

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

A-39

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

A-39

**Standing Committee on
Government Agencies**

Intended appointments

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Thursday 5 December 2024

**Comité permanent des
organismes gouvernementaux**

Nominations prévues

1^{re} session
43^e législature

Jeudi 5 décembre 2024

Chair: David Smith
Clerk: Isaiah Thorning

Président : David Smith
Greffier : Isaiah Thorning

Hansard on the Internet

Hansard and other documents of the Legislative Assembly can be on your personal computer within hours after each sitting. The address is:

<https://www.ola.org/>

Index inquiries

Reference to a cumulative index of previous issues may be obtained by calling the Hansard Reporting Service indexing staff at 416-325-7400.

Le Journal des débats sur Internet

L'adresse pour faire paraître sur votre ordinateur personnel le Journal et d'autres documents de l'Assemblée législative en quelques heures seulement après la séance est :

Renseignements sur l'index

Adressez vos questions portant sur des numéros précédents du Journal des débats au personnel de l'index, qui vous fourniront des références aux pages dans l'index cumulatif, en composant le 416-325-7400.

House Publications and Language Services
Room 500, West Wing, Legislative Building
111 Wellesley Street West, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Telephone 416-325-7400
Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Service linguistique et des publications parlementaires
Salle 500, aile ouest, Édifice du Parlement
111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

CONTENTS

Thursday 5 December 2024

Subcommittee report	A-357
Intended appointments.....	A-357
Mr. Joe Vaccaro	A-357
Dr. Alison Burgess	A-362

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES ORGANISMES GOUVERNEMENTAUX

Thursday 5 December 2024

Jeudi 5 décembre 2024

The committee met at 0900 in room 151.

SUBCOMMITTEE REPORT

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Good morning, everyone. The Standing Committee on Government Agencies will now come to order. We are joined by staff from legislative research, Hansard, and broadcast and recording. As always, all comments by members and witnesses should go through the Chair.

The first item of business will be the adoption of a subcommittee report, which was distributed in advance. We have the subcommittee report dated Thursday, November 28, 2024. Could I please have a motion?

Mrs. Robin Martin: I move adoption of the subcommittee report on intended appointments dated Thursday, November 28, on the order-in-council certificate dated November 22, 2024.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Any discussion? Are members ready to vote? All those in favour? Opposed? The motion is carried.

INTENDED APPOINTMENTS

MR. JOE VACCARO

Review of intended appointment, selected by official opposition party: Joe Vaccaro, intended appointee as member, Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority board of governors.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): The first intended appointee today is Joe Vaccaro, nominated as member of the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority board of governors.

You may make an initial statement at your discretion. Following this, there will be questions from members of the committee. With that questioning, we will start with the government, followed by the official opposition, with 15 minutes allotted to each recognized party. Any time you take in your statement will be deducted from the time allotted to the government. You may proceed.

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: Good morning, everyone. Thank you to the Chair. Thank you to the minister for the opportunity to serve.

I believe in public service and the power of public service to bring people together and build strong communities. I also recognize that public service means that you

have to be willing to put yourself out there, to face questions and answer the questions of “Why?” and “Why now?” and “Why you?” and, eventually, “Why did you do that?” For those reasons, I welcome the opportunity to present to this committee and share with all of you my “Why?”

Why the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority? This is personal for me. I had the honour of being my Nonna G’s caregiver in the final 10 years of her life. This will not surprise some of you, but I’m a first-generation Canadian. My grandparents came from Sicily, bringing with them three sons all under the age of 16.

I grew up in a home on 10 York Street in Malton, Ontario. It was 1,300 square feet, with two grandparents, two parents, two kids and an uncle—seven people under one roof. When we moved across town, we moved into a home of 2,000 square feet and we added more members of our family: two grandparents, two parents, four kids, an uncle and the occasional visiting relatives—10 people in that home. I’m the eldest of those four siblings.

My point: I grew up with my grandparents in my life. The good: making traditional Sicilian cannoli, the secret being a lot of love and a little bit of red wine in the shell. The bad of all of that: broken plates at 6 a.m. when you don’t have the words to properly express yourself.

In 2008, my Nonna G moved into a condominium to enjoy independent living as a widow. I took on her power of attorney and her power of care. Over the next 10 years, I navigated through Ontario’s retirement home system. We started in a condominium with an active Italian community. They played tombola, bingo, scopa, cards, with the occasional trip to a local mall, the theatre and church service.

Eventually, we used private nurse care to provide additional care in her home, but then she became more and more forgetful around the stove and locking her door. Then, eventually, the falls started to happen, and then eventually the big fall and a long stay in a hospital.

At that point, it became clear to me it was time to move on to another care facility, and so our journey in their retirement home sector began—a tough decision for our family, but we did not have the tools to care for her ourselves. I moved my Nonna G into a regulated retirement home in 2015, with 200-plus residents, where they provided her service and care, from food to medication to activities, and they provided me with regular updates in between my regular visits.

As dementia began to set in, Nonna G became less and less engaged with the community and more fearful of her surroundings. It became clear to me again that it was time to move her into a more culturally focused home. I did that in 2017, when she moved into a small regulated retirement home with a large Italian community—some people from the village back home. This gave her a sense of security and comfort, and she was cared for there until she eventually passed away in 2018.

I have real-life experience navigating through the retirement home system. Caring for my Nonna G was a blessing—working through the system, managing the services needed to care for her and understanding the emotional impact and the relief that loved ones have when they can put someone in a comfortable, caring environment. That is my “Why?” for the RHRA: because as a grandson, at the age of 35, with my own family to care for, I took on that role for my Nonna G. I was blessed to do it. I see the opportunity to serve at the RHRA as a chance to continue to care for our seniors as a public service. When we care for our seniors, it is a blessing.

But why now? It’s really about where I am in my life right now. Many of you know I served as the CEO of the Ontario Home Builders’ Association for 10-plus years. I ventured out on my own, into the private sector, in October 2021. As the CEO of OHBA, I did not believe it was appropriate to serve on a regulatory agency, although the opportunity was available to me. I did serve on the Ontario Biodiversity Council and on the Species at Risk Program Advisory Committee; both serve to provide the government with advice, but with no regulatory power.

And the “Why you?": My work at OHBA has taught me more governance, financial oversight, regulatory and policy analysis, public presentation and advocacy. The industry is a regulated industry, which means I was in regular contact with many, many, regulatory authorities that govern the industry. Part of that is my understanding of the policy and economic impact that decisions made by government have on industry. I made it a priority to make sure that the regulatory industry was prepared for the implementation of government policy, because once government has made a decision, it’s important that we do the work to serve the people we are here to serve.

Today, I sit before this committee as a private citizen. I believe that I can now step into these public roles. I can bring my life experience and the skills I’ve learned through my time, and be a productive and effective member of RHRA. I believe in public service, I believe in the public service that the RHRA provides and I’m happy to serve. Thank you for your time.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Thank you very much. We will turn the remaining time to the government side.

I recognize MPP Smith. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Laura Smith: Good morning, everyone. I want to thank Mr. Vaccaro for putting his application forward for this very important position.

You talked about your background. I was very touched to hear about Nonna G and your journey through that, literally. Being a care provider is a very important com-

ponent of understanding the ecosystem of retirement communities and long-term care. And you talked about dementia, which is near and dear to my heart. But how do you feel your involvement with other corporate governance positions has prepared you for this role, aside from all of the very personable stories that you just provided?

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: In my time with the home builders, serving as CEO, we had a board when I started of 64 members, and then I worked through a governance process to reduce that to 23. But as the lead individual in that organization, you are managing the board of volunteers and their time and their energy, and you’re pulling from them their best expertise. You are also managing the finances and your responsibilities to your members. You have a membership base that is funding your work and you are responsible to them.

In that corporate environment, dealing with individuals who are also from large corporate environments, you come to understand the important roles of committees; of expertise around the table, collaboration and problem-solving as a group. All those things, I think, are key skills you want to bring to any regulatory authority, because the decisions you make within your mandate have a wide impact across the entire sector that you’re serving.

It’s also a code of ethics and behaviour: everyone understanding how they treat each other but also how they represent themselves. That’s part of it.

0910

Recently, I have taken on the role of president of my local soccer club. So now I sit in the chair as the president of my local soccer club, as a volunteer, and now I’m managing eight other invested parents, trying to make sure that we provide great soccer opportunities for our kids. Sitting not in a position of serving a board, but sitting in a position of leading a board, has also taught me the value of listening and hearing and understanding, and giving everyone the opportunity to really express themselves, but also giving everyone an opportunity to help solve problems and create opportunities. Those are the skills I believe I would bring to the board, along with my personal experience, obviously, in having navigated through the system as a caregiver.

Ms. Laura Smith: Thank you, and thank you for your service to Nonna G.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Pinsonneault: Go ahead, please.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Mr. Chairman, through you: Thanks for putting your name forward. I appreciate that. Your story is quite touching.

How can you take your professional experience in other health settings and apply to the RHRA?

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: The retirement home piece is part of a larger piece of care for our seniors. I talked about Nonna G’s falls, working through the hospital system, finding care when we returned her back to her condominium. It’s complicated. I think in my professional background, even what I’m doing now as a private citizen, things are complicated. So you need to be mindful of how one decision will impact the whole system.

I think my skill set, having been trained and worked in both a political environment and a legislative environment, an implementation environment, is to understand how every decision has to work to the greater piece. So I think about how the hospital system supported my Nonna G, but how ultimately, that wasn't the right place for her, and so they're moving her into the next system. All these systems combine.

I would like to believe that as professional people looking to serve in public service, we bring our best skills forward. But it is public service, so it's important that we also understand it's not always about the dollars and cents. It's also about what we are doing with care, what we are doing to make a difference, to make improvements. I think that's the skill set that I bring.

Conflict resolution is a key skill that you have to deal with when you're managing a board of 64 people, or a board of 23 or a board of nine, turning a conflict into an opportunity to have dialogue and find solutions.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you. That was a detailed answer. I appreciate that.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Pang. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Billy Pang: Mr. Chair, through you: Mr. Vaccaro, I can see from your experience that you have extensive work in both urban and rural areas. Could you please share how your experiences with rural and urban communities are related to this role?

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: Certainly. In my past roles, understanding community building and healthy communities, in that work—having strong retirement home options for people in rural Ontario is important. They are dealing with the same level of care needs that we have. When I think about places like Waterloo region and the growth of retirement homes in that region, it really reflects the fact that, even in those rural settings, they need service. They need areas of care. It's different in the sense of when they may trigger that need, but it's not different in the sense of they still need that opportunity to put their loved ones in a safe environment.

I have spent lots of time in my past life working with rural members, members of the associations who are sharing their stories and sharing the fact that a 30-kilometre drive to go see a loved one is not uncommon. Now, in rural Ontario, a 30-kilometre drive may only take 30 minutes. We know that in Toronto, a 30-kilometre drive could take four hours. That's their experiences. But I have come to realize, especially in this space, when I share my story with colleagues in rural Ontario, we share the same fundamental story: the need to provide care, put our loved ones in safe places, a standard of care that gives us comfort knowing that they're safe. Those are just universal realities as we try to care for people.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Sarrazin. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: Well, it was really nice to hear your presentation. I have to say that I think living with a loved one who actually was in a retirement home is a great way to understand the concept. What I found really

amazing about you as a person is your involvement with charities. You were mentioning the youth soccer club. How do you think being part of this will actually help you being on that board?

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: I've been president of my local soccer club for less than six months. I made the mistake of showing up to a meeting. I showed up to a meeting, I had an idea, and by the end of that meeting it was, "Well, you should be president."

I bring a level of experience both in managing boards and now in serving on one. I think public service is important, and we put ourselves out there. As MPPs, you've put yourselves out there to answer these tough questions of "Why?" As a private citizen now, I'm interested in public service, and this was an opportunity in an agency that, again, I have life experience with. I think I bring all of these things forward in everything that I do. Thank you for the question.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Thank you very much. That brings us to the end of the government's side.

We now turn our attention to the official opposition. Recognizing MPP Glover: Go ahead, please.

Mr. Chris Glover: Thank you for putting your name forward. Our role is to ask the tough questions. Let me just start with how you were previously the CEO of the Ontario Home Builders' Association, which is a large lobbyist for Ontario's development industry, and you have now founded a company that provides services for real estate agents. As you have worked primarily for the interests of real estate agents and developers, how will you remain neutral as member of the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority?

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: That's a great question; thank you. Yes, as part of the OHBA, I was a member of the lobbyists registry, and that was the work that I did. I've moved into the private sector.

Just to clarify what we are trying to do with our company: The name of the company is RIOS, a real estate industry operating system. We really see ourselves as an opportunity to work within the data management space for the real estate industry, both real estate, developers—everyone in that system; financiers and all the rest. I really focus my energy and my partner's energy on how we can create a better and more efficient data system, so we can make better decisions, whether they're government decisions in terms of the data they're looking for.

One of the struggles we had at OHBA and that government has in general is understanding what's happening in the housing system before you get to registry. Once you get to land registry, the data is there from the Land Registry Office, but before you get to registry, it's "What's happening? How many units have been sold? Where are they being sold?", and that management piece. My client base, if I can still use that language, is still very much the development industry.

I would say this: I have a personal story of why I am interested in this position. That personal story will keep me honest to my values and what is important to me. I'm interested in this opportunity because of Nonna G, because

of the time I spent with her navigating the system and the challenges I hear from friends who are going through it now, as they turned to me for advice. My personal story keeps me grounded in that reality.

I take public service very seriously. It's one of the reasons why I avoided anything in the regulatory space when I was with the home builders, but now I think it's the opportunity for me to step into this role. That's the best answer I can give you, sir.

Mr. Chris Glover: Okay. Let me ask some follow-up questions.

The RHRA's annual report has noted that there is an increased demand for regulatory interventions by the board to address the growing concerns of seniors living in for-profit and not-for-profit retirement housing. However, the RHRA is a fully self-funded body that relies on retirement home fees to run itself. How will you address the increasing demand for regulatory intervention while still complying with the restrictions of the RHRA's budget?

In other words, the RHRA gets funded by the companies that own the homes, not by the seniors who are living there. Yet the number of complaints last year increased by 14%, and in the previous year it was 66%. Obviously, the seniors are not getting the care that they need. How will you balance that? How will you advocate for the seniors?

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: RHRA would be no different than other self-governing, self-regulatory agencies who are funded by the organization that they license. That funding reality is a reality that runs across a number of these.

0920

Having said that, I think there are two levels to this conversation. The first level is the role of government to set the rules, the standards, the obligations, the expectations, and that's what government is there to do. RHRA lives through a legislative reality, and so it's important that government sets their priorities, their advice. And as members of this place, even as opposition members, you have a role in making sure that those things are heard and understood in government response. That's the first part of it.

The second part of it—and I take this part to be very serious—is that this is about public service and caring for our seniors, and the demands will continue to increase. The standard will continue to increase. That's to be expected. Then the question is balancing that reality of the demands against the other side of it, which is making it an effective, efficient system that people can access.

I think serving on the RHRA board, one of the responsibilities we have is to provide feedback to the government. Regulatory authorities provide feedback directly to government—

Mr. Chris Glover: Let me pick up on something you just said, because as well as the regulatory authority being funded fully by the companies that owned the retirement homes, one of the other issues is that a lot of the companies are not actually seniors' corporations. They do not have mandates, or their primary mandate is not to look after seniors. For example, Chartwell is a real estate investment

trust, and they closed a seniors' home and renovicted 200 seniors in Mississauga last year. They served notices to everybody, including a 103-year-old senior.

What would the role of the RHRA be and what would your role be in dealing with a situation like that, where a real estate investment trust is renovicting 200 seniors from what had been, for some of them, their home for decades?

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: That's a tough situation for everybody involved. I would say this: Sitting on that board, I would assume—and again, I'm not fully briefed on all of our powers—that as a licence-holder, we are making sure that a licensee is providing the appropriate notice and information before they make that decision.

I understand the challenge you're presenting, that licensees—this is not their core business; this is part of their business. But we are providing licences, and within that, there are expectations and obligations. So our job, first and foremost, as a regulatory authority is to make sure that they are following the rules as set out by our authority and the authority of my government.

The second half of that is the human impact of that decision, right? That is at the heart of public service. Again, if they followed the rules, and the rules have been followed, it doesn't mean that that's a good decision. The question then becomes, as an authority: What is the feedback that we can provide to government, so they understand that the rules have been followed and now government has to decide if these are rules appropriate? I think that, ultimately, is the responsibility. Now—

Mr. Chris Glover: Actually, I'm going to pass it to my colleague to ask you some questions.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Pasma, go ahead.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you very much for being here this morning, Mr. Vaccaro. I know it's not always the most comfortable experience, but it is an important part of our democratic process, so that the people of Ontario can have confidence that government appointments are being made on the basis of merit and not connections to the government, and that appointees are fully qualified for the position that they are being appointed to. So we appreciate you being here this morning.

I want to follow up on a similar line of questioning to MPP Glover. In my riding of Ottawa West-Nepean, there's been a very big issue for the past year of a retirement home provider, Alavida Lifestyles, jacking up fees by astronomical amounts on seniors: in some cases, more than \$30,000 a year. I couldn't afford a \$30,000-a-year increase in my housing costs. I doubt there's anybody in the room who could. I'm sure Nonna G wouldn't have been able to afford that either, and yet, at this point, it's entirely legal.

MPP Glover and I introduced a bill just on Monday that would change the legislation regarding fees, so that seniors could have some certainty about what fees they are paying and about what the fee increases will be. We've also seen a rise in the use of marketing discounts, where seniors are promised one fee to entice them to move in, and then once they've moved in, they're told that that discount has been

removed. Again, the fee can be increased by any amount that the retirement home provider wants.

What would you see as your role on the board of governors in addressing this issue of affordability for seniors and their capacity, on a fixed income, to be able to live in one of these retirement homes and have some certainty about what their finances will be for the rest of their lives?

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: I appreciate—and I appreciate that you appreciate—when people step forward, the need to answer these sorts of questions.

Let me separate this into two things. The role of the regulatory authority is obviously to implement government policy, government decisions. If a licensee is operating within the legal context—the rules, what have you—then, as a licensee, they are upholding their part of it. On the other side of that, the regulatory authority, it is the job of that authority to provide the government a regular feedback loop about the complaints coming in, the concerns being raised, so government can make the next round of good decisions. That's the reality of government decision-making: You make the first round of good decisions, you receive new information, you determine how the actors in the marketplace are playing, and now you make the next round of decisions.

So I think, as a regulatory authority, the responsibility should be to validate these concerns and then to report up, so that people in positions of decision-making can make the next round of decisions. I think that's very important, but it's also important to make sure that if the rules are not being followed, it's the role of this agency to take action—if the rules are not being followed.

I'll give you the second half of that, the personal half. It's incredibly difficult to manage the financial impact of someone you love in a retirement setting, because you are going to do whatever you can to ensure that they are comfortable. You don't want to disrupt where they are, so you will find a way. I'm sure we've all been through this, right? Whether it's with your kids or with your parents, you are their best advocate. You can't count on anybody else. So at the soccer club, we hear from parents who want better things for their kids. As an advocate for my Nonna G, I wanted better things for her every single day. So you have to advocate for those things.

I'm a firm believer that people need to express themselves, share what's going on. I'm a firm believer that regulatory authorities have an important role to validate and confirm. And I'm an extremely firm believer that government makes a decision, collects new information and then is prepared to make the next decision. I think that's how the system works best. But that feedback loop I talked about is key to all of these things. You've clearly taken that position, you've used your powers to present the issue, and government will now do its work from a regulatory side. If I am fortunate enough to be put in this place of public service, that's where I come from.

Again, I ground myself in my personal story. I don't look at this appointment as anything more than an opportunity to serve in a public space, to honour my grandmother and to hopefully help others in this area.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you. I really appreciate that answer, because I know more than two dozen seniors have had to move out of their homes in the past six months because of this fee increase. We know that seniors have increased risk of illness and mortality when they're forced to move from their home in the final years of their lives, and many of them have said they're losing their friends and their community, which is an awful thing to think of when we want our seniors to have a dignified retirement.

I hope one of the new initiatives of the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority is the collection of information from licensees. I would hope, in your role, you will be an advocate for including information on fees and fee increases in that role.

I just want to wrap up with some quick, uncomfortable but necessary questions. Have you ever been a member of the Progressive Conservative Party provincially?

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: No.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: What about the Conservative Party federally?

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: No.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Have you every donated to the Progressive Conservative Party?

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: Yes.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: How much did you donate?

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: Over the last 10 years, I've donated to all three parties. I donated, I would say, \$2,000 a year over the last 10 years to the Conservative Party, to the Ontario Liberal Party and donations to the NDP.

0930

Ms. Chandra Pasma: When you say "a year," that means a donation this year as well?

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: Yes.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay. Have you donated to the Conservative Party of Canada?

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: Yes, I donated during the federal election where Erin O'Toole was the leader. Let me just give a little context here, if you don't mind: In my role as an advocate with the OHBA, I believe that when people give you their time and engage you in thoughtful conversations, it's important to respect that relationship, and if that respect is an invitation to go to an event and you accept that, then you should be willing to contribute. It doesn't necessarily mean that you endorse their re-election, but it means that you respect the relationship, because they have given you their time and their energy and their ability to discuss about important issues.

So in my time as the OHBA CEO, before I left to be a private citizen, you would have seen that I made donations across the spectrum of all three parties, because I believe fundraising and supporting people who put themselves out there, especially if they're kind enough to give you their time and their attention—you should respect that relationship and not be afraid to support them, because campaigns cost money, and that's important.

As a private citizen, in the last number of years, I have given to the Ontario Liberal Party and the Progressive Conservative Party, again because as a private citizen,

there are decisions being made and people who are being kind with their time—

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Sorry, that concludes the available time allotted to this.

Thank you very much, Mr. Vaccaro, for your presentation. Thanks for coming.

Mr. Joe Vaccaro: Thank you all.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Thank you very much.

DR. ALISON BURGESS

Review of intended appointment, selected by government party: Alison Burgess, intended appointee as member, Durham College of Applied Arts and Technology board of governors.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Our second intended appointee today is Alison Burgess, nominated as member of the Durham College of Applied Arts and Technology board of governors.

Dr. Alison Burgess: Good morning.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Hello and good morning. Thanks for coming.

You may make any initial statement at your discretion. Following this, there will be questions from members of the committee. With questioning, we will start with the government followed by the official opposition with 15 minutes allotted to each recognized party. Any time you take in your statement will be deducted from the time allotted to the government.

You may proceed, ma'am. Thanks for coming.

Dr. Alison Burgess: Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today. I am very interested in becoming a board member for the Durham College board of governors and I appreciate your consideration.

I'm going to start with a little bit about me. I started off my career in science. I really loved post-secondary education. I became engaged in a research project in my fourth year of undergrad, and I really enjoyed that challenge. That led me to enter a master's program and ultimately obtain my PhD in neuroscience from the University of Toronto. I worked on the biology of the brain, how it develops and how that understanding can help us understand how brain diseases develop.

From there, I did a postdoctoral fellowship at the National Research Council and then ended up coming back to Toronto to work in a lab at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre with a scientist named Dr. Kullervo Hynynen. Kullervo was a world-renowned physicist and his work was really on drug delivery systems. I worked with him on drug delivery to the brain, focusing on novel treatments for stroke and Alzheimer's disease. The lab has had really great success and I'm very proud of my contributions to the team at that time.

For many reasons, I eventually decided to leave the science and academic world, and I moved to Ontario Tech University, which is here in Durham region, and I worked as a manager of research partnerships, where it was my role to connect industry and community partners to researchers at the university. This work led to many success-

ful collaborations with leaders across the Durham region community and beyond. It also led to collaborative grant applications and increased funding for the university.

It was during that time that I realized I really missed being in a classroom, and I was fortunate enough to take a part-time role teaching math and science at Durham College. I loved being in the classroom and seeing the impact that a great teacher can really have on students. I get a lot of energy, personally, from helping to ignite and foster that passion in others, and so this is a really rewarding time for me.

Eventually my career led me to the region of Durham where I began as the manager of corporate initiatives. I worked on government and community relations, and I continued to build and expand those relationships I had cultivated across the community. I now lead that government and community relations file, along with our corporate communications team, as the director of communications and engagement at the region of Durham.

I love the community that I live in. I've always been a big supporter, and I've had many volunteer roles, but as a mother of two daughters, I have spent a lot of time as a Girl Guides leader and as a treasurer for my local hockey team. Now that my daughters are in high school, there's more time for me to look for volunteer opportunities and give back to my community in ways that are of interest to me personally.

So when I saw this posting for a member-at-large for the Durham College board of governors, I immediately thought this would be a great fit. I really enjoyed the time I spent working at Durham College, I really value post-secondary education and by working at the region, I can understand and appreciate how important our post-secondary education institutions are to the community. I can bring my skills in analytics, strategic thinking and communications and my existing community relationships to this role. The vision of the college resonates with me and I'm really excited for the opportunity to contribute to their continued success.

Thank you very much for this morning.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): I now turn to the government side. Recognizing MPP Pinsonneault: Go ahead, please.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you for putting your name forward.

There is a growing concern and need to train individuals for health human resources in Ontario. From nursing education to medical education, there is a huge need for post-secondary institutions to focus on training the next generation of health care workers.

Specifically, how will you be able to leverage your experience as a woman in the STEM field to ensure Durham College continues to prepare students to be able to meet the labour market needs of Ontario today and into the future?

Dr. Alison Burgess: Thank you very much for that question.

First, I would say that Durham College is on this path already in training health and human services in the next

generation. I do feel, though, as a woman in STEM, that I do have a strong background in understanding what it takes to balance out a career. I think the world is balanced more now, but it certainly presents different challenges for women entering this field than it has traditionally held. So I plan on using my experience to bring forward the types of activities that I did, the types of pathways that I took. I'm happy to contribute to helping the college to continue to build programs to encourage students to enter those STEM fields.

One of the things that I know the college does very well is having internships and co-op programs where they have students actually go and enter these fields and try out these roles. That experiential learning is really critical, and that's really what I attribute that fourth-year project to, hooking me in that science field. So I think encouraging the expansion and continued success that they're having in those co-op and internship type of programs will allow students, including women, to get experience in the STEM fields and to look for careers in those fields.

If there are additional roles that the board of governors sees for me to contribute as a leader from this background, then I'm happy to take those on as well.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Pang: Go ahead, please.

Mr. Billy Pang: Chair, through you: Good morning, Alison. It's a good opportunity to meet with you this morning and listen to you sharing your experience and expertise.

I want to talk a bit about your research background. When people talk about research in Ontario, they usually think of big universities or research hospitals, but I think more and more, we are starting to see more colleges emerge as hubs for research and innovation in the region. As you have extensive experience in the research world, can you share with us how the college will continue to be a part of Ontario's research network, and specifically, the role you see for a college like Durham to play?

Dr. Alison Burgess: Thank you for that question. Yes, my experience is at one of those large hospitals and one of those large universities, and I really started with what we called basic scientific research—completely unknown. I learned a lot from that experience. However, I would say what draws me and where I value research is really the fact that we don't know the answer. We didn't know the answer about the work that I did in my scientific career. But we don't know the answer of a lot of things, and where the colleges play an incredible role is to that applied science.

So instead of the basic science back in the lab, how do we apply the tools and the technologies that we have available to us today in new ways? Those are still unknown research questions, and that is where I think the colleges play a great role in providing students that opportunity to try something and to answer a question that no one knows the answer to. That's what is really exciting about research in my opinion. It's not only that I don't know the answer; no one knows the answer, and that's why we're going to do this research. That's really, really

exciting and really rewarding. I found it really rewarding as a student. So to offer students who attend college programs that experience by looking at applied research questions, I think, is a really great opportunity to build out their skills and allow them to contribute to, essentially, the workforce of the future.

I already mentioned co-ops and internships, so I won't go through that again—but really great examples to see some of the problems that companies are facing these days and how students can use tools and technologies that they're learning about in their classroom and apply them to address those research questions that they will do in their careers as they move forward.

0940

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Rae. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you for your presentation this morning. The idea of bridging the gap between education and career skills is something often talked about within the post-secondary sector. As a candidate for the Durham board and someone who has been through the post-secondary education system as a student and educator, what are some of the gaps that you have seen? And what steps do you believe are necessary to better prepare young people for meaningful careers, especially students choosing to attend one of our great colleges in Ontario?

Dr. Alison Burgess: Thanks for that question. For sure, this is talked about, what that gap in skills is for students. Often, students get the technical skills in their classrooms. Certainly, Durham College and many of the other colleges across the province hire people with expertise in those fields, so they are experts who are able to provide those technical skills.

Sometimes what is talked about in the gap is the soft skills, for a generation that grew up using technology in a different way than many—than I certainly did, anyway—to develop those communication skills and how to interact in the workforce. I think Durham College already does a lot of this, as many of the colleges do, I expect: those additional seminars, workshops, training opportunities, in order to make sure that students have those experiences and understand what they're getting into.

The other thing that they do—and again, I'm going back to this co-op and internship—is at Durham region, we do bring on students from our local post-secondary institutions, including Durham College, for short periods of time as a summer student, or maybe as an intern, to give them experience to the work environment, so that they understand what the level of communications expertise is and how to interact in a professional environment, to help to build those soft skills in a safe environment, so that when they do graduate, they're able to have those skills that enable them to be successful when they get their full-time career.

We've benefited a lot in my professional life from bringing on students from local post-secondary and providing that skills gap education. I think other employers also have shared that sentiment, and I would be encour-

aging the college to help continue to expand some of those programs.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Smith. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Laura Smith: Through you, Chair: I want to thank you for bringing your application forward. You've talked a lot about partnerships, and for the purposes of my question, I want to circle around that issue. You talked about internships and co-ops, and what I'm interested in is talking about how local labour needs are addressed and the creation of partnerships within the community. As someone who works in the region of Durham and is now seeking an appointment to the college, can you talk about the importance of ensuring strong partnerships between colleges, municipal partners and local employers, specifically when dealing with labour issues?

Dr. Alison Burgess: That's a really great question. I do believe that—you said it very well—strong partnerships are critical to the success and growth of a community. We find at the region of Durham that our post-secondary education institutions, including Durham College, are critical to continuing the vibrancy, training people for local jobs and making sure that they're ready for those jobs so that they can continue to contribute to the local labour market.

Because I work in municipal government, one partnership that we established—we call it the CityStudio Durham program. It is a partnership between the region of Durham, several of our municipalities and the three local post-secondary education institutions, including Durham College. Essentially what happens is, I go to my municipal colleagues and I ask for what they're working on, what are the challenges that they're facing in their role. We put them on a portal. The college students, whether in class, whether through a placement or a summer position, end up coming and working on those challenges that we're facing in municipal government.

We find that through this program—hundreds of students come through it—we are building civic-minded people who understand and are attracted to municipal careers. That's sort of a new program for us. That partnership has really created quite a strong connection between the post-secondary education institutions and the regional government, and we've seen a lot of success and excitement from the students considering careers that they hadn't in the past.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Martin. Go ahead.

Mrs. Robin Martin: Thank you for putting yourself forward. I'm very excited about neuroscience, so when I hear about your background, I get all excited about that just because we're learning so much about the brain. It's kind of a last frontier within the human body, really. I read Dr. Norman Doidge's book about the brain that heals itself and got all excited about brain science. Anyway, good for you.

A college's board of governors is responsible for making very large decisions on behalf of that institution, like selecting the president, passing the budget and ap-

proving plans for future initiatives. As a potential board member, what would you do to ensure the future success and the continued success of Durham College and post-secondary education as a whole?

Dr. Alison Burgess: Yes, great question. I don't take this appointment lightly, for the record. I do understand the gravity and the seriousness of the role and will certainly take that seriously. The one thing I would say that I do bring is an analytics background and that research background. I don't take anything for granted. I always want to read the background study. You read that book; similarly, I'm going to want to read all of the materials and truly understand and be well briefed and well informed before I contribute to any board of governors decision.

The other point that I'll make, though, is I'm very happy it's not a board of governors of one. I know that there are others on the board, and they have a variety of experience and expertise. I look forward to working with them, hearing and sharing ideas to ensure that any decisions that are made are thoughtful and that they position the college well for the future.

Mrs. Robin Martin: Great answer.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Sarrazin.

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: Should you receive this appointment and, years down the line, your term comes to an end, what is the lasting impact you would want you or your fellow board members to leave?

Dr. Alison Burgess: Jeez—great question. The lasting impact—I would say that Durham College is on a growth trajectory, as are colleges across the province. We talked a little bit about their contributions to the local labour market, certainly within Durham region. They help to build a vibrant community. They help to keep our businesses going. They help to provide vibrancy to our downtowns and, certainly, the tourism industry. That student population is helping to build the next generation of Durham residents.

I think I would want to help continue them along that trajectory. They've been forthcoming and really at the forefront of things like new technology and adopting new technology. They came up with the AI Hub and established the AI Hub years ago, before we were all talking about AI. They're really at the forefront of that. That speaks to me about the innovation of the college, and I would love to be part of that legacy, to say that we continued on that upward trajectory.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): I want to thank you very much.

Now we will turn to the official opposition, recognizing MPP Pasma. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you very much for being here this morning, Ms. Burgess. It's not always the most comfortable experience to be here, but it's an important part of the democratic process, so that the people of Ontario can have confidence in government appointments. It's unfortunately not a practice that the government always lets us do for appointees, so we really appreciate you being here this morning and answering our questions.

I want to start with a question about the financial context of post-secondary institutions in Ontario, because we are really seeing them struggle. The government provides the lowest amount of funding per capita in the entire country. Tuition rates have been frozen for six years, so universities and colleges have really depended on international students as the only source of revenue that they could increase, and now, with the federal cap on international students, we're really, really seeing our post-secondary institutions reeling in trying to deal with this financial situation.

I note that Durham College has an incredible impact on the economy in the region of Durham—more than \$900 million—and I'm sure that's an issue that's near and dear to your heart, given your role within the region. So how will you work in your role on the board of governors to ensure that Durham College is able to remain robust, offer the much-needed programs and continue to have that really positive impact on the region of Durham, given the financial constraints that Durham is facing?

Dr. Alison Burgess: I guess I'll first start just by saying that I'm not an expert in how the funding works for Ontario colleges. Most of my experience has been working either at the university in that partnership piece or in the classroom, so I don't have a lot to contribute to the funding per capita.

I know at Durham College they do have a balance of students between domestic and international, and certainly in my role at the region of Durham, we are focused on that domestic student population and how much they contribute to the community. Many come from Durham; many don't. Many come from surrounding areas and then find a home in Durham, where we certainly, to your point, value the impact of that college on the development of the community.

0950

With respect to how to ensure that they are doing robust and offering the much-needed programs, one of the things that I think that colleges do very well—and Durham College, for sure—is the advisory committees. The programs have advisory committees where they will meet with the experts in those fields, whether they're professionals or business owners or industry leaders, to understand how those fields are changing, so that they're not teaching things that are out of date. They're focusing their resources that are available on programs that are positioning students for the careers that they are going to hold in the future, which I think is a way to maximize the efficiency of the programs and really make sure they are connected to the local and even broader labour market.

The other thing: I already mentioned the AI Hub a little bit. Those are example of ways to benefit students. Often through that hub, there are partnerships where companies come in and they offer extracurricular-type opportunities, outside-of-the-classroom opportunities, for students and, again, provide an enriched experience that will allow the student to be successful and get a robust education, while maximizing the efficient use of resources.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you very much.

One of the consequences that we are seeing of the financial situation of colleges is the closure of programs. Sheridan College just announced that they're suspending 28% of their programs and reviewing another 19%. In my riding of Ottawa West–Nepean, Algonquin College decided earlier this year to suspend their hairdressing program, even though there was a high demand and a wait-list for enrolment, because they just could not make the finances of the program work any longer. Niagara College has just announced that they are suspending their EA—educational assistant—program and their behavioural sciences and adult service worker programs, even though those are all fields that are in very high demand. As the education critic, I know schools are desperate for qualified EAs, yet these programs are not able to continue because of the financial situation of colleges in the province.

As you've mentioned, colleges are very much employment-focused, unlike universities, so we're talking about desperately needed workers within our economy. How within your role on the board of governors of Durham College will you work to ensure that Durham is able to keep meeting the needs of our economy, sectors where there is high demand for qualified college graduates, despite the financial constraints that Durham is facing?

Dr. Alison Burgess: Yes, great question. Again, I can't speak to any of the closures of the programs you mentioned, but I would just reiterate that the approach that I take to basically everything is really based on that research approach. I want to see the data. I want to understand the issue fully. I think the board already operates by that, but I'll certainly be bringing my approach forward to say, "Let's look at the data that we have. Let's do some analytics and make sure we are still meeting those market needs."

Also, relying on partnerships: I mentioned those industry associations that come in and guide the college on how the fields are changing. I think that's also really critical. We need to make sure we are listening to those industry leaders and those industry partners about where those needs are. So between doing our own research and relying on those that we have strong partnerships with, I think that will provide the board with a good foundation for making those decisions around what programs are required in order to continue to meet the labour force needs.

There are partnerships already between the college and the region looking at labour markets. We have a local labour market board that analyzes where the jobs are locally. That's also data that I think the board is likely to consider as they make these decisions.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you.

Another major challenge we are seeing in the sector is the financial security of students, particularly with the cost of housing and food. We are seeing students struggling so much to pay for the cost of housing that there are some students sleeping on campus, which I don't think anybody wants to see. Demand for food bank support among post-secondary students has grown massively. Student services that provide food banks are asking for help so that they can continue to meet that need.

We've also seen a rise in ancillary fees, because tuition is frozen and the provincial funding that is provided is so low. Those ancillary fees, of course, are coming from students who are already struggling with the cost of living.

What do you see as your role on the board of governors to ensure that there is support for and recognition of the financial insecurity of students?

Dr. Alison Burgess: Yes, great question. Just to address where you said that we have students sleeping on campus, I agree: That is not acceptable anywhere, for sure.

I can't get into the details, again, of the ancillary fees or where they're going, so I won't address that specifically, just because I don't have the background and the budget.

But just to note that my position at the region of Durham allows me to be very aware of the community supports that are available. There are food bank supports. We have outreach workers who connect people to housing. There are housing lists to get on. I don't know if we are connecting with students specifically, but there certainly are resources in the community that I'm aware of that are available to residents of Durham, including those attending for school. I would be providing that sort of network or that connection into the board of governors, to make sure that those resources are all being maximized, so that students are able to access the supports that they can within the community, so that they can safely be healthy when they attend post-secondary in Durham.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Speaking of health, we're seeing a crisis in mental health among our post-secondary students—not unique to the post-secondary sector; we're seeing the same crisis in children and youth, as well as adults. There's a real lack of community services. There's a wait-list of over 30,000 children and youth for mental health services in the community, and also challenges within the K-12 sector in getting mental health supports. But there's not enough mental health support on campus, as well, for students who need it.

As you say, we want students to be well. We want them to be able to focus on their post-secondary studies. What do you see as your role on the board of governors of Durham College in supporting the mental health of students and making sure that resources are there when somebody is brave enough to reach out and say they need help?

Dr. Alison Burgess: Great question. Mental health, as you say, is affecting so many people in our community—students, and including others in the community as well. We do know that services are difficult to come by sometimes. Certainly access to services is one, and that connection to how to reach out is sometimes a barrier. So again, it's just drawing upon that community experience to make sure everyone is very clear on how to reach out to community supports that are available to them.

We do hear sometimes, "I didn't even know this service was available," and so we need to overcome that, to make sure that students are aware of what services are available, so that that barrier of lack of understanding or lack of awareness is overcome. Again, I think it goes back to the data and evaluating the resources. What supports are available on campus? We need to look at that. What is the

wait-list on campus? How are students able to express their need for these supports? And when they do, what are the wraparound supports that come around them when those people come forward? Because it's not an easy thing to step forward and say that you're struggling with mental health.

I think we'd have evaluate that system. I'm sure the board is doing that, but I would certainly love to be part of that discussion. And then, I think it comes back to that budget question: How do we effectively manage resources if this is a need for the students that isn't being met?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you very much, Ms. Burgess. I'm going to turn over the rest of the time to MPP Glover.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Thank you.

Recognizing MPP Glover. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Chris Glover: Thank you, Ms. Burgess, for putting your name forward here. To be honest, if I had my druthers, I'd just ask you about direct delivery to the brain and what that means. I did a quick scan and I got introduced to the terms "nasal epithelium" and "subarachnoid space." Let me just ask one question about this: Is that how you are doing direct delivery of drugs to the brain?

Dr. Alison Burgess: Very quickly: There is a blood-brain barrier that protects our brain. It's very good for us, because the toxins that we ingest or inhale etc. throughout the day can't access our brain, which is such an important organ for us. But that limits drugs we deliver for other body parts to get into the brain, so we would use ultrasound to temporarily, for minutes, disrupt the blood-brain barrier and allow the drugs that we delivered into the blood to get to the brain, and then they would actually have the ability to function there as they do the rest of the body. That was sort of the summary of the research we did.

Mr. Chris Glover: Wow!

Interjections.

Mr. Chris Glover: Okay, I think everybody just perked up. They don't want me to go through the rest of the questions; they want me to keep asking you about this. But let me do my other questions.

The role of the board of governors at Durham College: I'm from Oshawa. My brother attended Durham College. I taught at different colleges and universities. The biggest concern that I have is—you were just mentioning mental health, and one of the issues for mental health is just that there's so much stress on students right now. There's financial stress. There's food insecurity that my colleague was just asking about.

The other source of stress is that there's a lot of gender-based and sexual violence, and this is happening at alarming rates on campuses across the province. There were three formal complaints and 16 informal complaints of sexual violence between December 22 and September 20, 2023 at Durham College alone. As a board member of Durham College, would you support a return of the Student Voices on Sexual Violence survey that would collect data on gender-based violence and sexual violence at schools such as yours?

Dr. Alison Burgess: It's a great question. I'm not aware of the survey specifically that you mentioned, but

the numbers are alarming. Certainly we'd be looking into what that survey did, who it polled and what the results were, if it was used in the past, to see if it made sense to deploy again. Certainly it's concerning to talk about gender-based violence and sexual violence on campus, and so we'd be looking at understanding what the needs of the students are and evaluating if that survey is the right tool or if there are other resources that need to be put towards that issue.

1000

Mr. Chris Glover: Durham College has a vision of inspiring learners to create success for themselves and their communities through the best in innovative and transformative education. How does your experience align with these goals at Durham College?

Dr. Alison Burgess: I really love the terms “innovative” and “transformative.” I do think the world is changing very fast, and I think having that background in research—I've also changed careers. There aren't many scientists who lead communication teams, truthfully, and so that varied experience that I've had I think indicates my willingness to transform and be innovative—not only in my career, but to pass that on to others. I think why that vision resonates so well with me is because of that thinking about how the world is changing, and how we can adapt with it and we can prepare others for success in the path that they go forward.

Mr. Chris Glover: Thank you.

I've got some quick, uncomfortable, but necessary questions. Have you ever been a member of the Progressive Conservative Party, either provincially or federally?

Dr. Alison Burgess: I was a member for the provincial party more than five years ago.

Mr. Chris Glover: Have you ever donated to the Progressive Conservative Party?

Dr. Alison Burgess: No. I've never donated to any party.

Mr. Chris Glover: Have you ever worked on a Conservative election campaign?

Dr. Alison Burgess: No.

Mr. Chris Glover: Did anyone ask you to submit an application for this position?

Dr. Alison Burgess: No. I saw it on LinkedIn.

Mr. Chris Glover: Those are all my questions. Thank you very much for putting your name forward. One day we'll have to have a conversation about direct delivery to the brain.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): That concludes the available time. I'd like to thank you, Ms. Burgess, for your presentation. Thanks for coming.

We'll now turn to concurrence. We will now consider the intended appointment of Joe Vaccaro, nominated as member of the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority board of governors. MPP Martin.

Mrs. Robin Martin: I move concurrence in the intended appointment of Joe Vaccaro, nominated as member of the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority board of governors.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Any discussion? Are members ready to vote? All those in favour? Opposed? The motion is carried.

We'll now consider the intended appointment of Alison Burgess, nominated as member of the Durham College of Applied Arts and Technology board of governors. MPP Martin.

Mrs. Robin Martin: I move concurrence in the intended appointment of Alison Burgess, nominated as member of the Durham College of Applied Arts and Technology board of governors.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Any discussion? Are members ready to vote? All those in favour? Opposed? The motion is carried.

The deadline to review the intended appointees selected from the November 22, 2024, certificate is set to expire on December 22, 2024. Is there unanimous consent to extend the certificate by 30 days? I heard a no.

That concludes the business of today. This committee now stands adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1004.

STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Chair / Président

Mr. David Smith (Scarborough Centre / Scarborough-Centre PC)

Vice-Chair / Vice-Présidente

Ms. Chandra Pasma (Ottawa West–Nepean / Ottawa-Ouest–Nepean ND)

Mr. Andrew Dowie (Windsor–Tecumseh PC)

Mr. Chris Glover (Spadina–Fort York ND)

MPP Zee Hamid (Milton PC)

Ms. Sarah Jama (Hamilton Centre / Hamilton-Centre IND)

Mrs. Robin Martin (Eglinton–Lawrence PC)

Mr. Billy Pang (Markham–Unionville PC)

Ms. Chandra Pasma (Ottawa West–Nepean / Ottawa-Ouest–Nepean ND)

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault (Lambton–Kent–Middlesex PC)

Mr. David Smith (Scarborough Centre / Scarborough-Centre PC)

Ms. Laura Smith (Thornhill PC)

Substitutions / Membres remplaçants

Mr. Matthew Rae (Perth–Wellington PC)

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin (Glengarry–Prescott–Russell PC)

Clerk / Greffier

Mr. Isaiah Thorning

Staff / Personnel

Ms. Pia Anthony Muttu, research officer,
Research Services