for the review committee to look at. (Laughs) I do appreciate that very much. This will have to be - or this could be another topic. I know the member and I can have a further discussion about the review committee and how other items can be discussed. I do appreciate everything the member has brought forward and this could be part of that review as well.

KENDRA COOMBES: Continuing on in that vein, Minister, when people are on WCB, they lose coverage for medical issues not related to their injury. This means they no longer have private insurance to cover things such as medications. Is the department looking into this?

JILL BALSER: That's another reason why I'm so appreciative that staff is here today. For anything the member has brought forward, we can follow up.

KENDRA COOMBES: Again in this vein, let's keep on going. WCB does not cover people over 65. Nova Scotia no longer has a mandatory retirement age and I believe that is why stopping the WCB coverage over 65 was in place is maybe my understanding of this. The moment they turn 65 is the time that they lose their benefits. Is the department looking at this?

This is a real issue. It's affecting, as the minister knows, miners. Many DEVCO miners are also in this position where they are losing their coverage and there's a bill on the table. My bill is on the table for that one. Besides the miners, I want to talk about all Nova Scotia. Are we looking at this for all Nova Scotians, and also, are we looking at my bill?

JILL BALSER: Again, I'll defer that to staff to follow up.

KENDRA COOMBES: The income caps have also been criticized as being too low when assessing benefits under WCB, especially with the rising costs. This means people injured at work receive far less compensation after injury. Is the department looking into this?

JILL BALSER: I think the staff is going to have its work cut out for them. I do appreciate everything that the member has brought forward, but this will be another one I defer to the team for further discussion.

KENDRA COOMBES: I want to go back to the coverage of 65. I've had questions come to me about widows of miners who - their spouses died, they were receiving WCB benefits, and once the miner has passed away, the WCB benefit is cut off to the widow or widower. I was just wondering: Are we looking into this issue?

JILL BALSER: Having the discussion today just really does prove the wholesome and robust need to be able to review WCB in many different ways and shapes, and the items and issues that the member has brought forward - this will just be another to add to the list and take to the team as well. But I do appreciate the member bringing forward all the questions the member has today.

KENDRA COOMBES: I have been hearing regular stories, and I know I have shared many of these with the minister, one issue being people who are having a really hard time on WCB, facing many issues. One of those issues is about conflicting medical advice and expertise impacting people and their WCB claims, with WCB doctors often overruling doctors outside WCB. That would be anything from an ortho doctor being overruled by a WCB doctor, a surgeon being overruled by a WCB doctor, a psychiatrist or psychologist being overruled by a WCB doctor. I'm wondering: Is the department looking at this issue?

JILL BALSER: This is an issue that I am aware of and speaking with the member about it. Again, it will be one that the department can follow up with for further discussion and knowing that the review committee is going to look at WCB and its system in its entirety and making sure that it is a system that works for employers as well as employees, knowing that there is an opportunity, perhaps, that even reducing red tape might help with this, but we know that there is a further review that will be under way and we can look at this further.

KENDRA COOMBES: I just want to put the urgency on the department because there are people who are taking MAiD because of these issues. I know I've provided the minister with some issues. This is a tragedy, should it occur that people have taken MAiD because of this issue.

The appeals process is considerably lengthy as well, meaning that people are left in limbo for months or years waiting for a decision. Is the department looking into this issue?

JILL BALSER: There is actually a review of the appeals process that's under way within the department currently.

KENDRA COOMBES: Do you have a timetable on that?

JILL BALSER: In anticipation of that follow-up question, we know that the review should be wrapping up within a few months.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm just trying to find a couple of questions that might fit into this. I know there was an announcement regarding modular housing for health care workers and for others. I'm wondering how many of those modulars do you expect to have - will it be through your department that you'll have access to and how will they be distributed this Summer?

JILL BALSER: My colleagues, of course, over at Municipal Affairs and Housing are leading this particular project, but the department is excited to be part of that work. Knowing that when we met with the construction sector, they said they have infinite need for workers, but also where are they going to be housed? They also provided some innovative ideas around how we can look at housing in temporary ways to help bring the skilled workers that we need to build housing and other infrastructure.

I'm pleased to be working alongside the minister in that department on this particular piece of work and seeing where it can go, but also knowing that industry also has some innovative ideas as well, and we look forward to working closely with them on some other ideas.

LISA LACHANCE: Perhaps we can take this up on Tuesday, in terms of what does that mean working with - and how will those - I want concrete . . .

[3:15 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: Order. It is now 3:16 p.m. That concludes the Subcommittee's consideration of Estimates for today. The Subcommittee will resume consideration when the House resolves itself into Committee of the Whole on Supply. For those of us who don't have to go back to the Legislature, have a Happy Easter. For the rest of us, please return to your seats in the Legislature to continue. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 3:17 p.m.]