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**Official Report
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(Hansard)**

SP-54

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des débats
(Hansard)**

SP-54

**Standing Committee on
Social Policy**

**Comité permanent de
la politique sociale**

Estimates
Ministry for Seniors
and Accessibility

Budget des dépenses
Ministère des Services aux aînés
et de l'Accessibilité

1st Session
43rd Parliament
Monday 4 November 2024

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43^e législature
Lundi 4 novembre 2024

Chair: Christine Hogarth
Clerk: Lesley Flores

Présidente : Christine Hogarth
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL POLICY

COMITÉ PERMANENT DE LA POLITIQUE SOCIALE

Monday 4 November 2024

Lundi 4 novembre 2024

The committee met at 1300 in committee room 2.

ESTIMATES

MINISTRY FOR SENIORS AND ACCESSIBILITY

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Good afternoon, everyone. The Standing Committee on Social Policy will now come to order. We are meeting to consider the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility for a total of two hours.

We are joined today by staff from Hansard, broadcast and recording, and legislative research. From the ministry, we are joined by the Honourable Raymond Cho, Minister for Seniors and Accessibility; Deputy Minister Melissa Thomson; and ministry officials and staff.

As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address. I trust that the deputy minister has arranged to have these hearings closely monitored with respect to questions raised so that the ministry can respond accordingly. If you wish, you may verify the questions and issues being tracked by the research officer at the end of your appearance.

Are there any questions from the members before we begin? Seeing none, I am now required to call vote 3501, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister for Seniors and Accessibility.

Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Good afternoon, everyone. I would like to start by thanking committee members for your valuable work. I would also like to thank Deputy Minister Thomson and the entire Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility leadership team.

We envision a province where seniors can live in their community of choice, making new connections and staying independent for as long as possible. We envision a province where people with disabilities can develop skills, find meaningful employment and participate in our communities without barriers.

To accomplish this, we provide funding for community organizations, municipalities and other stakeholders to deliver programs and services for seniors and people with disabilities. My ministry provides funding for many programs that reduce social isolation among seniors by help-

ing them stay active, socially connected and able to participate in our communities.

We have a robust network of seniors active living centre—SALC—programs across Ontario, delivering a variety of programs including book clubs, fitness classes, health and wellness services, social activities and other special events.

This year, we are investing approximately \$15 million to support over 300 programs across the province. This is an increase of \$1 million from last year, supporting our SALC programs getting a funding increase from \$42,700 to up to \$50,000. And, as announced last week in the 2024 fall economic statement, we are investing an additional \$17 million over the next three years to expand access to services and activities for seniors through 100 new SALC programs across the province.

Due to the overwhelming success of the program, we made changes to the Seniors Active Living Centres Act in June 2024. These changes aim to improve access for older Ontarians in communities that are underserved by the SALC program by expanding the types of organizations that can support SALC programs in their communities. With the new regulation, local and community-based organizations, including Legions and the Lions Club, can now partner to operate a SALC.

SALCs promote wellness and social connection and reduce ageism, helping seniors to stay active, independent and engaged in our communities. We issued a call for proposals in July 2024, inviting organizations in areas without access to SALC programs and those that service specific underserved populations to apply.

Our SALC programs are complemented by Seniors Active Living Fairs. Each year, fairs are held across the province in partnership with the Older Adult Centres' Association of Ontario, reaching thousands of seniors. These fairs are an important way to raise awareness about programs, services and information available to seniors across Ontario. In 2024-25, we are investing up to \$429,500 to deliver over 100 in-person and virtual fairs, providing more opportunities for seniors to learn about supports and programs in our communities.

My ministry also supports local community groups, not-for-profit organizations, municipalities, and Indigenous communities and organizations through our annual Seniors Community Grant Program. Every year, hundreds of local organizations receive grants of up to \$25,000 to run local projects that improve the well-being and the

social engagement of seniors across Ontario. Since 2018, the ministry has invested over \$34 million in the Seniors Community Grant Program, supporting over 1,800 grassroots projects that have helped seniors stay socially and physically active in their communities.

This year, we've had the opportunity to tour the province, attend events and meet with many seniors taking part in programs made possible by funding from our government. Each experience is meaningful to me because it shows first-hand how our small, but mighty ministry is accomplishing its goal to support the well-being of Ontario's seniors.

Ontario also has many financial, health and housing supports to help seniors and people with disabilities live independently and at home.

The Ontario Seniors Care at Home Tax Credit helps seniors aged 70 and older with eligible medical expenses, including expenses that support aging at home. These include attendant care; assistive breathing devices; dental; vision, hearing and working aids. Eligible recipients can receive up to 25% of their claimable medical expenses up to \$6,000, for a maximum credit of \$1,500.

My ministry also provides the funding for the Home and Vehicle Modifications Program, run by March of Dimes Canada. This program helps eligible individuals with a mobility restriction to continue living safely in their homes, participate in their community and avoid job loss. Eligible individuals may receive grants of up to \$15,000 for home modifications and/or up to \$15,000 for vehicle modifications every 10 years. This program has changed many lives for the better, which is why, starting in 2022, we increased the budget by 50%, bringing the total funding available to \$15.6 million per year. In 2023-24, the Home and Vehicle Modifications Program supported over 2,000 individuals with disabilities in making their homes and vehicles more accessible.

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Now, I'd like to speak about programs and services for people with disabilities. Before I do, I want to talk briefly about Ontario's 28th Lieutenant Governor, the Honourable David C. Onley. He was a friend of mine and a true champion of accessibility who is greatly missed. When I was appointed as Ontario's first Minister for Seniors and Accessibility in 2018, Mr. Onley said to me, "The best thing you can do for people with a disability is to create a province where meaningful jobs and proper training are a reality for the accessibility community."

I agree. We must be leaders in helping people with disabilities gain meaningful employment and wholly participate in our communities and the economy. People with disabilities offer unique skills and deliver their experience, which provides valuable perspectives and benefits to organizations.

We know that people with disabilities have so much to contribute. We celebrate and support this through many initiatives. This includes our work with the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development to identify opportunities to promote and target employment programs to people with disabilities, and all the others.

Through the Skills Development Fund, we have invested \$465 million in 341 projects that support people with disabilities, aiming to serve over 396,000 clients.

This year alone, the Skills Development Fund is investing \$6.5 million that will support more than 3,770 people with disabilities to find meaningful employment in their communities. In addition, we promote employment for young people with disabilities through the Youth Job Connection program. Our EnAbling Change program provides organizations with the funding to create more accessible environments for all Ontarians to live, work and engage. The program provides up to \$1.5 million annually for projects that help create equitable opportunities in the labour market, drive a culture of respect and dignity for people with disabilities, and support greater awareness of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, or AODA.

Creating more inclusive, accessible municipalities is also a priority for our government. That's why we introduced the Inclusive Community Grants Program in 2020. These grants provide municipalities, non-profit organizations and Indigenous communities with up to \$60,000 for local projects that will help older adults and people with disabilities participate in community life. Since then, this initiative has provided over \$5 million to support 107 projects promoting inclusivity and accessibility throughout Ontario, including accessibility upgrades in municipal parks, outdoor spaces and beaches.

At MSAA, we take a whole-of-government approach to embedding accessibility into programs and services. Much of this work is built on the foundation of the AODA. The AODA advances accessibility by identifying, removing and preventing barriers to access for people with disabilities. As part of this work, the government has developed and implemented accessibility standards in five key areas: customer services, information and communication, employment, transportation and the design of public spaces. Plus, the AODA sets out the province's requirements to help municipalities and publicly funded organizations make their services facilities accessible.

Ontario is leading the largest public transit expansion in North America. This includes building the Ontario Line and the Scarborough subway extension, bringing back the Northlander, GO expansion and the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program funding, which has helped to purchase over 2,200 accessible buses. Transit funding programs require that any transit vehicles purchased must be accessible, ensuring better public transportation access for people with a disability throughout Ontario.

Each year, Ontario school boards are allocated approximately \$1.4 billion to renew and improve school buildings and sites, including to improve accessibility in existing schools. The Ministry of Health invests over \$500 million a year in the Assistive Devices Program, ADP, which supports persons with disabilities with their mobility needs. Ontario invests annually in accessibility projects as part of the Partner Facility Renewal Program, supporting building upgrades to maintain and modernize facilities that provide vital community programs and services.

In the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, Ontario committed to ensuring that best efforts were made to achieve the highest applicable accessibility standard in its respective jurisdiction for all projects.

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In 2020, Ontario partnered with the Rick Hansen Foundation to assess and certify 250 municipal buildings based on the foundation's accessibility rating. Of these sites, 206 received the RHF Accessibility Certification and 21 achieved the RHF Accessibility Gold certification—

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): One minute left, Minister.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay.

This past year, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities invested more than \$170 million in repairs and renewal at Ontario college and university campuses, including some AODA-related improvements. The ministry is also investing approximately \$55 million in publicly assisted colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes to support students with disabilities. This funding supports special purpose grants, including accessibility funds for students with disabilities, with an annual budget of \$32.7 million.

Since 2018, Ontario has been focused on ways to meet and go beyond AODA standards. Community by community, project by project, we are making Ontario more accessible—

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Excuse me, Minister. That's your time for today, but we just want to thank you very much for your presentation.

Now, we're going to begin with questions and answers in rotations of 20 minutes for the official opposition, 10 minutes for the independent member and 20 minutes for the government members for the remaining time allotted. As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

For the deputy minister, assistant deputy ministers and ministry staff: Please state your name and title when you're called to speak, so that the proceedings can be accurately recorded in Hansard.

I will start with the official opposition.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: First of all, I want to congratulate the ministry on the successful SALC program. It's hard for me to talk to you when I'm—I'll try and balance that.

Just for clarification, am I correct in understanding that it no longer just has to go through a professionally run organization, but volunteer-run organizations can also apply for SALC funding? I believe that's what you said. You said there were changes as of last June 2024? Did I understand that correctly?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for the question. By the way, I'm a super senior, and like most super seniors, I have a hearing issue, so sometimes I may ask you the question again.

I'd like to refer that question to my deputy minister.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Thank you very much. Melissa Thomson, deputy minister at the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility.

Yes, that's right. We expanded who could run SALCs to include organizations such as Legions and others in order to broaden the access. The government wanted to ensure that there were programs in as many communities as possible and partnering with as many community organizations as possible. So that's why the government made that change.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Is it correct the overall budget has been increased by 0.4%?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Deputy, could you respond to the question?

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Absolutely. Yes, you'll see that some of our programs were undersubscribed: for example, tax credits. We forecast what we think will be the take-up, but we can't know the use of tax credits necessarily. So you'll see some undersubscription of tax credits and the additional investments last years in programs like SALCs, for example.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario: Pre-COVID, their funding was \$900,000 a year, and then it was cut during COVID to \$800,000. It's gone up a little bit since then. It's at \$862,900. They do incredible work. Is this funding coming from the ministry? I'm wondering why it has not been returned at least to its pre-COVID levels.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for the question. The government focused on three areas to prevent elder abuse: First, training of front-line staff; second, raising awareness through public education; third, coordination of community relief. Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario, EAPO, provides resources to help prevent and address financial abuse—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I'm just going to take my time back here. I know what they do, but my question is: Why has the funding not been returned to pre-COVID levels? They're having extreme difficulty hanging on to staff and they rely on volunteers, but when they first approached me—which is now two and a half years ago—they were really, really struggling. I'm sure that they are still struggling, because their funding was cut. I'm not sure what the rationale was, but it's certainly not meeting the need and it's not addressing the inflationary costs that everyone is dealing with.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for the specific question. Deputy, would you like to respond?

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Happy to. A quick point of clarification: I think you had a number that's different than mine. I have \$866,785. Certainly, we continue that collaboration with them directly, and that amount supports almost 45,000 individuals. As you know, we rely on them very much for training front-line staff and public awareness programs that are really important as part of our suite of elder abuse supports, but there are others as well. Certainly, that funding is continued in out years.

My assistant deputy minister, Michèle Sanborn, can speak to the changes and fluctuations between now and before COVID.

Ms. Michèle Sanborn: Michèle Sanborn, assistant deputy minister, policy, programs and strategic partner-

ships. We can look into that. It might be that they did receive some COVID funding to do something during COVID.

But I do want to add that elder abuse is a package. EAPO has a role. We also support the Seniors Safety Line. We support French-language services through FARFO, and we have funded Action ontarienne contre la violence faite aux femmes. We fund across all of those things to address elder abuse prevention.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay. I will conclude this section to say that I don't think they are getting the funding that they need. During COVID, elder abuse cases went up, I believe, 275% and I don't think that that has gone backwards in that time. I would like to recommend that that consideration be given to raising the amount of support that they get.

I have a number of questions but I want to actually look at this: It's less a financial question, but it's a very important one about the illegal use of the Trespass to Property Act, something I raised last year and I've raised in the House many, many times. There needs to be direction from the government to address this. In 2021, the House voted unanimously in support of motion 129, called Voula's Law. The idea of that was to prevent institutions of congregating living, whether they're seniors, retirement homes, long-term-care or group homes for people with disabilities—those institutions are frequently using the Trespass to Property Act to keep people from visiting their loved ones in those facilities—

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Excuse me, MPP Vaugeois. This is a policy matter. We want to stick with the estimates, please.

M^{me} France Gélinas: How much would it cost to get that done?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay, that's a good question: How much would it cost to get that done? What we need is a letter to every single organization clarifying the correct and incorrect use of that law. Is that something that could be built into the budget?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Point of order.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: That's a question to be put to the Attorney General. It doesn't fall under the purview of this ministry.

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MPP Lise Vaugeois: If this ministry is responsible for the well-being of seniors and their quality of life, then it does fit. It's certainly in the mandate of this ministry to be looking after quality of life. There are a lot of programs that are not necessarily delivered by this ministry, but there is a shared responsibility and accountability toward the well-being of seniors.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): We have a point of order on the floor saying this belongs with the Attorney General. Did you want to tie it to the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Yes. The Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility is quite explicit in looking out for the well-being of seniors, their quality of life. If their care-

givers are not allowed to enter the premises to look after them because they make too much of a fuss—

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): MPP, this is also a policy issue; this is not an estimates question.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Right, but there is a question as to whether the budget could be put toward actually looking after this issue.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: I will refer that question to my DM.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: I can't opine, obviously, on whether or not it would be included in the budget, but I can certainly say that we do work very, very closely with homes on care standards, as you know, in homes. That is something that we work with the RHRA on, as well, and is something that we in the ministry and the government are very actively engaged on, in very constant dialogue.

Certainly, the MAG legislation specifically, I can't speak to, but I know Assistant Deputy Minister Michèle Sanborn also wanted to add in a little bit on this piece as well—not so much the budget piece and not so much the MAG legislation, but around care.

Ms. Michèle Sanborn: I did just want to clarify the role of the RHRA, the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority. They did issue a memo on this.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: A long time ago.

Ms. Michèle Sanborn: Yes, they did. But I think what they conveyed in that was the rights of the residents of retirement homes and their families to be shielded from any retaliatory action, and to re-emphasize the role of the RHRA and its ability to accept and address any complaints if a family or if a resident felt that there were retaliatory actions. I just did want to add that, in terms of the ministry's goal overseeing the retirement home sector.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you. Perhaps, out of this situation, we can have a further conversation about this because this is happening repeatedly, and people have no choice but to go to court and spend a lot of money. It really should not be happening, but it is, in spite of the best intentions, I think, of the ministry.

Would you like to take the next one?

M^{me} France Gélinas: Sure.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Madame Gélinas, go right ahead.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Thank you. My first question has to do with—you said that there was \$70,000 for attendant care. Then you went on to 25% of claimable medical expenses, up to \$6,000. I just wanted to know: This is on top of the ADP for seniors? So they can receive money from the ADP and then apply for that money as well?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: The Ontario Seniors Care at Home Tax Credit is a refundable personal income tax credit to help low-to-moderate-income seniors aged 70 and older with eligible medical expenses, including expenses that support aging at home. These supports include attendant care, assistive breathing devices, dental, vision, hearing and walking aids.

The credit fills a gap by supporting eligible senior families who cannot fully benefit from the existing non-refundable medical expenses tax credit. Eligible recipients

can receive up to 25% of their claimable medical expenses up to \$6,000, for a maximum credit of \$1,500. The credit provided an estimated \$119 million in support to about 220,000 low-to-moderate-income senior families in 2022. MSAA underspent \$14 million projected in the Ontario budget mainly due to reduction in the Ministry of Finance expenditure focused on the Seniors Care at Home Tax Credit.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Just to clarify—

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Would you like to answer more? Please.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Yes, that's what I was referring to earlier, where, because it was undersubscribed, there is that reduction. But I think what you're asking is, "Is this in addition to ADP?", and the answer to that is yes.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. I guess I'll be more precise. I'll give you an example, out of the blue: \$2,000 for a hearing aid. ADP gives you \$1,200; \$800 has to come out of your pocket. When you file the income tax, do you get 25% of the \$800 or 25% of the \$2,000?

So the hearing aid costs \$2,000. ADP gives you \$1,200. There's \$800 that you have to pay. When you submit, do you get 25% of \$800 or 25% of the \$2,000?

Ms. Melissa Thomson: I would guess that's the delta, but I'm going to defer to Meenu Sikand, ADM in our ministry, who may have a better perspective on that.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: So with the CRA—

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Can you state your name, please, for the record?

Ms. Meenu Sikand: Meenu Sikand, assistant deputy minister for seniors and accessibility, accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities division.

It will be the \$800 that you actually spend on medical expenses. So all the medical expenses accumulated, that will be where the formal 25% will be applied.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: So the delta.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Again, with the cost for anything that has to do with hearing aids, with all of this, the ADP gives you 75% up to a max. ADP never pays you 100%. It gives you 75% up to a max. It would make a huge difference to a lot of low-income seniors if the 25% was on the full amount, so on some things, ADP gives you close to 75% of the cost of the device, and then you guys would come in with the 25%.

There was money left in the budget for this. That would have helped low-income seniors. But the way you have it now, you get 25% of the 25% that ADP doesn't pay. It still leaves seniors with hundreds of dollars. Many of them don't have those hundreds of dollars, but they do need the hearing aid, they do need the special chairs, and they do need the shower chair so that they're safe in there. There's lots of assistive devices that they end up going without because ADP only pays up to 75%. For many of the assistive devices, there's a cap, and the cap is way below 75%.

You had money left over in that. It is specifically for low-income, so people who can afford to pay will continue to pay in the store there. But the difference would be low-income seniors who decide to go without because they

cannot afford to pay the \$2,000, \$3,000, sometimes \$4,000 for the assistive device that would help them stay in their home more safely.

So it would be good if you could consider the 25% on the full cost. You will never spend more than the value of the device, because ADP never gives you more than 75% and has capped most of the assistive devices at a set price that is way below 75%. Is there any openness to considering that?

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Ms. Michèle Sanborn: This would be a Ministry of Health program, where the ADP is supervised. I think that will be a question for them.

M^{me} France Gélinas: No, I'm not asking to change the ADP. I'm asking you to change the personal income tax credit for low-income seniors who spend money on medical expenses.

Ms. Michèle Sanborn: Understood.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. Thank you for the suggestion. I will—

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Point of order.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: The request to make a change of policy is a policy question, not an estimates question.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): I just want to caution the member that this is about estimates that we're discussing today, not about changing policy for the future.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. So then my question becomes, if you apply the 25% on the full amount, would you have had sufficient funds in the fund that had been allocated? Because you ended up having quite a surplus in that amount of funding. Having paid 25% of the cost of the device for low-income seniors, I think you would have been able to meet the needs. Would you agree?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. Thank you for your good suggestion. I will consult with the Ministry of Finance.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Just to note, Minister: There is one minute left of the official opposition questions.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. So my question is: Do you feel that the money that sat there and was not used—was "undersubscribed," was the word that you used—had you been able to give the full 25% of the medical devices, how much money would have been underspent?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Can you respond?

Ms. Melissa Thomson: What I do know is that the underspending was \$14 million. What I don't know is the math on whether that would cover that off, but noted. If I understand what you're suggesting, you're saying for that delta that is unfunded on the ADP, could you use some of the tax credit funding to close that gap? The—

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Thank you very much. That concludes the first round for the opposition.

Next, we have the independent member for 10 minutes. Go ahead, MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I'd like to carry on with that line of questioning. Recently, I heard that because of the lack of ability from March of Dimes to fundraise the amounts

needed to pay for things like a power chair, we're finding that folks who have been prescribed a power chair are unable to have access to a power chair because they can't afford the percentage that they have to pay out of pocket with the program ending.

I would like to ask, in line with my neighbour's question: Could we use these budget surpluses for low-income folks who otherwise are seeing a barrier for them to access the mobility devices and access the ADP program, because they don't have that 25% and they can no longer access it?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for the important question. I'd like to refer that question to the deputy.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Thanks very much, Minister. A quick point of clarification: The tax credit program—not to mire us down in logistics, but it's a finance program. We don't retain the surplus, as you can imagine. That's a Ministry of Finance program. Notwithstanding, it's something that we work very closely with them on, given its intended purpose. So it's not as though we have the surplus in hand per se, but what I'm hearing is, "Is there an opportunity to explore, in the event that you have under-subscription in a program like that, any proactive cost offset for users?" I've heard the minister is committed to explore with colleagues at finance what's possible.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Thank you.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Just to respond to your question: The ADP is a Ministry of Health program, so we do not control this program. Maybe you could bring it to the attention of the Ministry of Health.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Yes, and your advocacy—I know that while you aren't the carriers of all the baskets, of all the dollars, I know that your ministry—if we're not meant to work in silos, and if it's truly to be the spirit of the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility, that you would take our discussion today and bring that forward to the ministries that you interact with is my hope.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I had a chat—I want to give a big shout-out to members of KW AccessAbility and, in particular, Edward Faruzel, who is a mentor of mine. He was able to walk me through some of the challenges faced by folks with disabilities in my community. One of the main areas that they find is that there is a big blunder with AODA. Studies show that we are not on track to reaching the goals by January 1, 2025, and the suggestion is that we create an envelope of funding with employment opportunities for folks with disabilities to help with the enforcement of the AODA because, at this moment, businesses carry on knowing that there is very little accountability.

Can you speak to the investments you should make in future years to ensure that we can meet these AODA targets? Because right now, there is no accountability for the targets met and the targets missed.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Point of order.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Mr. Leardi?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: That is a policy question. We're an estimates committee; I'd like to hear some estimates questions.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Thank you, Mr. Leardi.

Please note, this is about estimates that are in front of us today, so we are not talking about policy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: This is a program that's funded by the government. It involves dollars to make the AODA a possibility. We can have all the policy we want in the world, but if we're not funding the solutions, we're no further ahead and it's all performative. I'm asking what would be the investment needed, because we aren't meeting those targets. What are the investments you can make to ensure that you can meet those targets?

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): I've already made a ruling on that. We're not discussing policy. It's the estimates that are in the book today, so we're talking about these estimates, not future estimates.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: The estimates, as I see them, are not meeting the targets, so they're falling short. What is your response to the gaps in funding in these estimates leading to us missing the AODA targets?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: I would like to respond as much as I can. Since the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005, was passed, the government received input from standards development committees, composed of representatives from the disability community, businesses, and other internal and external strategic partners in support of developing accessibility standards in key areas of daily life.

Achieving full accessibility in Ontario is an evolving journey, requiring meaningful collaboration on shared initiatives with government partners and sector stakeholders. Ontario continues to make investments across the province and works to achieve, meet and exceed AODA standards.

All 444 municipalities are required to have accessibility plans. These set out municipalities' plans to adhere to AODA accessibility standards, to build infrastructure and deliver municipal services and programs by adhering to AODA intentions—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Thank you, sir. I'd like to move on. I appreciate that response and I hope that you'll consider this gap in funding.

I'd like to ask a little bit about the budget, because while I appreciate that the ministry is spending more money, it hasn't matched inflation. Just to look at one line of our estimates, there was a reduction of 6% in the services budget line. Can you explain why you haven't chosen to ensure that the budget keeps pace with inflation, which essentially means that there is a cut to this ministry, when we have an aging population and more people identifying as facing disabilities than ever before?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: I'd like to respond to the first question, then refer the second question to the DM.

Since 2018, we have invested more than \$89.2 million in the Home and Vehicle Modifications Program, helping people with disabilities to continue to live safely in their homes, avoid job loss and participate in their community; invested over \$5 million in inclusive community grants;

invested approximately \$7 million in the enabling change program—

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Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Sorry, Minister. I'm going to interrupt, because I was talking about the gap in funding for AODA, not the list of funds.

I'm going to move on, and I'm going to ask again about the funding gap.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: The funding for this ministry doesn't keep up with inflation, so that means there's a cut—sorry.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. Thank you. I will refer that question to the deputy minister to respond, please.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Thank you very much, Minister. I think the 6% reduction that you're referring to in the services is actually AODD division costs and my office costs. So it's actually a reduction in us running the business, not dollars out the door, if that's what you—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Can you speak then to the overall budget not meeting the rates of inflation? That was one budget line, but overall, the budget is not increasing with the rate of inflation. So my worry is that, as we have more people identify as facing a disability and we have more seniors and complex needs, why is it that your ministry isn't keeping up with the rate of inflation?

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): The independent member has one minute left.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: What I would say—obviously I would have to look very closely at those numbers, but the funding for services out the door has kept pace. It's for running the business where we've had a contraction, and that's just through efficiencies in our program design and delivery.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Okay. All right. Thank you.

I do have some concerns. You have a role to play in retirement services. What's your role with LTCs? Because we know there are some challenges there when it comes to staffing and growth in terms of beds. Can you speak to the financial challenges to properly funding this growth in demand?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Well, we do not oversee LTCs—

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Point of order.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): There's a point of order from MPP Leardi. Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Long-term-care homes fall under the Ministry of Long-Term Care. That is not the ministry that is before us today.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Thank you very much. Just to let the member know that we are talking about the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility.

And on that, our time is completed, so we'll have to wait for the next round. Thank you very much.

Now we're going to be moving to the government for 20 minutes, and I understand the first question is from MPP Leardi. Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Through you, Chair, to the minister: Minister, seniors in my riding of Essex are looking for ways to stay active and involved in the community. They want to stay socially connected, because they know that social isolation is enemy number one. They want to have access to programs and services that are specifically designed for seniors, and they want these programs and services in Essex county.

With reference to the estimates that are before us today, can the minister please inform this committee what this government is doing to help seniors stay active and socially connected in Essex county?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you, MPP Leardi, for that very important question and for working so hard for seniors in Essex. I was in your riding. I saw with my eyes. You're so popular with everybody, especially seniors.

This past year, we were able to add an additional million dollars through internal savings through the Seniors Active Living Centres Program. That is why we're able to open not just one, but two new seniors active living centres in Essex this past year, and I was there. These are two of the 17 new SALCs opened across Ontario last year. I had the pleasure of visiting the one in Amherstburg and another in Kingsville. This funding makes sure that our seniors in Essex and all of Ontario have programs and services that keep our seniors fit, active, healthy, socially connected and close to their homes in their municipalities.

Our seniors active living centres bring our seniors together, because we know social isolation is public enemy number one for our seniors. These centres are great places to connect with older friends and make new ones. I have the honour to travel across Ontario to meet with seniors in every corner of the province. Everywhere I hear from seniors how much the connections they are able to build through these programs matter to them.

We know that socially connected seniors generally live a healthier life and can more fully participate in our communities. Investing in keeping our seniors active and connected is a good economic policy and also good social policy. This is one of the reasons that I appreciate the historic expansion of the Seniors Active Living Centres Program, which was made through the fall economic statement. Adding 100 new seniors active living centres to our existing network of 316 is a game-changer for seniors in Ontario. It is an incredible opportunity to have hundreds of thousands more of our seniors have access to the programs, services and activities that help them to stay healthy, active and connected.

Thank you, MPP Leardi, for your continued leadership on behalf of our seniors in Essex and across Ontario. I share your enthusiasm for the Seniors Active Living Centres Program and I cannot wait to visit our 100 new locations. Thank you, MPP Leardi.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): MPP Wai?

Mrs. Daisy Wai: It is great to see our super seniors minister Raymond Cho here at estimates today. Like many other communities across Ontario, the number of seniors in Richmond Hill is growing. We also have a diversity of

seniors who are also looking for supports that are culturally and linguistically appropriate.

Minister Cho, can you please tell us what kind of investments are happening in Richmond Hill to support our seniors?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Before I answer your question, Madam Chair and committee members: I am really lucky; I have the best PA, Daisy Wai. Thank you for raising the question.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: It is because of your leadership for all seniors in Richmond Hill, especially when it comes to care for seniors in community centres, they have a marvellous adult day program that provides structured and supervised activities for our seniors.

It is fantastic that these programs are delivered in the language of their choice for our seniors. We know that when seniors are able to engage in their language of choice, we can help overcome barriers that can keep our seniors from being engaged. I am happy to let you know that it is because of increased funding this year that this program will continue to provide seniors in Richmond Hill and Carefirst with the quality of service they have come to know.

Carefirst is a leader, just like you, and when it comes to supporting our seniors in Richmond Hill, I cannot think of a better MPP than Daisy Wai. Carefirst enables our seniors to reach for the stars, to achieve and maintain their highest level of activity, so they can stay fit, active and healthy, and be together, because when seniors are together, we get energy from each other. That is why I'm happy to report that Carefirst received over \$50,000 in funding, an increase over last year, to make sure our seniors get the support they deserve.

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I'm also very happy to report to this committee that the city of Richmond Hill's seniors active living centre also received over \$50,000 to provide services and activities for our seniors.

I'm also happy to again mention that, through the fall economic statement, we are going to be raising the core funding of \$55,000 for each of these centres. This further demonstrates how important we view these incentives for our seniors.

Thanks to you, MPP Daisy Wai, seniors in Richmond Hill are staying fit, active, healthy, socially connected, close to their home while seeing old friends and making new ones.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): MPP Bailey, go ahead, sir.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Through you, Chair, and to the Minister of Seniors: Thank you, Minister Cho, for being here today.

I have the honour of representing Sarnia–Lambton, my community. As I work with my community, seniors continually ask me about the government's commitment to them and to make sure the programs and services are there for them now and in the future. They appreciate all the supports that we've put in place. They're also asking for what evidence we can point to for our support to continue

them in the future. In regard to the estimates being discussed today, could you elaborate on that, please?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. I want to thank the MPP for Sarnia–Lambton for all of his hard work and dedication, not just for the people of his riding but to all Ontarians. He has done an excellent job for many, many years, and it's because of him that every year our government continues to support seniors and older adults in his riding. Thank you, MPP Bailey, for that wonderful question.

I'd like to start by speaking about some of the wonderful organizations in the member's riding that are supporting our seniors. Cruickshank Centre and the city of Sarnia's Strangway Community Centre are important partners in that region and are doing an excellent job of supporting our seniors. Both of these organizations are seniors active living centres, providing cornerstone activities and support for our seniors. This past year, they received up to \$50,000 each for services and activities, keeping the most important people active all year long.

I say "the most important people" because I hope you will agree that seniors are the most important people. They are the ones who raised the families. They are the ones who built the best province in the world, Ontario, and the best country in the world, Canada. We must give our seniors the dignity and respect that they deserve.

The core operating grant for our seniors active living centres went from \$42,500 to \$50,000, and in the fall economic statement, we pledged to increase it further to \$55,000 per centre. This demonstrates our consistency in supporting organizations that offer activities and programs that our seniors want and love.

We know the number of seniors is rising both in Sarnia–Lambton and across Ontario. As the number of seniors continues to rise, our government is continuing to expand the support and programs available for them. This consistency of approach of making historic investments to expand our partnership and services for seniors, I will suggest, MPP Bailey, is part of the evidence we can offer of our dedication to seniors.

It was under the leadership of our Premier, Doug Ford, that the role of our Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility was created, further demonstrating how seriously our government takes empowering our seniors to live in their communities as long as they wish. The expansion of our programs, whether it be the Seniors Active Living Centres Program or the expansion of the Seniors Community Grant Program, help to provide proof that our government cares for seniors.

I'm a super senior myself. I understand why seniors in the riding of Sarnia–Lambton would ask these kinds of questions. They have seen other governments make promises and not deliver. From our government, they can see concrete examples of support and programs for them expanding. Thank you, MPP Bailey.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Thank you.

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: Chair, through you to Minister Cho: I think we all know the incredibly valuable role that seniors play in our communities. They are the bedrock

upon which our country has been able to grow and thrive. Whenever I travel around my riding of Bay of Quinte, whether it's to charity organizations, community events or service clubs, I'm reminded of how indebted we are to those who have built the social and physical institutions that we now take as given.

As you are Minister for Seniors and Accessibility, I'm hoping you can tell me what kind of investments have been made by your ministry to help support seniors in my riding of Bay of Quinte.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you very much for the important question. Before I respond to you, I'd like to first congratulate you on your recent election to Queen's Park.

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: Thank you, sir.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: And, MPP Allsopp, I already mentioned it earlier: You look so comfortable, as if you've been MPP for over 10 years.

Over the past six years, we have invested in many programs and support in your riding. Each is targeted at helping seniors to live life with dignity and stay active, healthy, connected in our communities.

We know that social isolation is enemy number one for seniors. When seniors are isolated, they are at risk of rapidly failing health or of becoming victims of fraud and abuse. We must detect the underlying cause and help our seniors to stay connected in our communities through the programs we deliver.

A great example of this is our Seniors Active Living Centres Program. These centres offer activities and programs, and keep our seniors active, healthy and socially connected. One example in your riding is the Prince Edward County Community Care for Seniors Association. This year, we increased the base funding grant for our sub-operators, including the Prince Edward county centre, from \$42,500 to \$50,000. This helps to reduce the paperwork which our operators have to fill out, enabling them to spend more time delivering the services, programs and activities our seniors love.

I am excited to be going to visit this centre with you next week and to participate in the Seniors Active Living Fair. Our Seniors Active Living Fairs are another great resource for our seniors in our communities. My ministry funds approximately 200 fairs all across Ontario, including the one coming next week in Prince Edward county. These fairs help to connect seniors with community-based program services partners who can help them live independent lives in their homes and communities as long as they wish.

1410

Helping our seniors to stay connected requires a whole suite of programs. When we do so, our seniors can stay connected in our communities through the one that best fits their needs. When our seniors are connected, we all benefit.

Because these centres are so important, I truly appreciate the leadership of Minister Bethlenfalvy and Premier Ford in announcing through the fall economic statement that we will look to open 100 more centres across Ontario.

For all of the centres, including the Prince Edward county centre in the member's riding, their core funding will go up to \$55,000, a 10% increase.

Thank you for the question. Keep up the great work.

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: Thank you, sir.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): MPP Anand, just as a note, you have a minute and six seconds left.

Mr. Deepak Anand: Absolutely, Chair. Thank you for that reminder.

As we have one minute, I'm actually just going to ask my question in the next round, but I want to take a minute to say thank you to Minister Cho. It's always a pleasure to see you—you are a super senior—thanks to your laughter therapy. I do remember when you came to our office, and the seniors loved it. Thanks for that positivity.

I will be asking you a question at a later time, but I'll start with a question in the time we have allocated: Why is it important to serve our seniors? Then I'll ask the question in the next round.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: MPP Anand, thanks so much for the question. The people of Mississauga-Malton have never been served better.

Mr. Deepak Anand: Oh, I agree with that.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: You continue to provide the kind of leadership your residents, especially—

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Thank you for that, Minister. We're going to have to hold off on more good news about MPP Anand for a later date.

The government members are done with their questioning, and we're going to move over to the official opposition for 20 minutes. We're going to start with MPP Vaugeois.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Madam Chair, pardon me. I need to go to the washroom. Can I have a washroom break for five minutes?

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): We're going to call a five-minute recess.

The committee recessed from 1413 to 1418.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): I'm going to bring the meeting back to order, and we're going to start with the member from the official opposition. Go ahead.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you very much, Speaker.

I'd like to know how much of the budget has been allocated to implement recommendations of the AODA K-12 Education Standards Development Committee.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. Deputy, please answer the question.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Deputy Minister?

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Happy to—thank you very much, Minister.

The ministries responsible for the recommendations from the standards committee are the ones who budget implementation. So we certainly do have a budget in our ministry for what the member referred to earlier around silos, the cross-ministry leadership, the driving for a decision and the support for decision-making, plus also, as the minister has been referencing throughout estimates, extensive investment through programs. But for the implementation of the recommendations specifically, those

dollars associated with any of those recommendations would be housed within the ministries.

So while we have an overarching budget for our leadership work, I guess I would say—and that’s in Meenu’s shop—we don’t specifically hold the dollars, if you will, to implement the recommendations for specific ministries. Why don’t we ask Meenu to add a little bit more detail? Because she will be able to add more specifics.

1420

Ms. Meenu Sikand: As the deputy kindly mentioned—

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Excuse me. Do you mind just speaking a little louder for us? We’ll just have someone help you with the microphone.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: Thank you. Can you hear me now a little bit better?

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): A little bit better, yes.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: Thank you. So the SDC recommendations come to MSAA for analysis, and then sending it to the partner ministries who will be responsible under their mandate to implement those. My division will be working closely to facilitate those analyses, making sure that, strategically, those ADMs and deputy ministers are aware of what the recommendations are and where they can add into their strategic planning process and allocate budgets according to their mandate.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay. So you would say, then, that this ministry has that oversight role to actually make sure that those things are implemented and built out?

Ms. Meenu Sikand: We do advocate, because it is a government-as-a-whole approach to implementing any standard-development committee’s recommendations. We do have that overarching role as a facilitator, as a coach and as an educator to make sure that they understand.

And also, within our ministry, we have an EnAbling Change program. Through that, we do do outreach to municipalities, business sectors, colleges and universities to make sure that they also understand how they can implement the recommendations that have come through SDCs.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Can I just add—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Yes.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Sorry, Meenu, to interrupt.

Ultimately, it’s the government’s decision on the recommendations. It’s like any other recommending body: The government receives recommendations, and then considers those recommendations and then makes a decision against those recommendations.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: May I?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Yes.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: I’d like to talk about current government investment related to accessibility:

—since 2021, investing more than \$960 million in the Skills Development Fund training stream, creating meaningful training and real jobs for Ontarians, including people with a disability, from the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development;

—in 2021, the city of Toronto ordered 60 fully AODA-compliant streetcars with a provincial funding investment of \$180 million from the Ministry of Transportation; and

—in 2023-24, providing approximately \$55 million in special-purpose grants to support post-secondary students with disabilities—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay. Thank you. I’m going to take my time back.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. Thank you.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: What is the allocation for the enforcement of accessibility standards? How many fines for non-compliance were issued? What was the size of those fines?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. Deputy, could you respond?

Ms. Melissa Thomson: I’d be more than happy to, but it would be wonderful to hear from Meenu Sikand, who runs that part of our business and has great insight into the compliance function of our ministry. Meenu, over to you.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: Thank you. With enforcement and compliance, our main focus is always to make sure that we bring an organization to compliance. That is the impact that we always want to achieve when we are enforcing any compliance requirement.

The AODA in total has 263 requirements, and as of today we have been able to implement 97% of the auditable requirements to date, and we are on track to put all 100% of auditable requirements to be audited by 2025.

As the compliance reports are filed, the first step is to take a look at how many organizations we audit and if they are in non-compliance, and then there is a notice of non-compliance, issued with an action plan to bring those organizations in compliance, with an action plan attached to it. I’m happy to note that 97% of the organizations reach that outcome. If that is not achieved, then we go forward with a director’s order, and then there is a monetary penalty to the organization.

So far in 2024, we have received—just let me check my notes. We have received 100, I think. Just one second.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I can wait for that answer.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: One monetary order has been issued for the organizations, and I’m not sure about the number for the director’s orders.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I could get that later. Thank you. There is a—

Interjections.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Excuse me.

Interjection.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: No, please don’t.

I have a question about the contracting of the Rick Hansen Foundation. There have been certainly very strong objections from the AODA Alliance about their contracting. You’ve probably seen the video that David Lepofsky put together about the Toronto courthouse and that the Rick Hansen organization certified that building as being completely compliant, but in fact it is not. So are there repercussions for that building? It sounds like the design elements got to take precedence over the accessibility elements.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Questions with respect to the Ontario Court of Justice's new Toronto courthouse should be directed to the Ministry of Infrastructure and Infrastructure Ontario, as well as the Ministry of the Attorney General—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: But it's your ministry that hired the Rick Hansen Foundation, correct?

Ms. Meenu Sikand: So that will be the ministry and Infrastructure Ontario who will be hiring the contractor, as well as deciding to take a certification from the Rick Hansen Foundation.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: So we do have a left-hand, right-hand problem, because your ministry, I believe, needs to be the ministry that oversees the entire AODA process—I hope; there needs to be somebody who's overseeing that. But the Ministry of Infrastructure has then employed an organization that does not have the support of much of the local disability community, and in fact, they have certified a building that's not accessible. So there's a problem of needing to pull that accountability, I believe, back to your ministry, where it can be monitored.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Just to build on what Meenu was saying: Absolutely, we're aware of the issue and have been working with MOI and other colleagues on it. What I will also say is that we're looking forward to the final report of the design of public spaces standards committee, which will also have recommendations related to some of the issues seen in the courthouse.

So, just to confirm, we're very engaged on it, working closely with MOI and others and also looking forward to what's to come from the recommendations.

1430

Ms. Meenu Sikand: Do I have time to add something?

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Sure.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: So the courthouse we visited is not non-compliant with AODA or even the Ontario building code. However, as we always say, the AODA is the minimum standards. They are the basic standards that a structure can be built on.

There are design elements that were brought to attention by the AODA Alliance to the project manager and the Minister of Infrastructure, and they are looking at addressing those gaps. I am very confident that with interventions, they will be meeting those design gaps that have been identified. However, they are not by any means non-compliant with AODA or OBC.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: So, in other words, AODA has not caught up with the actual needs of visually impaired users? Is that what you're saying?

Ms. Meenu Sikand: So the design-of-public-spaces public consultation has finished and the SDC is reviewing the final recommendations. In the spring of 2025, you will be seeing the updated DOPS recommendations.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay. That's a little bit past the January 1 deadline for implementing AODA, so there's a bit of a lag there.

I can keep going, or you can jump in.

M^{me} France Gélinas: No.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I'll keep going then.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Just over seven minutes left.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Seven minutes? Oh, my goodness.

We are looking at the challenges of fully implementing AODA and hopefully taking it further for what is not there right now. I have some worry that I'm not sure how much is actually budgeted, and I think this is what MPP Clancy was trying to get at, as well. How much is actually budgeted for making sure that it's implemented? Because it does need to be a whole-of-government approach. Somebody needs to be tracking that each of these things in different ministries is taking place. So that's one piece. Maybe you can address that, and then I'll go to part 2 of that question.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. Investing more than \$89.2 million in the Home and Vehicle Modifications Program helps people with disabilities continue to live safely in their home, avoid job loss and participate in their community. We're investing over \$5 million in inclusive community grants; investing approximately \$7 million in the EnAbling Change program; and since 2021, investing more than \$960 million in the Skills Development Fund Training Stream, creating meaningful training, real jobs for Ontarians, including people with disabilities. In 2021, the city of Toronto ordered 60 fully AODA-compliant streetcars—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I think we've heard this already, Minister. Thank you. We did hear those amounts already.

Really, what I'm trying to get at is whether this ministry has the wherewithal, the staff hours and the dollars, because it is a small budget. This ministry has a small budget. Do you have the wherewithal to have that overview and really make sure that all of those pieces are funded and actually take place?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. I'd like to refer that question to the deputy.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Thank you very much, Minister. I would never say we have enough money to run our ministry, only because I have to say that, but what I can confirm is that we do have a budget of \$8 million for the accessibility division.

I would agree with you that it's a massive mandate. Any population-based ministry has a massive mandate, and any population-based ministry—I think we might be one of the very few population-based ministries. But any time you have a population-based mandate, if you're lucky, like we are, you have program dollars where we can actually be sending out into the community.

But then also your primary bread and butter is the convenor, the catalyzer, the driver, the coordinator across ministries. For example, when you see massive transit investments or education investments for kids with disabilities or investments in health—for example, to support seniors—that is a product of that collaboration and that convening and catalyzing, if you will, for lack of a better word.

So 100%, we track, certainly, SDC recommendations and what ministries those apply to, if you will, but also all

investments across the organization in ministries with other, broader mandates not specifically related to our population, and even other jurisdictions—the federal government, for example—plus those mandates not yet worn out where we might be able to insert ourselves to drive change.

I will say we're small but mighty, and certainly believe very much in this incredible team. We definitely have wherewithal, but I would acknowledge "small but mighty."

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Madam Chair, I'd like to add: Project by project, community by community, Ontario is becoming more accessible every day. Every dollar this government invests in infrastructure is a dollar invested in accessibility. We are working with all levels of government to meet, achieve and exceed the goals of the AODA. All 444 municipalities have accessibility plans, which set out their plans to adhere to the standards of the AODA. This is how we are driving accessibility, project by project, community by community. We are getting it done.

M^{me} France Gélinas: You talked about the 263 requirements under the AODA—97%—and then you talked about the auditable requirements. Of the 263, how many can you audit?

Ms. Meenu Sikand: So, 273 is the total requirements under the AODA, and within those requirements, there are subsections. We will say that these are the verified requirements that can be audited, but there are some requirements, for example, that come from SDC, that are in principle, so we cannot verify those requirements. Changing the culture of the education system, changing the culture within Ontario: That's what I mean by non-auditable.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Is it your part of the ministry that does the audit? How many resources have you got to do audits? How many can you do?

Ms. Meenu Sikand: The standards were developed in a staggered manner for that reason, so when we implement, we can start enforcing according to those staggered dates. We have been able to audit all of those requirements which could be done with accessibility compliance reports. Then we moved on to where we could do on-site inspections; for example, the three ferries in Ontario that qualified to be audited under the AODA were audited this year. We are on track to be able to audit all the requirements by December 31.

M^{me} France Gélinas: It's people within your ministry that do the audit?

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): The opposition has one minute left.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: Yes, we have a staff of 24 in the enforcement and compliance branch, and out of those, 12 staff are directly and indirectly involved in auditing and 12 are behind the scenes—for example, working with organizations to bring them to the compliance report.

I do have the numbers that I missed earlier if you're interested.

France Gélinas: Sure.

1440

Ms. Meenu Sikand: In 2023, 98.4% of the verification audits were resolved and in compliance without escalation, so they did not receive any notice of proposed orders. Then 32 went ahead with notice of proposed orders and director's orders were issued to resolve non-compliance. In 2023, we had zero administrative monetary penalties. In 2024 so far—

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Thank you very much. That will end the round with the official opposition.

Now, we're going to move over to the independents. You have 10 minutes for your final round. Go ahead, MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: You can finish your statement.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: Okay. In 2024, we have 120 notices of proposed orders issued, 12 director's orders were issued and two administrative monetary penalties have been issued, and we have checked 7,000 requirements this year so far.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Thank you.

I didn't say what I was hoping to say last time. I wanted to thank all the staff who are here today and the minister for coming and spending this time with us. I really appreciate your contribution. I can tell it's a very passionate team who really wants to make Ontario better for everyone, so deep gratitude there. I know we're here to nitpick a bit, but I just want you to know that your efforts and hard work are much appreciated.

I guess I want to push back a little bit, because what I'm reading is that reviewer Charles Beer—there have been four reviews enacted in 2014 and 2019. Reviews have always outlined that "the status quo isn't working." Reviews have said that "the province fails to prioritize the file" and "provide meaningful guidance on ... enforcement."

How do we reconcile the quote of us not hitting targets by January 1 and the challenges, and saying that the status quo isn't working? Why do you think there is a review of that? Can you respond?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Maybe the deputy could respond.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Absolutely. Thank you very much, Minister—more than happy to.

In particular, related to the most recent fourth review, we worked very closely with Mr. Donovan on that review, and in particular on his three main priorities around evacuation from government buildings, procurement and the creation of a user group in concert with standards development—which we know is the hallmark of the AODA—and his overview in terms of evolving past or with standards into something more practical in terms of day-to-day use. So we worked closely with the reviewer on that.

Continuing not just with the fourth review, but to your point around other reviews: We reference those reviews in the development, so all that work that I was describing before—not just our own in terms of programs that we are lucky enough to send out the door, but also programs in other ministries—we use those recommendations fre-

quently, and reference them frequently, in order to build robust solutions with our ministry partners.

Similarly, with the enforcement pieces, there is enforcement from a variety of different perspectives: the audits that Meenu was talking about, but also self-reporting and other pieces that are part of a package, if you will. That, in conjunction with the target—we all know targets push and drive us all to accomplish as much as we possibly can, and this government has been really committed to that.

We are always thinking past 2025, with the government, in many dialogues. At every cabinet table, there is a requirement to consider accessibility and seniors in all proposals, and the government is referencing those reviews and recommendations, as well as the target in every proposal that comes to them.

I don't know if we want to ask Meenu—do you want a little bit more flavour on that in terms of the target, or do you want to move on to another question?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Yes. I have other questions. But if you have a brief comment, sure.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: Accessibility is not an end result where, on December 31, you can turn the switch on and Ontario looks totally different on January 1. Legislation cannot drive the impact on people with disabilities.

I think that's the basic thing we need to understand when we talk about moving with any reviewer's recommendation. They have technical recommendations, but we are asking questions about the impact on the community. Those impacts, understanding the intentions—as we just mentioned, now we have legislation which has set a framework in Ontario. We have legislation which has at least minimum requirements, and we're always aspiring to move forward, exceeding those requirements when we talk to the organizations.

But now, this is the time to move towards inclusion and making sure people with disabilities have the same experiences as others when they are accessing services, programs or infrastructure. We are setting up a user group which will tell us what their experiences are, so it's not just the ACR.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Thank you. I'd like to ask a little bit more about how, in this budget, we should have expanded medical supply reimbursement. I just had a story of a woman who moved from ODSP to OAS, and now her incontinence supplies are no longer covered and she had to leave her home. She lost her apartment because of an affordability issue related to the lack of coverage for incontinence supplies. I had another senior saying that she actually using a less expensive treatment that isn't covered under OHIP, a saline treatment.

How can we look at some of these supplies that, again, affect people to keep their housing and their inclusion in society?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Point of order.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): MPP Leardi, go ahead, please, sir.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: That is a question the falls squarely in the Ministry of Health. It does not apply to this ministry.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Sorry, I looked up online that there is a medical supply reimbursement fund. Is that not correct? No? Okay. That was on your website for seniors.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): I will make a judgment here. It is outside the scope of what we are discussing today. Let's stick with the estimates that are in front of us for the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility, please.

Did you want to form that in a different type of question?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Thank you. Sure. Part of the budget of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility is to influence all these other ministries. We continue to talk about how we have representation from your ministry in the Ministry of Health, in MCCSS etc. to push forward legislation. Is it adequate, considering there continues to be major gaps and seniors continuing to be impacted by these gaps?

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Thank you very much for the question. A quick point of clarification: We don't have representatives in other ministries—I think that's what I heard you say.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: At cabinet tables? I thought you said you had roles in cabinet tables—

Ms. Melissa Thomson: No. Sorry. I was just meaning that when any cabinet member brings a decision to their colleagues, they have to consider a bunch of elements on any submission, and accessibility impact on seniors is an example. That's all I meant. I did not mean to say that we have representation in other ministries.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: That's okay. I can switch. I apologize.

Perhaps I can shift us to the grants. Again, hopefully my reading is accurate this time, that grants have been available not-for-profits etc. I'm finding that a lot of folks who live in condos, for example, have inaccessible buildings, and because they don't have the finances, aren't able to put in a ramp, aren't able to create accessibility for shared spaces in that condo. The funding is missing in this budget to ensure that there is inclusion for things like condos in these retrofits, in these grants.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Just to the independent member: You have one minute left.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Okay. Thank you.

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Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Ontario has numerous financial, health and housing supports for seniors, including the Ontario Seniors Care at Home Tax Credit, which supports a wide range of eligible medical expenses to help low-to-moderate-income seniors aged 70 or older.

The Home and Vehicle Modifications Program provides grants up to \$15,000 for home modification, adaptation and devices and up to \$15,000 for vehicle modifications every 10 years. The Ontario Senior Homeowners' Property Tax Grant helps offset property tax—

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Thank you very much, Minister. Maybe you can continue if the government asks a question, but I'm going to move over the government's side. This is your last 20 minutes; it's ac-

tually a little less than 20 minutes because we don't have time on the clock. Who is to lead here? MPP Anand, go ahead.

Mr. Deepak Anand: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I just want to thank you again for saying I am the best MPP for Mississauga–Malton. I have to correct the record. That is actually the truth, because I am the only MPP so far for Mississauga–Malton.

Meenu Sikand, assistant deputy minister: It's really good to see you. Your advocacy—I know we talk about only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches, but the one who is saying it, if he doesn't know—he's not wearing the shoe; it's just a statement. But in your case, you have lived experience. Your organization, Disability without Poverty, have been very active, so it's really good to see that you're not just active within the sphere, but you're supporting the province of Ontario under the leadership of the minister, so I just wanted to acknowledge that.

Minister, you know that seniors in Mississauga–Malton and, in fact, all over Ontario want to make sure that the funding and the investment from your ministry remain stable, because it is vital. When we talk about our seniors, those who have given everything for us, it is our responsibility that they have the comfort, they have the stability, they have the security to live comfortably.

I know in my riding of Mississauga–Malton, there's been a lot of pressure. We talk about inflation, for an example. Everyone on my side of the caucus knows about something which is killing all of us: It's called carbon tax, and that is increasing and hurting, causing our seniors to spend their hard-earned savings and pensions on increased heating, hydro, food, cost-of-living expenses.

Under your leadership, under the leadership of Premier Ford, we can't thank you enough for something which is very popular: senior's fares. You talked about it. They're very popular with our seniors.

Community-based organizations you're supporting are really important. For example:

—Carassauga: Marek Ruta is not only serving Mississauga–Malton; he's serving the whole of Mississauga;

—Uzma Irfan and Anu Randhawa at Malton Women Council—again, not just serving Mississauga–Malton; they are serving the whole Peel region;

—George and Carmela at MICBA, not just serving the Italian population, but serving the whole population at Forum Italia;

—Balbir Sohi, Women That Give, or Devanand Maharaj, Peel Career Assessment Centre: These are the great examples of what your ministry has supported through the local and community-based programs and services.

So thank you. Through your advocacy, through your work, supporting these organizations—because these are the organizations which help our seniors to provide the mandate of this government. I want to hear from you: What is the message you have from these organizations and seniors at Mississauga–Malton?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you very much for raising—actually, you raise so many questions. One is the carbon tax. The carbon tax is—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Sorry, guys. Point of order.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): That's okay. MPP Clancy. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: We are here to talk about provincial policies and provincial budgets. I request that you not involve discussion on federal policies.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: I see your point, but the reality is, it affects the lives of all the seniors. It affects them, because the seniors have a fixed income—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Come on, guys. Point of order.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): I'll just remind everybody: We are considering the estimates today for the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility.

Minister, go ahead.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. Back to my ministry: I feel so thankful to the Minister of Finance, Peter Bethlenfalvy. Last week, he made an announcement that we are increasing seniors active living centres. As we know, we have so many programs and services; among them, the top one is the seniors active living centres. The Ministry of Finance are increasing the operating budget from \$42,700 to \$55,000, and the Minister of Finance made the announcement that we are increasing 100 seniors active living centres over three years by expanding funding—\$17 million—so we're so thankful.

When seniors are isolated, they become merely victims in so many ways: mentally, socially and victims of fraud. And to help the seniors away from social isolation, one program—as mentioned, seniors active living centres. Another one is the seniors community grants. This year, we are including \$1 million more—\$6 million—so that more non-profit organizations get the grants, up to \$25,000, and also to make the communities more accessible—

Mr. Deepak Anand: Thank you, Minister. I really appreciate that.

Considering the time, Madam Chair, I'd like to pass it on to my caucus colleagues.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): MPP Jordan.

Mr. John Jordan: I'd like to thank the minister for his presentation, and also for travelling up to Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston and spending a couple of days there—even to go as far as up to Robinson Lake, which is a bit of a trek, as your staff can attest to. But you did make a lot of friends during those two days, and I think the Skills Development Fund, as well as the seniors' activity centres, have been a great increase for the seniors in my area.

One of the things I know from working in the Lanark Highlands for a couple of days is the importance of partnerships and building those partnerships that deliver programs and services, and also to engage in volunteerism. I'm wondering if you could speak to the importance of adding new partners to help serve seniors better.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you so much, MPP Jordan, for raising that marvellous question. I was so honoured to join you in your beautiful riding to announce the two new seniors active living centres that we opened, and I noticed that you are well respected in your community. These centres were two of the 17 that we added last

year through the extra million dollars annually that is invested in this worthy program.

It was a treasure to see so many happy, active and engaged seniors in Smiths Falls. They love you, MPP Jordan, and they spoke highly of your ongoing commitment to their community. I'd like to repeat what I said: You are definitely one of my favourite MPPs. Any MPP working hard for seniors, they're my favourite MPP, and I repeat that today. And at the SALC in Smiths Falls—it's a perfect example of how our funding through this program can be a catalyst to support the amazing work of a local organization to deliver programs, activities that are tailored to local needs.

It's important for our government to continue to seek new partners. This is core to our ability to expand services to best meet the needs of our seniors, in the way they want them to be met. It also speaks to why the announcement in the fall economic statement of adding hundreds more SALCs and over \$17 million in extra investment is so important.

Our government is constantly seeking to ensure that all seniors in Ontario, no matter where they live, are able to access service and fully participate in our communities—

Mr. John Jordan: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Thank you, Minister.

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Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. I would just like—

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Okay.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Our program helps ensure that seniors always feel they have an ally in our government and that they are not alone. Thank you for the excellent question, MPP Jordan.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): MPP Wai, go ahead.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Thank you, Madam Chair. How much time do we still have?

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Four minutes and 44 seconds.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Okay. I'll ask very fast, then. First of all, I just want to take this opportunity to thank the minister, and the whole team and all the staff here. I witnessed myself, with my own eyes, how hard the team has been working. As I see this binder, I say, "Oh, my goodness. You've done a lot more than what I have expected," and I just want to say thank you first.

I do have a question for our minister. I'll say it as quickly as I can. It's about the investment that our government made in Niagara region. This past summer, I travelled with Minister Sam Oosterhoff, MPP for Niagara West. We saw first-hand how the investments in our seniors are making a huge difference in the Niagara region. Maybe I will just quickly announce the grants that were given: the township of West Lincoln received \$21,000; the town of Lincoln received \$5,450; the town of Pelham received \$25,000; Welland received \$5,200.

I would like to quote Cheryl Ganann, mayor of the town of West Lincoln: "I have witnessed incredible physical

and mental health benefits with seniors programming for older adults in our community. These programs provide a means of social connection and community engagement, igniting creativity and empowering independence."

Minister Cho, my question to you is: Can you please inform this committee of what other kinds of investments are taking place to support our seniors in the Niagara region?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you so much for raising important questions. I want to let you and the entire committee know that you are doing incredible work for seniors. It is in these communities where we see our Seniors Community Grants do such valuable work. They provide seniors with the ability to come together, to learn, to be active and to support each other.

That is why I'm so proud that under the leadership of Premier Ford, our government invested in the following seniors active living centres in Niagara: the Beachcombers Senior Citizens Association; the older adults, 60-plus; and the Fort Erie Lions senior citizens complex. Each of these seniors active living centres received over \$50,000.

As a result of the increase in funding, seniors are staying fit, active, healthy, socially connected, close to their families, in their communities all across Niagara region. These investments throughout Niagara this past summer highlight how we believe the seniors in this region deserve dignity and respect. That is why I'm so happy to report back to this committee that our programs have invested over \$4 million in seniors in the Niagara region since 2018.

Seniors, whether they are in Niagara or Richmond Hill, are so very well being supported with these investments all across Ontario.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Minister, government members, there's one minute left.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): No further questions? There's 47 seconds left.

MPP Allsopp.

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: Yes. I just wanted to say thank you to the minister and staff for making their time available today and for answering all of our questions. Thank you very much.

On a personal note, I'm very much looking forward to seeing you next week in Prince Edward county at the Wellington and District Community Centre for a tremendous seniors fair, one of 200 going on across the province. Thank you so much for coming back to our riding. I look forward to seeing you next week. Thank you, sir.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): There are 17 seconds left. Mr. Anand.

Mr. Deepak Anand: Minister, thank you for being a super senior. Thank you for supporting Ontario. We are so delighted—

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): That brings us to a conclusion, before we let him go too far down the road. That concludes the committee's consideration of estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Chair?

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Do you have a point of order?

M^{me} France Gélinas: Yes, please.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Can I excuse them first?

M^{me} France Gélinas: No.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Okay. Point of order, MPP Gélinas.

M^{me} France Gélinas: The assistant deputy minister for accessibility for the Ontario and disability division, in answering my questions, was giving us information about the resolved cases of non-compliance for 2023, and she went on to 2024. I was wondering if I could get the rest of her answer in writing, or if she wants to tell us now.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): There is no further debate at this time. Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates, so that might be an offline conversation.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): First of all, thank you, Minister, and the minister's team, and the deputy minister and her team, for being here today. We still have some voting to do on our part, but I thank you very much for being here and for all the hard work that went into preparing for today. Thank you very much. We'll allow you to depart. Committee members, please stay, as we have votes to do.

Interjections.

The Chair (Ms. Christine Hogarth): Can the members please take their seats, so we can vote? Can the members please take their seats, so we can conclude this meeting?

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

Shall vote 3501, ministry administration program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 3502, policy program and strategic partnerships, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 3503, accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

This concludes our consideration of the estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility. I'd like to thank everybody for your participation throughout the estimates process, and I want to thank the staff for your help today, especially the Clerk, Lesley. Thank you very much.

The committee is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1509.

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Also taking part / Autres participants et participantes

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho (Scarborough North / Scarborough-Nord PC)

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