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Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina



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• (1715)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 17 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

I would like to start by acknowledging that I am joining you today from the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinabe and Chonnonton nations.

Pursuant to the motion adopted on June 9, 2020, the committee is meeting for the purpose of receiving evidence on the subject matter of the supplementary estimates (A), 2020-21.

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference. The proceedings will be made available by the House of Commons website. During this meeting, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the whole committee.

In order to facilitate the work of our interpreters and ensure an orderly meeting, interpretation in this video conference is like that in a regular committee meeting. Choose, on the bottom of your screen, floor, English or French.

If you are speaking in English, please ensure you are on the English channel. If you are speaking in French, please ensure you are on the French channel. As you are speaking, if you plan to alternate from one language to the other, switch the interpretation channel so that it aligns with the language you are speaking.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name, and when you are ready to speak, you can either click on the microphone icon or you can hold down the space bar, as I'm doing now, while you are speaking. When you release the bar, the mike mutes.

I remind everyone that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. Should any members request the floor outside of their designated time, they should activate their mike and state that they have a point of order. If a member wishes to intervene on a point of order that has been raised by another member, they should use the "raise hand" function.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute. If technical issues arise in relation to interpretation, or if you are accidentally disconnected, advise me or the clerk, and the technical team will work to resolve it. We may need to suspend as we need to ensure all members are able to participate fully.

Click on the top right-hand corner of the screen to ensure you are on gallery view.

In this meeting, we will follow the same rules that usually apply to opening statements and the rounds for questioning of witnesses. Each witness will have up to five minutes for their opening statement, followed by the usual rounds of questions from members.

Now it's time to get to our witnesses: the Honourable Carolyn Bennett, Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations; the Honourable Marc Miller, Minister of Indigenous Services; and the Honourable Dan Vandal, Minister of Northern Affairs.

Minister Miller, I was informed that you will be starting. Please go ahead for five minutes.

Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Indigenous Services): Thank you, Chair.

As I am in Ottawa, I do want to acknowledge my presence today on the traditional territory of the Algonquin people.

Kwe, good afternoon, bonjour.

Before I begin, I would like to say a few words on the current social climate. Right now, we are in a moment when Canadians are recognizing that there's unfairness built into our systems and that these systems have always been unfair towards indigenous peoples.

I look to my colleagues on this committee among others and across government to reflect and question ourselves on why injustice towards indigenous peoples still happens and how we can move forward in the short, medium and long term.

This is obvious. We need to ensure that there is accountability and that policing services are committed to ensuring that they are always worthy of the trust we put in them. Indigenous peoples and their communities are entitled to the best, and the best there is of the RCMP.

We need to constantly question and reflect on the issues of systemic racism in institutions, particularly those that hold exceptional powers, ones, at times, of life and death. The exceptional powers exercised by police services across Canada come with correspondingly exceptional responsibilities. We must keep fighting to remove systemic racism from these institutions, institutions that are meant to serve everyone living in this country equally and fairly.

With that, I welcome the opportunity to provide you with an update on our continuing effort to confront the evolving COVID-19 pandemic and to answer your questions on supplementary estimates (A).

As of June 15, Indigenous Services Canada is aware of 247 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in first nations communities on reserves. Of these, 208 individuals are considered to have recovered. In terms of Inuit in Nunavik, all of the 16 cases reported have recovered.

• (1720)

Our commitment to supporting communities in their response to COVID-19 has never wavered. That is why our 2020-21 supplementary estimates (A) reflect a net increase of \$1.7 billion. This was essential to address the needs of indigenous peoples during this global crisis. These supplementary estimates include \$950.5 million of statutory funding, mostly related to the COVID-19 response measures, in addition to new funding support for key programs such as Jordan's principle and child and family services.

To date, the Government of Canada has made roughly \$1.5 billion in distinctions-based funding available to indigenous peoples and northern communities to support their efforts to successfully battle COVID-19. Specifically, these estimates contain more than \$280 million to support Indigenous Services Canada's health response in first nations and Inuit communities. This is essential funding that will help to provide first nations and Inuit communities with additional health care providers; personal protective equipment; health infrastructure, specifically retooling existing community spaces or purchasing mobile structures to support isolation, screening and/or accommodations; and community-level infection prevention and control measures that are essential.

In addition to this, these estimates also reflect \$305 million for the distinctions-based indigenous community support fund. Of this amount, \$215 million was dedicated to first nations, \$45 million to Inuit, and \$30 million to Métis nation communities, plus \$15 million in proposals-based funding for first nations off reserve and urban indigenous organizations and communities.

An additional \$75 million was also sought for organizations supporting first nations individuals off reserve and Inuit and Métis living in urban areas, as well as \$10 million in funding for emergency family violence prevention shelters on reserve and in Yukon.

[Translation]

As part of our COVID-19 response, we are also providing \$260 million to respond to financial pressures on income assistance.

Outside of funding to support our COVID-19 response, these supplementary estimates also include \$232 million to support the ongoing implementation of Jordan's principle, and \$468.2 million to support the ongoing delivery of the first nations child and family services program. These investments demonstrate the government's ongoing commitment to fully implementing the orders of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal.

This investment more than doubles the program's budget, bringing it to nearly \$1.7 billion. Funding will be used to ensure that first nations children and families are getting the services they need.

[English]

You'll note that we have also made a few other announcements recently. These items will be reflected in future supplementary estimates. These include \$75.2 million in new investments to support first nations, Inuit and Métis nations post-secondary recent graduates impacted by the pandemic, and \$440 million in funding in support of indigenous businesses and the indigenous tourism industry in response to the hardships created by COVID-19.

I will close by saying that we are committed to responding to the needs of first nations, Inuit and Métis and to stopping the spread of COVID-19. We're committed to getting more nurses, paramedics, nursing stations and health centres to help those who need it most.

I want to take a moment, as I close, to thank all health care professionals working in indigenous communities for their continued dedication and determination to ensure that quality and culturally appropriate care, testing and treatment are provided during this pandemic.

I want to thank members for this opportunity to meet with you today, albeit virtually.

Again, I am happy to answer any and all questions.

Meegwetch. Nakurmiik. Merci.

• (1735)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now we go to the Honourable Carolyn Bennett, Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations.

You have five minutes, Minister Bennett.

[Translation]

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I am joining you today from my home in Toronto, on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit. I would also like to recognize the traditional territories from which all of you are participating.

I am pleased to be here today to speak to the supplementary estimates (A) for Crown-Indigenous Relations.

Officials from Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs are also online to help respond to your questions, led by our deputy minister, Daniel Lee Quan-Watson.

[*English*]

This has been an emotional time. We have all been upset by the images on our screens and the undeniable evidence of systemic racism in Canada. It is the basis of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls and the over-incarceration of first nations, Inuit and Métis.

I know that everyone on this committee wants to ensure that Canada is investing in making amends for the past and in putting in place the concrete actions to make real change.

The estimates for CIRNA include key initiatives and new funding totalling approximately \$748.7 million for Crown-Indigenous Relations.

This funding will ensure that we can continue the concrete work to renew the relationship between Canada and first nations, Inuit and the Métis nation, to support their visions of self-determination and to advance reconciliation.

The estimates re-profile \$481.2 million for the Federal Indian Day Schools Settlement Agreement and \$260 million in sixties scoop funding to ensure sufficient funds are available for individual compensation and to support ongoing administration costs of the settlements. In both cases, the re-profiled funds will ensure that there is no funding shortfall and that Canada can promptly make payments to survivors.

As you know, the McLean implementation date was delayed as a result of several court appeals.

The sum of \$500 million has already been transferred to the sixties scoop claims administrator, and the transfer of an additional \$250 million of compensation will be determined once the total number of eligible claims is known. Eligible class members have now already started receiving partial payments of \$21,000 each.

The estimates also request \$6 million to support the co-development of a national action plan in response to the issues identified in the final report and the calls for justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Our hearts are with the families of the missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and two-spirit and gender-diverse people and the survivors. Our government, indigenous leaders, survivors, families and provincial and territorial governments are working hard to co-develop the national action plan that will set a clear road map to ensure that indigenous women and girls and two-spirit+ people can be safe wherever they live.

We will not let the families and survivors down. We have already put in place concrete actions to end this national tragedy as documented on my department's website. We are grateful for all the work of all of our partners towards a national action plan. As you know, prior to COVID-19, work to develop the plan was well under way, and indigenous women's organizations had received funding to engage their communities.

The funding in the estimates will further support national and regional indigenous organizations and groups to engage with their members, and families to engage in ensuring that the national action plan is accountable.

As we have seen with COVID-19, better data is essential in being able to assess results. We are working to determine the appropriate indicators and reporting by partners to ensure an effective plan. This money that is in the supplementary estimates today will ensure that we will be able to measure, adapt, measure, adapt for the next five years.

We cannot let the families and survivors down. We promised concrete actions to stop this national tragedy. We owe it to them to be accountable for the results.

I look forward to your questions.

Thank you, *merci, meegwetch*.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Now for our third presentation, we have the Minister of Northern Affairs, the Honourable Dan Vandal.

Minister Vandal.

Hon. Dan Vandal (Minister of Northern Affairs): *Kwe. Hadlookut. Tansi.* Greetings and *bonjour*.

I want to acknowledge that I'm speaking to you from my office in Saint Boniface—Saint Vital, Treaty 1 territory as well as the traditional homeland of the Métis Nation, and a city that is now home to many Inuit.

I'm happy to be here today with Minister Miller and Minister Bennett to clarify and contextualize the actions the Government of Canada has taken and continues to take to assist indigenous nations and all northerners during this COVID-19 pandemic. I also thank you for this opportunity to discuss the important work Northern Affairs is doing to confront and mitigate the situation in regard to COVID in the north.

I'd like to take the time to thank the public service for their adaptability and professionalism. They have been working under very difficult circumstances these last few months in their commitment to serving Canadians.

We recognize that many Canadians are facing financial hardships, and they are concerned for their health, their jobs and their families. This is especially true in Canada's north, but there are exceptional challenges in meeting the unique needs of northerners in this pandemic.

[Translation]

The supports I will speak to today augment ongoing funding and programs to help those living in remote and northern communities.

These estimates include key initiatives and new funding totalling approximately \$879.5 million. Of that amount, \$130.8 million is for Northern Affairs. This includes \$15.9 million in vote 10 grants and contributions for the north, of which \$10 million is to support research and higher education in Canada's north, and \$6 million is to support planning activities led by the Government of Northwest Territories for the proposed Taltson hydroelectricity expansion project.

[English]

In response to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic, we have committed to additional investments and expanded measures and support for the north, which are included in these supplementary estimates. Our government's objective is to provide needed support to address the concerns facing the north, including support for health and social services and nutrition, as well as air transport. This is based on critical priorities identified by the territories in order to prepare for and respond to the pandemic and to avoid the spread of the virus.

We also recognize the increased costs of many essential goods in the north. Families are facing increased financial pressures and should not be worried about how to pay for nutritious food or essential household items. That's why we have committed up to \$25 million to support enhancements to Nutrition North Canada, further safeguarding food security for people living in the north.

This funding will help ensure that Nutrition North Canada fulfills its mandate to improve access to healthy foods through nutritional education and subsidies. By doing so, we will help to alleviate the costs of food in isolated communities. We have seen recently what this means on the ground in cutting the cost of flour in half and making milk more affordable so that people can afford a four-litre bag rather than the one litre that they may have previously purchased. This support is in addition to the harvesters grant, which was developed in direct collaboration with indigenous partners. This grant is helping northerners access traditional foods by lowering the cost of getting out on the land.

We have invested up to \$72.6 million to address urgent health care and social service needs in the territories in response to COVID and, as you know, airlines are a critical link in maintaining the supply chain for the movement of essential goods and services. That's why we have provided up to \$17.3 million to enable the continuation of northern air services supporting essential resupply and medical services in the north. We recognize the essential role that a focused and reliable air network plays in enabling the movement of essential goods and services in response to the pandemic.

[Translation]

Funding has been disbursed already for the urgent healthcare and social support needs in the territories in response to COVID-19 and to enable the continuation of northern air services supporting essential resupply and medical services in the north.

We continue to work closely with indigenous partners as well as provincial and territorial governments to ensure that northerners get through this difficult time.

[English]

I want to thank you again for this opportunity to be here today. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much to all of our ministers.

Now we go to our questions. The first round is six minutes, and I have Bob Zimmer, Adam van Koeverden, Sylvie Bérubé and Mummilaq Qaqqaq.

Bob Zimmer, go ahead, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is to Minister Vandal. It's great to have you at committee today.

It was well over two months ago that the Yukon and Northwest Territories and Nunavut chambers of mines wrote to you, raising the issue of how non-revenue-generating businesses like the north's mineral exploration industry are ineligible for the Canada emergency wage subsidy. As you know, Canada's mineral industry raises billions of dollars in revenue to explore...and yet due to the government's definition of revenue for the Canada emergency wage subsidy, these businesses are still unable to access this program.

Does the government plan on changing the definition of "revenue" for the Canada emergency wage subsidy to ensure that our north's vital mineral exploration industry does not get left behind?

Hon. Dan Vandal: We recognize that mining is the economic backbone of northern communities, and we support mining industry workers and their families. Mining produces more than \$3 billion in minerals annually and more than 10,000 direct and indirect jobs. We are working hard to respond to the challenges posed by this pandemic. Emergency response payments, wage assistance and small business relief are flowing to meet the critical needs of those who require it.

I had a good meeting with the chamber of mines about a month ago. I'm working closely with the Minister of Natural Resources towards this issue. I look forward to coming back with help that will be tangible and will be of aid to the mining industry.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you for that, Minister.

I know it's urgent. Coming from the mouths of the chambers themselves, they said that short of tourism, mining is the industry and they really need help.

I want to ask you about a specific line item in the estimates. It's on page 2-20, and it's "Contributions for promoting the safe use, development, conservation and protection of the North's natural resources, and promoting scientific development for Indigenous Peoples and the North". The estimate to date is \$147 million and the supplementary estimate is another \$6.6 million on top of that, so the revised and total estimate is \$153,792,914.

With that kind of money, Minister, we're wanting to know where that is going and what that's being spent on.

Hon. Dan Vandal: That's an excellent question.

I will turn to the DM to clarify that question for Mr. Zimmer.

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson (Deputy Minister, Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs): I believe that piece is not actually in the supplementary estimates today, but in the mains, if I understood the question correctly. I'll get the ADM for northern affairs—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It's in the supplementary estimates. It's on page 2-20.

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: Okay. Sorry about that.

I'll turn very quickly to the assistant deputy minister for northern affairs who works directly with that, rather than taking up more time myself.

Mr. Serge Beaudoin (Assistant Deputy Minister, Northern Affairs Organization, Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs): I wonder if our chief financial officer would have the details of that in front of her. I don't have that figure in front of me.

• (1740)

Mr. Bob Zimmer: If I could get that after committee, that would be much appreciated. Certainly that's a lot of money, and I'm curious to know where that's being spent.

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: Absolutely. We will do that right away. Sorry about that.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Here is my third question. Airlines are a key service in the north, carrying essential goods, services, medical supplies and personnel to remote communities.

Is the government planning to reduce the costs related to fuel excise taxes as recommended by the Northern Air Transport Association? What about other related fees, like airport landing fees? Are any steps going to be taken by the federal government to assist our northern airlines in reconfiguring aircraft in order to manage the risk of COVID-19 virus?

Minister Vandal?

Hon. Dan Vandal: Yes, that's an excellent question.

I know that in April we announced \$17.3 million to support a focused and reliable air network for all three territories and the mov-

ing of essential goods, medicines and foods. The funding has been disbursed, with \$3.6 million to Yukon, \$8.7 million to the Northwest Territories and \$5 million to Nunavut. Those consultations are ongoing. I know that the public service is meeting with the industry, as is Minister Garneau, to look at how we can further help the industry. Those decisions have not been made yet, but I know those discussions are ongoing. I agree that it's essential to the north.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Do you have a timeline for when those answers will be forthcoming? I know that some of these industries are hanging by a thread.

Hon. Dan Vandal: I don't have a precise timeline, but I would say sooner rather than later.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: What about the mining industry? I know that conversation is ongoing, but as you know, the window for exploration is very narrow. I'm even further north, in British Columbia, and we have a solid four months of what we would actually call summer. I know that further north it's even more limited. When do you expect to have those answers for the mining industry as well?

Hon. Dan Vandal: I know the conversations are occurring. There's a lot of communication among the different departments of the public service, and I hope those answers will be coming very soon.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thanks very much for attending, Minister. Again, I appreciate your efforts.

Hon. Dan Vandal: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we have Mr. van Koeverden.

I had Ms. Zann, but I'm told that technically it's difficult, so you have the floor for six minutes, Mr. van Koeverden. Please go ahead.

Ms. Lenore Zann (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Chair, I don't think he's here.

The Chair: I'm sorry. You sound clearer now, Ms. Zann. Can you go ahead?

Ms. Lenore Zann: I just wanted to say thank you so much to the ministers for being here today. I know that it's been a very difficult time for all of us, and I know that you care deeply about the people of this country and the indigenous people of this country. I just wanted to say that we're all in this together and we need to make things better for the indigenous people of Canada from coast to coast.

Minister Bennett, with respect to the co-development of a national action plan in response to the issues identified in the calls for justice in the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, is that investment of \$6 million for a single year or is it going to be ongoing funding to support that process?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I'm very pleased to report that will be ongoing for the next five years. We really do believe that in order to have a national action plan that is accountable for results, we will have to be measuring and adapting the plan. We had always said it would be "evergreenable", but working with our partners, the families and the survivors on the necessity of being able to update the plan regularly based on getting results is what the major part of that investment will be.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you.

How do you propose to go forward? Or is this part of what we are actually waiting for now? How are the families going to be involved as we move forward?

Tanya Brooks was a missing and murdered woman, and we walk every year in her honour. The family lives here in Millbrook First Nation. What do you suggest is the best way to be moving forward?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think that what a number of the families and survivors have said is that they also want to have an ability to influence their local jurisdiction's plans. Each of the provinces and territories will have their own chapter and their own plan. We were inspired by the local plan for the Yukon Territory, where the first nations, the families and the women's circle, together with the government, have developed a very impressive plan.

We will be seeing that again. In Nova Scotia, the families will be included. I think it's coast to coast to coast. Also, organizations like Pauktuutit, the Michif women and NWAC will be involving families as we go forward. Certainly, this investment in the money will make sure that families are able to help us improve the plan as we go forward over the next five years.

• (1745)

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you, Minister.

To get to the nitty-gritty of the racism that is at the root of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, we have to take a look at the fact that it's partly about respect.

For one thing, women are not seen to be respected as equal citizens in the eyes of some men, and then when you add on somebody who is racialized, it's even more difficult for them. Anybody whose ever gone through a sexual assault of any sort, which many of us unfortunately have, know what it's like to be just an object and not actually thought of as a human being.

What are your thoughts about what we can do as a government, as individuals and as members of Parliament to change that old-fashioned and just really despicable mentality?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think that as we've seen over these recent weeks—validating what indigenous people have been experiencing in their lived experience forever—this is something that has to be examined in each of us and in every institution in Canada.

Certainly, when we began the pre-inquiry to actually hear about the sexism and racism, not only in what they experienced in policing or in the justice system, but as you say, in a hospital or after a sexual assault, in education, in post-secondary.... This is everywhere—

Ms. Lenore Zann: Or even walking along the street.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes, and walking along the street.

One of the things that really struck me at that time was that for a family with a daughter who was missing, if it got accidentally reported that the daughter was Caucasian, the family would feel that they shouldn't correct it, because they felt that the search would be less...it would be "oh, it's inevitable", or.... Also, on the quality of the investigation, the charges laid, the plea bargaining and the sentencing, everything seemed to be different to the families if it was an indigenous person who had been missing or was found murdered. That is their lived experience.

The Chair: We're at time right here. Thank you very much.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you so much, Minister. I really appreciate that.

The Chair: Madam Bérubé, you have the floor for six minutes, please. Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses who are participating in our committee meeting. I also want to thank the technicians and the interpreters, who are essential.

I am on the traditional territory of the Algonquin, Anishinabe and Cree of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou.

My question is for Minister Bennett.

Ms. Bennett, in your mandate letter, you were tasked with drafting legislation to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the end of 2020. The deadline is approaching and time is running out.

Will you commit to introducing a bill as soon as Parliament resumes in September?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: With my colleague, Minister Lametti—and this is very important with regard to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples—

[*English*]

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq (Nunavut, NDP): Apologies, Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Ms. Bennett, I believe you need to put your translation on the French channel.

• (1750)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I'm sorry.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: Thank you, Chair.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: With respect to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, along with my colleague Minister Lametti, we have committed to jointly introducing legislation to implement the Declaration by the end of 2020. That commitment has not changed.

We will work closely with our indigenous partners, the provinces and territories, and other stakeholders, on how to move this important work forward and determine how to proceed when Parliament resumes regular sittings.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: So I must understand that we will finally be able to resume our parliamentary work by September, and put forward legislation.

I cannot hear you, Ms. Bennett.

[*English*]

The Chair: Something has happened with your microphone, Minister. It doesn't show "mute", but we're not hearing the sound.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Once Parliament resumes sitting in the fall, Mr. Lametti and I hope to introduce a government bill that will follow through on our commitment to indigenous peoples.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you.

Métis and non-status Indians are excluded from the sixties scoop class action settlement.

What do you intend to do to make reparations for the harm they have suffered? When will they be compensated?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: As far as the Métis nation is concerned, it is very important that they have their own process. Canada's Métis nation must have a process to present to its members.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Will you work to rectify the situation?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: At a previous committee meeting, you stated that, according to Chief Ghislain Picard, Quebec first nations need nearly 8,000 housing units. For more than 20 years, the AFN-QL has been asking for changes in this regard. How do you plan to improve the supply of housing?

My question is for you, Ms. Bennett.

Hon. Marc Miller: I can answer that question.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Yes, of course, Mr. Miller.

Hon. Marc Miller: The capital investments our government has made in housing have been for housing in general. In terms of our investments in housing for indigenous people, we have recognized that it has not been enough, and indigenous people are obviously suffering as a result, including through increased vulnerability to COVID-19.

As we emerge from this epidemic, we will therefore have to ask ourselves what level of capitalization exists across Canada, and not only in Quebec, to really address the problem of housing and overcrowding that may exist in the communities. I also include the Inuit communities, who are vulnerable to lung disease, to which over-

crowding is a major contributor, especially given COVID-19, and tuberculosis, which is present in some communities.

We must all reflect on this. Above all, we must ensure that we make adequate investments in indigenous communities to overcome this plague.

● (1755)

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. That's your time.

Now, Ms. Qaqqaq, you have six minutes.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: *Matna.*

Thank you, Chair, and a shout-out to the IT team and translation for always being so great with all of us.

Thank you to the ministers for being here today. With my time crunch, I'm going to ask that you keep your responses to about a minute .

My first two questions are for Minister Miller.

First, the Inuit child first initiative was meant to assist Inuit children and parents. Instead, we hear stories of unbelievable hoops that parents need to jump through. A woman from Iqaluit told the Nunatsiaq News she had applied seven times, writing over 25,000 words, with over 50 appointments with qualified professionals and over 40 supporting letters, among many other items, just in the application process.

That is completely outrageous. We need to ensure Inuit children have access to fulfill their needs. What is being done to make this initiative work for children and parents?

Hon. Marc Miller: I thank the member for that very, very important question.

I am very conscious about your time. I do recognize that the child first initiative has been undersubscribed and that we need to deliver that flexibility, but I want to allow the time for my associate, Deputy Minister Valerie Gideon, to answer on that point.

Chair, could we pass that over to Valerie, please?

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms. Valerie Gideon (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, Department of Indigenous Services): Very quickly, it's just to say that the Inuit child first initiative right now is an interim approach. We are committed to working with the National Inuit Committee on Health on an approach that will meet the needs of Inuit across Inuit Nunangat.

We are consistently approving requests, and we've approved a number of requests related to COVID-19 as well, but we do believe that, working with the land claim organizations, there can be a simpler way to manage the initiative, which would be led by Inuit for Inuit.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: For my next question, my colleague brought forward motion number 174, a national suicide prevention action plan, in May 2019. Part of that motion stated, “conducting within 18 months comprehensive analyses of high-risk groups”. This was just over a year ago.

We know that Nunavut has the highest suicide rate. What has been done and what is going to be done to assist communities that have needed such resources for years?

Hon. Marc Miller: This is part of the undertaking that I undertook towards indigenous peoples when I was asked to serve as minister: to move forward on a national suicide prevention strategy. Some of the leaders in that area were the Inuit, with their suicide prevention strategy.

You will note that the 2021 supplementary estimates provide \$5 million in new funding to support the continued implementation specifically of the Inuit-designed and Inuit-led Inuit suicide prevention strategy. This is a long-term solution tailored by Inuit to deal with the effects and the prevention of suicide, and this is something that is done through distribution of funds to Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, which you are well familiar with, and the four land claim organizations.

This is building, of course, as you mentioned earlier, on the first three years of the implementation, and the funding will continue for the strengthening of suicide prevention strategies across Inuit Nunangat.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: I've heard comments from constituents that they wish the federal government would react to our suicide crisis the same way we've been reacting to the COVID-19 pandemic.

My next two questions are for Minister Bennett.

There are institutions across the country that the federal government has refused to recognize as day schools, even though they clearly were. What was the reasoning to cut more people out of being able to access compensation? Also, when will you make sure that everyone who has suffered from trauma through these programs is compensated?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you very much for the question.

We believe that a lot of the agreements to date have been based on court action. We don't want anybody to be left out, and we are committing to anyone who was part of a day school or harmed in any way just by going, and then, like all agreements, if there was physical or sexual abuse.... All of these agreements make that part of the way forward for healing. This is really very serious, and we feel that we've moved with McLean, and now we will move on with others.

• (1800)

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: I can give you a list to make sure that we are including everyone.

Pauktuutit has requested \$20 million to support five shelters across Inuit Nunangat and in Ottawa. In recent announcements, we have not heard of this inclusion. While we know that women in the north are three times more likely to experience violence, over 70% of communities in Inuit Nunavut do not have safe spaces.

The delay in the response to the MMIWG report is nothing but disappointing. When will the federal government assist in providing the much-needed safe spaces for Inuit women and girls?

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you.

The member might have noted the undertaking of the government a couple of weeks ago to invest \$50 million into women's shelters and sexual assault centres across Canada to help with their capacity over the long term. This is something that does not exclude Nunavut.

This is funding—let me be clear about this—that works with CMHC to deliver that to the institutions and representatives that will administer it, and I have had successive talks with Pauktuutit. This does not exclude their other ask, which is in relation to shelters across Inuit Nunangat, but this can be a partial answer to that request. I am encouraged by the discussions we had, but they will be ongoing as to their capital needs, and we are obviously dedicated to making sure that—

The Chair: Thanks—

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: Chair, I know I'm well over time.

Thank you.

The Chair: I'm sorry. Thank you.

Mr. Viersen, you are first up on a five-minute round.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our guests and witnesses for being here today.

I also want to thank Mr. Powlowski for giving us a great tour of his house when trying to find some headphones earlier. I appreciate that too.

My questions will be directed to Minister Bennett. Thank you for being here.

With 14 first nations in my riding, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls matters a lot to many of my constituents. One of the chiefs, Chief Billy Joe, lost his youngest daughter, Bella Laboucan-McLean, a few years back in Toronto. Initially, the Toronto police called her death a suicide, and then later that was changed to a suspicious death. To this day, the family doesn't have any answers, and we continue to look for answers. We're looking to have the response to the national inquiry help out with that.

Your mandate letter calls for you to lead the response to the inquiry, but it appears that the national action plan launch has been postponed. Minister Bennett, can you confirm that it has indeed been postponed?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you for the question.

The story of Chief Laboucan and Bella is one that really underlines how much work we have to do. This was a tragedy that happened here in Toronto. I think we are feeling now that the family liaison units that were set up at the launch of the commission itself are helping families to navigate the justice system in a better way and to access healing.

I think there have been families where.... The FILU here in Ontario commissioned the documentary *Audrey's Story*, where the chief coroner has reopened the case. I think, again, this is about justice for the families, healing for the families and survivors, as well as putting in the concrete measures to stop this tragedy.

Because this is the first-ever national inquiry, it means that all the provinces and territories are working on their plan, their chapter, as well as the distinctions-based lens that will allow first nations, Inuit, Métis and two-spirited and gender-diverse people to have their own views in a national action plan.

Arnold, I think the thing that really matters is that it works. It can't be a national action plan that sits on a shelf. That's why the money in the supplementary estimates today is so important. It will allow us to choose the indicators, work with families and survivors, and make sure that we're measuring/adapting, measuring/adapting, and getting the results. We cannot let those families and survivors down.

• (1805)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: On what date can we expect the release of this national action plan?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: We are working as hard as we can. As I said, when it became clear that we weren't going to make it this month around the anniversary of the final report.... We will work continuously to be able to get the kind of report that the families and survivors will see is serious and accountable. We are working with the provinces and territories—all of the provinces and territories.

In your province, Minister Wilson has been amazing. I spoke with Alberta's organization for the advancement of indigenous women this morning.

There is lots of work to do, and we want to make sure this is an effective plan that will stop this national tragedy.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Will your government be supporting all of the calls for justice from the inquiry?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The issue now is that we've received them all, and we are engaging with our partners to develop a national action plan, which will outline the priorities of our partners to be able to put in place concrete action to stop the tragedy.

As you know, there is a website that documents the actions to date. As we said, we wouldn't wait for the final report to put in place the kinds of things that Mumilaaq talked about, whether that's around shelters, changes to child and family services, or what we are living right now, dealing with the racism and sexism in our institutions. The national action plan will—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Minister. We're way over time, and I want to make sure everyone gets a chance.

Also, to our speakers with earbuds, the interpreters really need to hear you clearly, so some of you may need to move the microphone a bit closer to your mouth to enable that.

Mr. Battiste, you are next, and you have five minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Miller, within our budget I was pleased to see an increase in funding for Jordan's principle. I'd like to acknowledge the work they are doing and the difference that these workers are making. Their work has been vital, both on and off reserve, to help those who have slipped through the cracks in health, education and a lot of areas where indigenous people had nowhere else to turn but to them.

How will our recent funding help us reach full implementation of Jordan's principle, and what are some of the challenges that have surfaced during COVID that we are able to address with this funding increase?

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, MP Battiste, for what is really an excellent question that goes to the heart of some of the work that Indigenous Services Canada does.

Mr. Chair, at the end of my statement I will pass the microphone over to ADM Valerie Gideon to show some of the daily work that we do at Indigenous Services Canada. I'm going to quote numbers, but behind those numbers are kids whose lives are being transformed by the implementation of Jordan's principle by this government. It's key, as part of our work with first nations, to ensure that this principle is being.... It's a sacred one to be upheld. The children really have access to products and services that they support, need and have the right to have.

The member has noted that supplementary estimates (A) provide \$232 million in new funding to support the continued implementation of this principle. It brings the total budget for Jordan's principle up to \$668 million. This ensures that children receive access to the health, social and educational products, services and supports they need, as well as speech and language pathology, physiotherapy, mental wellness supports, education assistance and mobility aids.

During this COVID period, those needs have become more acute as schools are shut down. As those needs become more specific, it's tailoring critical needs within the home. That has put pressure on the system, but it's welcome pressure because it is something that we need to fulfill as part of our duty to indigenous peoples.

On that note, I will pass the microphone over to Valerie Gideon.

• (1810)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Valerie, you have one minute, please, because I have another question.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I'll just say that we were actually able to provide services to children who would have normally relied on services being provided in school, and that would be the same with respect to food for those vulnerable families. We were also able to provide some virtual mechanisms for families to be able to access supports. That included laptop technologies, for instance, or anything that they required, including connectivity supports. Those are concrete examples of what we've been able to do during COVID-19.

In terms of challenges, I would just say that the volume continues to increase. We had a 150% increase in the number of requests approved between 2018-19 and 2019-20, and we are going to continue to see that increase. I think that supporting first nations communities and organizations to really be able to lead the way in terms of addressing more systematically gaps that children are confronted with would be a sustainable approach going forward.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Thank you, Valerie.

Minister Miller, during COVID, mental health has been something that we've heard a lot about in Canada. We've seen that the most successful models are where the first intervention is done by indigenous people themselves, often in indigenous languages, through social media or phone calls, instead of law enforcement.

With the recent deaths of indigenous Canadians in New Brunswick, I'm wondering if the minister can speak about how our government is making mental health a priority and about what supports our government is providing to ensure that indigenous models of intervention are being utilized.

Hon. Marc Miller: Jaime, this is something that we've seen throughout the pandemic: the increased demand for mental wellness support with the corresponding stress, anxiety and fear that COVID has created. As you know, the solutions that are best led are those within community. As we look at past weeks and question whether police really should be doing a number of these interventions that turn on mental health situations, it's obvious and it jumps out that work needs to be done to ensure, in short order, that these supports are provided even more so than they are today.

I'll give you some of the examples that we've seen from our perspective in supporting mental wellness. There's been an increase of 52 community-led wellness teams since 2015, 63 across Canada. The great example that we have is the great work being done by Nishnawbe Aski Nation's choose life initiative, which is benefiting upward of 22,000 high-risk youth and children. There are the implementation of the 24-7 Hope for Wellness Helpline and ITK's national suicide prevention strategy that I mentioned earlier.

These are all elements in a broader implementation of wellness supports that we need to continue working on. We see that in terms of budgetary pressure, but again, behind that are people who need the support, particularly during COVID-19.

The Chair: Thanks, Minister.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you very much, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Battiste.

We now go to Mr. Vidal for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I as well want to thank you, ministers and all officials appearing at committee today. I know your time is valuable and you're busy.

I firmly believe that one of the primary functions of a member of Parliament is to provide financial oversight. Scrutinizing government spending has become very difficult under the circumstances. In fact, this morning the Parliamentary Budget Officer issued a report in which he raised many flags about the government's lack of transparency and accountability, and identified how difficult it was for parliamentarians to do their job in light of the current conditions. I want to make the best use of the time we have today, and again, I do thank you for being here.

My first question is for Minister Miller. Minister, Saskatchewan is currently in its third phase of reopening, and in fact, this morning, announced the date for phase four of its opening.

The government started announcing measures to help Canadian businesses way back in March, but unfortunately, many indigenous businesses, indigenous financial institutions and urban indigenous organizations were left out of those original announcements.

Yesterday I had the opportunity to speak with the general manager of a community futures organization that also acts as an AFI in northern Saskatchewan. Because of that, many of the businesses he serves are indigenous businesses. He indicated to me that he finally received his community futures funds last Thursday, and only this week will he be able to actually disburse the funds to those businesses that truly need this help.

Can you identify for me why it took so long for the funding to actually reach these businesses after the announcement on April 17?

• (1815)

Hon. Marc Miller: Before answering, I want to highlight the excellent work you've done in communicating with our office as to some of the things you're seeing in northern areas of Saskatchewan. You have done excellent work with our teams in supporting all the work that has been done in La Loche, which is an extremely concerning situation.

On your question—and it's an extremely important question—we've been rolling out measures and programs in record times. The last thing we wanted to do was leave indigenous communities behind, and that includes in terms of business support. These are things that ordinarily would go through a very long process. As you recognized, they've been compressed into a very, very tight time frame.

The importance for us, when announcing things, was to ensure that potential recipients knew they had the backing of the Government of Canada. We announced \$306 million of specific indigenous funding, knowing that indigenous businesses were best served through the 59 AFIs across the country. As well, last week we announced an additional \$117 million specifically in loans, and those that would be, for the most part, forgivable, to ensure there was that support in place.

The timing of these things can always be scrutinized. Again, this is something that this committee plays a key role in doing, and Parliament plays a key role in doing. In terms of timing and the ability of government to move on a dime, I'm quite proud of the work we've done.

I can speak to a specific situation that you're highlighting, and I absolutely would like to look at that with my team.

Communities know that the Government of Canada has backed them financially and will continue to do so as we chart the path of COVID-19, which most experts still don't have the capacity to fully predict. We do have to acknowledge that uncertainty as we take measures in a very precipitous fashion.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you for that, Minister.

I would just comment that, from many of the people I've talked to, it seems that some of the support for indigenous businesses came almost as an afterthought and wasn't part of the original consultation. That's just some criticism I'm hearing from people on the ground. I pass that on.

I'm going to move on to my second question, also for Minister Miller. As you're well aware, northern Saskatchewan is home to many friendship centres that offer essential programs to urban indigenous people. In March, the government announced the application-based program for urban indigenous organizations to receive funding, which you referred to in your comments today.

The concern I heard from friendship centres was that it was weeks before they heard from the government, and then they received a small fraction of what they'd asked for. On May 21, you did announce some additional funding for urban indigenous organizations, but again, I'm hearing from these people on the ground, who could potentially be recipients and who have great work to do, but they've heard nothing from the government since the announcement. There's no idea of the timing or the outcome of this.

Can you clarify for us and for these organizations when they might actually get answers and when they might see some of this additional funding to support the urban indigenous people in their communities?

The Chair: You have less than 10 seconds. I'm sorry.

Hon. Marc Miller: Gary, this is very important. We made this \$15-million commitment in an area of jurisdiction that is shared among municipalities, provinces and the federal government, and we realized quite quickly that the federal government had to step up, so in addition to the \$15 million we announced an additional \$75 million going into urban indigenous centres, serving people who need to be served by all members in all jurisdictions, provinces and territories.

It is a gap that we have tried to fill as quickly as possible. It doesn't necessarily fall under the mandate of Indigenous Services Canada, but it is something we have to reflect on. It hasn't prevented us from moving, and it hasn't prevented us from investing. If you have a particular case that you would like to address, I would be glad to get back to you. We will be deploying—

The Chair: We are way over time. We need to move on. I'm sorry, Minister.

We'll go to Mr. van Koeverden for five minutes.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before I start, I would like to acknowledge that I'm on the sacred territory of the Haudenosaunee, the Huron-Wendat and many first nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

My questions will focus on youth.

Minister Miller, we know that when indigenous communities and indigenous nations move toward self-governance and self-determination, they have better outcomes across the board, whether that's in health, education or other ways, but part of this involves supporting effective community governance in first nations. How will the \$24 million allocated to the band support program in these supplementary estimates help these first nations move toward self-determination and better outcomes for kids?

● (1820)

Hon. Marc Miller: When we speak about self-determination, the tendency in government is to speak in broad, almost philosophical brush strokes. We speak of the critical importance of UNDRIP, but you brought it to its core, and I spoke earlier to it when I addressed issues on Jordan's principle.

When you talk about building nationhood, you speak about a number of pillars: security and control over land, over people, the ability to have control over your health care and your education. Those are the pillars you look at as part of nation building, on the terms told to us by the indigenous people who are renewing that nation-to-nation relationship with us.

Kids go to the heart of that painful realization. When we talk about reforming child and family services, we talk about care, control and custody over things that somebody like me would take for granted, which has been taken away from indigenous peoples. It is a difficult topic for all of us to speak about, but most certainly for indigenous peoples.

Making sure that families have the supports they need, making sure that within government and its process, which you alluded to, we continue to support self-determination and continue to support the governance tables that Minister Bennett is in charge of, is so important in being able to speak to issues that I take, with respect to government, as granted, which are looked at in a different perspective in an indigenous community.

Indigenous children are an immensely growing part of the population, and it is a generation that cannot be left behind, but I don't dictate those terms. The terms need to be told to me, to us, and we need to work in partnership. Perhaps sometimes it makes things slower and more difficult, but it is the right way to proceed.

I want to conclude by thanking you for that important question.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Mr. Chair, do I have a few minutes left?

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you.

You took the second half of my question out of my mouth, with respect to what National Chief Bellegarde has said in this committee, and many times elsewhere as well, about the growing population of youth in indigenous communities across the country. I hope to focus on them, because they are the future of Canada and their success is so vital to everybody's health and well-being across the country.

How do we do more by doing less? How do we support people by stepping back and ensuring the programs they develop are culturally relevant and important to them? How do we ensure self-determination and self-governance while taking more of a supportive role or a background role? What does that look like?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The example we use all the time is from Eskasoni, where 20 years ago, when they took control over their own education system, 20% of the kids were finishing high school. Now it's above the national average, in the 90% range.

We know that's what works. When they have the culture and the language part of the secure personal cultural identity, these kids do better. That is the future.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Yes. I think that sense of belonging, that sense of nationhood, is one of the most important things.

My question, then, maybe to one of the department heads—

The Chair: Your time is almost up. You have only six seconds left.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Okay. That's it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Now you don't have any seconds left. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michaud, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses. It is always nice to welcome ministers to committee meetings.

I would like to state that I am on the traditional Mi'kmaq territory in my hometown of Amqui. In the Mi'kmaq language, Amqui means "where people have fun". It is a lot of fun to be here tonight with you.

My question is for you, Minister Miller.

In your opening remarks, you stated that the public is becoming more aware than ever of the injustices indigenous peoples face in the system. I am sure the government has the best of intentions, but many people are still being left behind.

Do you feel the amounts provided to date are sufficient, not only to begin reconciliation but also to restore balance to the system? In times of crisis, such as the one we are currently experiencing, inequalities are only increasing, particularly in certain communities.

With particular reference to the indigenous community support fund, are the amounts that have been invested sufficient?

• (1825)

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you.

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge your leader Yves-François Blanchet's speech this morning on behalf of Regional Chief Ghislain Picard about matters such as the importance of helping indigenous police. It is very much a key point to make to Parliament.

As to whether the amounts are sufficient, I will give you a qualified answer. We admit failure with regard to the inequalities that indigenous communities have been facing since the beginning of the crisis.

The demands we received were related to overcrowding and low capitalization of indigenous housing, and lack of investment in housing, education and healthcare. The demands were also directed at provincial governments.

Faced with this failure, we had to deploy resources in some communities that would not have needed them if they were not indigenous. Mobile equipment was needed to be able to isolate people and do tests, and we had to increase the number of nurses. We deployed resources based on the cards we were dealt.

Are the many resources we deployed in these communities sufficient? We will not know until later. It has worked on reserves because not many people there have been infected with the virus. We are facing an unpredictable epidemic. We must therefore always remain vigilant and deploy the necessary resources. There is a very real danger of several successive waves.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you for your kind words about the leader of my party.

[English]

The Chair: Sorry, Madame Michaud, we're well over time.

Ms. Gazan, you have two and a half minutes. Please go ahead.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's nice to see the ministers here today.

My question is for you, Mr. Miller. Talking about systemic racism, I'd like to start with your government. Are there provisions in the 2020-21 supplementary estimates that provide for the cost of complying with the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruling to immediately stop racially discriminating against first nation kids?

I have a limited amount of time, so I would ask you to limit your response. Thank you.

Hon. Marc Miller: As to the budgetary requirements in order to implement Jordan's principle, absolutely yes. As I noted in a previous answer, those sums—please correct me if I'm wrong, officials—were of an increased amount of \$200-plus million.

Thank you.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Okay. I'm not talking about the \$700 million, as that is not certainly identified to pay for the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruling.

With all due respect, your government has spent between \$5 million and \$9.4 million fighting first nations kids. If you have that money to spend fighting little kids in court, why is there nothing in your budget to ensure that little children are afforded basic human rights and to pay what you owe as ordered by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruling? Children are asking. Could you respond, please?

The Chair: You have less than a minute.

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you.

I would invite a longer, more complete answer should the time run out.

You would have to specify which order. If you were speaking about the current negotiations that the court—

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm talking about the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, with which you are on your tenth non-compliance order.

I'm asking if you have any plans to follow the law or if you are going to continue breaking the law.

• (1830)

Hon. Marc Miller: The member will note that we are fulfilling those orders. That is why we have those budgetary amounts with respect to Jordan's principle. They are so key. Currently, we are working with all sides to perfect some of the funding models that the court has asked us to do. We've made good progress.

I should have an update for members shortly.

Ms. Leah Gazan: With all due respect, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruling does not agree with that.

The Chair: Thank you for that. We're right at time.

That brings me to Mr. Doherty, for a five-minute round of questions.

Todd, I hope your microphone is good and you're ready to go for five minutes.

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the ministers.

Thank you to IT for fixing the technical issues we had earlier on.

I want to thank my colleagues for allowing me the opportunity to be on this call.

I will direct my questions to Minister Bennett throughout my five minutes, as I haven't had the opportunity to work with Minister Vandal and Minister Miller in their current capacity.

Minister Bennett, would it be fair to say that over the last five years you and I have had an open dialogue about the indigenous issues within my riding?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Absolutely.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, dating back to January 2016, you and I have talked, whether it was regarding missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, or the Highway of Tears going right through my riding, or the June 2014 Supreme Court landmark decision about aboriginal title, the William case. We've had numerous discussions regarding that. Is that correct?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes, and I think we were able to make investments in the Highway of Tears. I think we have had a good working relationship with Chief Alphonse, who I know is a friend of yours.

Mr. Todd Doherty: He is, which is why these conversations are always delicate.

Minister, anywhere in the supplementary estimates.... As we know, some of the issues with respect to missing and murdered women are a result of a lack of safe and reliable transportation within our rural and remote areas, with Greyhound's exit from western Canada as well as no reliable bus service. Is there any funding for rural and remote transportation in your supplementary estimates?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think this is not in the Crown-Indigenous Relations portfolio. I don't know if there is anyone on the call. I think it is something that communities are working at in their funding to try to find safe transportation for their community members to and from urban centres. We know this is a priority for many communities.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you for that, Minister.

Minister, as you know, with the June 2014 Supreme Court decision on the William case, on aboriginal title for the Tsilhqot'in First Nation, no duty of care was granted to the non-first nation residents and business owners located within the one million acres.

What has your government done to address this issue?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: As you know, as we begin those conversations towards self-government with the Tsilhqot'in Nation, that becomes very much part and parcel of those conversations as we go forward.

In terms of the communities nearby, I know it is done differently with different nations. We look forward to working with you on that.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, over the last five years, I've personally provided you with evidence of harassment, intimidation—even as far as intimidation at gunpoint—and growing tensions within my region between non-first nations and first nations. You've still refused to act. Why is that?

• (1835)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Again, I think this is.... My responsibility is about building a relationship and trying to have durable solutions in all of the regions across the country. I think that in terms of policing and jurisdiction, that also becomes provincial in terms of how people end up seeking justice on both sides, so I again commit to doing what we can together to make sure that people feel safe.

The Chair: Thank you. We're right at time there.

I have Mr. Powlowski next, but I don't see him. Having toured his home earlier, I'm not seeing him in that particular room, so I'm going to ask Mr. Battiste if he can step in now and carry on for this five-minute segment.

Jaime.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Minister Bennett.

As we look to rebuild after COVID-19, we are looking to build back better. We've heard from many witnesses that the normal on reserve is far below the Canadian standard. Many witnesses stated that in order for first nations to grow and not rely on government, they need to access financial capital and loans to be able to grow their economies.

I'm wondering, as part of our efforts to move forward, whether there is the ability for us to also include first nations government in that, in terms of their ability to grow through forgivable loans, interest-free loans, as we've seen as part of the COVID money.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think Minister Miller would be in a better position to answer this. We certainly have been investing in the self-determination and in nation rebuilding, but in terms of that kind of support, that has been coming from Indigenous Services Canada.

Hon. Marc Miller: MP Battiste, I think we've seen a real increase, particularly on the west coast but moving east, of the use of 10-year grants. They are very important in creating that predictability and ability to look over 10 years as to what the needs in communities are. My mandate letter, as well as a number of other ministers', contained undertakings toward indigenous people in closing the infrastructure gap.

We work with communities. Our regional directors work on the five-year infrastructure plans that are key to the planning of communities. It's something that I think we need to take a look at as we take stock and ask, "What is the new normal? What are the needs within communities to ensure that they thrive, that they grow and that we can continue the nation-to-nation relationship?" That includes looking at financial instruments that non-indigenous communities take for granted or that are available and haven't necessarily been available.

A number of the issues that we face on a daily basis.... Communities choose to get out from under the Indian Act. Again, these are slow discussions, but they are deliberate ones. They are very important in order to make sure that community decision-making, nation decision-making, is not made from Ottawa but, indeed, made by the peoples and the nations that we are trying to improve our relationship with.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Thank you, Mr. Miller.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Jaime, if I can just add.... I know that you know well the First Nations Finance Authority. During this time, we did provide it with \$17.1 million so that it could deal with some of the first nations with existing loans and work in partnership with them to make sure that any potential trouble was ameliorated.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Thank you very much.

The band support funding is certainly good to see—another \$24 million on top of the \$48 million delivered to 222 first nations—but it was intended as an interim measure.

I know that I've reached out to both ministers on the wage subsidy, on making sure that indigenous businesses are eligible. However, some of the indigenous leaders I've heard from are saying that the CRA has been telling them that they're not eligible because they don't pay into taxes. I'm just wondering if there's an ability to reach out to the CRA and to work between departments to figure out why some indigenous businesses are being told that they aren't eligible when our government has said that they should be.

• (1840)

Hon. Marc Miller: This is something we have been struggling with from the very beginning.

There was never any intention to exclude band-owned businesses, for example, or support to indigenous communities. A number of modifications needed to be made in order to effect that, and if it's an issue of clearing that up with CRA, absolutely. Sometimes it is on a case-by-case basis and depends on the business's eligibility, which all Canadians are struggling with, but this is something that we can work with on a case-by-case basis with CRA.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Thank you.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: That's it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Vidal, you have five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In addition to the limited scrutiny and transparency that I talked about in my earlier round of questioning, as identified by the PBO this morning, the House of Commons is no longer actually sitting, and because of that, I'm not able to ask or submit order paper questions. This question might be one that I would normally have as an order paper question, but I'm going to ask it in this forum. It's for Minister Miller.

Last week I spoke with Chief Peter Bill of the Pelican Lake First Nation in my riding. He expressed his concern that the carbon tax is raising the cost of fuel, heating fuel and other goods in his first nation, and is making life more expensive for members of his first nation.

Minister, can you tell me how much carbon tax revenue the Government of Canada is collecting directly from first nations across Canada?

Hon. Marc Miller: I cannot personally. I would ask if any officials are on the line, and perhaps our CFO or J.F. could answer that.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay (Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services): Normally the products, if I remember correctly, would be taxed off reserve. I'm not sure we are taxing on-reserve products per se, those that are sold on reserve.

We can follow up and try to give you the information, but it's not information that I have at the moment. I doubt that the CFO would have that information.

Mr. Gary Vidal: I appreciate that maybe you don't have that at your fingertips, but if you could clarify for me whether or not the chief is wrong, that would be good. If he's correct—

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: I would never say that a chief is wrong.

Mr. Gary Vidal: If you could provide me with a number on that and follow up, that would be appreciated as well. I can then take that number back to the chief and provide it to him directly.

Minister Miller, to you as well, the last time this committee reviewed estimates—I think it was the main estimates—I questioned you or talked to you about the department and the implementation of Bill C-92 and how that was going and whatnot. In these supplementary estimates now, there's an additional \$468 million that's identified as being for Bill C-92 implementation.

Can you identify for us how many first nations have applied to take control over their child and family services? I understand they have to indicate their intent as part of the application process. How many have actually started down that journey?

Hon. Marc Miller: Yes, and thank you for the question. It's a very important one as part of my mandate, but most importantly for communities that want to take that jurisdiction and assert the right to self-determination.

We have a number that have applied, and I would defer to my department to disclose the specific number at this time. If not, we can undertake to get back to you.

J.F., can you answer, please?

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: Let me come back to you on this, because a lot of them have expressed interest, but that doesn't mean they formally sent us a demand.

We have received some over the last few weeks, so I want to make sure that we have the more accurate numbers. I would prefer to make sure we have all of them and give you a sense of the ones that have expressed interest, that want to engage with us. Some of them would say they're not necessarily expecting to get there and take jurisdiction in the next few years, for example, which is different from the ones that will say that in a year from now they expect they will actually take jurisdiction. That's the difference. I will try to separate those two, do the triage, and we can respond to you in writing.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Gary, I would just like to say that in a lot of the negotiations on self-determination, child and family are quite often at the top of the list as the incentive to take back that jurisdiction.

There's the child well-being law with the Anishinabe nation here in Ontario, and we did sign an agreement with some of the hereditary chiefs at Wet'suwet'en. There is a real need to bring their children back in all of the negotiations that we're doing.

• (1845)

Mr. Gary Vidal: I appreciate that.

Perhaps you wouldn't mind also including for me some idea of how we are tracking against the targets that have been set.

I think I have time for one quick question, Mr. Chair, if I watch the clock here.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds. Go ahead.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Mr. Miller, in your presentation, you talked about the \$270 million for income assistance for people on reserves, or the income assistance program that you added \$270 million to. The news release talks about this also helping to hire additional staff to better serve first nations communities and better connect individuals to other government programs.

I'm curious as to whether you could identify how much of that \$270 million was actually getting to the ground on the first nations to help with income assistance, and how much was internal resources to add staff and administration.

The Chair: Gary, that was the whole 30 seconds.

Could you respond to that question in writing, Mr. Miller?

Hon. Marc Miller: I will.

We plan to deploy this shortly. I will note one nuance, though. As people in Canada, regardless of whether they are indigenous or not, have suffered income challenges, we have to manage for additional caseloads, so some of the elements you see may reflect that, but I would note that sensitivity as we get back to you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm now having problems juggling the speakers list as well, for technical and other reasons.

I have Ms. Damoff as our next Liberal speaker, for five minutes. Pam, please go ahead.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

After Jaime giving us all a great laugh with his kids at home, I'm going to pass it over to him for the next question.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I want to apologize. It's a hard life being a single dad sometimes.

On a serious note, we've all been hearing about the institutional racism that exists in Canada. I've been frustrated myself, and deeply concerned, with what I'm hearing from chiefs who have lost community members because of what's going on. They have talked to me and pleaded for justice and change.

I would like to get a sense from the ministers, especially Minister Vandal, who is an indigenous person as well, of what's happening now. What are we doing to address systemic racism and what are we doing to decolonize some of our institutions?

Hon. Dan Vandal: Thank you so much, Jaime. That's a great question.

First of all, I want to say clearly that the images we've been seeing on television for the last couple of weeks—whether it's in Nunavut, Alberta, the Maritimes or Minneapolis—are absolutely unacceptable. For me personally, they are revolting. It's something that our country, our society, can really no longer put up with.

I'm talking to you from Winnipeg, and when I first started getting involved in community issues and politics, there was something called the aboriginal justice inquiry that kicked off in the late 1980s. Judge Murray Sinclair presided over it. Three years or four years later, there was a big book of recommendations on how we work ourselves out of it. Successive governments since that time have done something; others have not done anything.

The bottom line is that 20-some years later, there is not a lot of change in the city of Winnipeg. We've had three shootings of young indigenous people in the last six months. That is unacceptable.

Since then, of course, we've had the calls to action from the truth and reconciliation commission. We've had the inquiry into murdered and missing indigenous girls and women.

I think that all levels of government have been shown the way over successive years. What we really need to do is to act, to do something more dramatic, which hasn't been done in a long time.

There are no simple solutions. There is no silver bullet that's going to turn all of this around. We have to take collective action. We have to take a whole-of-government approach and a whole-of-society approach. That's the way to do it.

In trying to answer your question, I know that our government has spent unprecedented amounts, at least \$25 billion in new money, to try to change education, health care and infrastructure, to try to change those social determinants of health to let young people have a better chance out there.

However, it's not just the indigenous population; it's the non-indigenous population that has an even greater responsibility. It is really built into our colonial system, where the first three policy objectives of the Government of Canada were to civilize, to Christianize and to assimilate indigenous people into Canadian life way back when Canada was formed. That is really the basis of the racism. It needs to stop, and it needs a dramatic government intervention.

I hope that our government will be able to lead the way, because the images we saw of police brutality are absolutely unacceptable. We need to stop the hate, the violence, and we need to stop the racism.

• (1850)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Thank you.

Do we have time for any of the other ministers to answer that, Bob?

The Chair: We have 45 seconds. Someone can try.

Hon. Marc Miller: I don't think I can say it any better than what Dan said. Maybe Carolyn has some words.

The Chair: That's fine.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I just think that as we look to other models of policing that are community-based and first nations-led, that is the work that Minister Miller, Minister Blair and all of us will be helping with as we look to the success of Kwanlin Dün and what happens when you have trusted people who know the community. Calls to the RCMP dropped by 30%.

The Chair: That does bring us to time. Thank you very much.

We now have a round of two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michaud, you have the floor.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Earlier, I ran out of time before I could thank Mr. Miller for his kind words about my leader. I will certainly pass them on to him.

The key message in his speech, of course, came from Mr. Picard. He said that in three months, police operations have claimed more victims than COVID-19 itself, which is quite unbelievable.

This brings to light several issues. Since the 1960s, 14 commission of inquiry reports have been released, all with the same damning conclusions. We have been aware of problems, inequalities and injustices for a long time, but it seems only now that people are thinking of going into solution mode.

Beyond funding, what has been done so far to address these issues? It is not just a matter of putting money on the table to fix them. What has been done so far?

Hon. Marc Miller: We are all becoming aware of the situation and we are outraged. Over the past few weeks, you may have seen me express my outrage on television. As you have pointed out, now it is time to act.

When the MMIWG report came out, we did not delay in taking action, especially with regard to the findings on police forces.

These measures are not only the responsibility of the federal government, but also of the provincial governments, as they also control their own police forces. There is work to be done in the short, medium and long term.

First nations have long called for policing to be under their own control and managed by their communities. I know many indigenous people who have served in the military and have been part of a non-indigenous police force. They, too, would like to have an indigenous police force in their communities because the situation is unacceptable.

As ministers—three of us are here at today's meeting—we feel that now is the time to act. This will not happen overnight. We can take action in the short term, but it is a job, as Minister Vandal pointed out in English a few minutes ago, that will also be done in the medium and long term, even if it means reforming a police force. This promise was made two years ago.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you. Can you provide examples of steps to be taken?

[*English*]

The Chair: We're at time right now. I'm sorry to interrupt, but we're way over time.

Now we have Ms. Gazan for two and a half minutes. Please go ahead.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Minister Bennett.

On April 11, 2016, you promised this very committee that your government was committed to putting an end to long-term boil water advisories on reserve within five years. On June 11, 2019, you promised that boil water advisories would end by 2021. Clearly, your government is going to be breaking another promise to indigenous people.

I looked on the website. It has not been updated in terms of boil water advisories since February 15, 2020. That was prior to COVID.

In the estimates, you've allocated approximately \$6,832,500 for capital investments. How much of that \$6 million will be invested to end boil water advisories?

If you could you limit your response because of the short amount of time, thank you.

• (1855)

Hon. Marc Miller: I would perhaps note that this is a question that most likely should have been directed to me, since Indigenous Services Canada is in charge, in addition to the communities that are affected, in eliminating those boil water advisories.

I believe what you have said to be correct. There have been no public updates since March and perhaps the end of February.

We have continued to invest in ensuring that short-term water advisories do not become long-term ones. Those that are on the list, and indeed the ones remaining, are the most complicated, but I would note that as of December 31, 2019, we've invested more than \$1.4 billion with targeted funding to support over 602 wastewater projects, including 276 that are actually now complete. These projects serve about half a million people in first nation communities.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I have just one last point. With COVID, we now know that it's more urgent. This is a very clear human rights violation, and wilful. What is your plan? How long is this going to take? This is a life and death matter.

Hon. Marc Miller: Our plan, MP Gazan, is to eliminate the long-term drinking water advisories on reserve.

Ms. Leah Gazan: By when, Minister?

Hon. Marc Miller: We continue aggressively to meet that spring 2021 date that we've set. My team is working around the clock, despite COVID, to keep working on that date. This is community-by-community decision-making, and we are engaged with those communities to ensure that they have the supports they need, even in the face of communities that have decided to close down. We want to make sure that they do have that support for what is best described as an essential service.

The Chair: Thank you. Thanks, Ms. Gazan.

You will recall that we were very late getting started because of a number of technical issues. I said that I would ask the committee, because we need unanimous consent to continue after the hour.

Is it the wish of the committee to continue to fill out our round of questioning? Are there any comments? Does anyone have issues that would not enable them to?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: I'm going to ask that we carry on now for the remainder of the questioning round, which is a five-minute round, followed by a round of two and a half minutes.

Mr. Viersen, you are up for five minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My questions continue with Minister Bennett.

Thanks, once again, for being here.

I also want to thank the IT folks for making this all happen. I'm definitely looking forward to doing this in person back in Ottawa soon.

Minister Bennett, the last time I had an opportunity to ask questions, we were talking about the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Over 50% of the victims of human trafficking in Canada are indigenous women and girls. Under the "Master List of Report Recommendations", there are theme 14 and theme 14a, which is "The need to address human trafficking of Indigenous women and girls". Are you familiar with those two themes?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes. As you've followed and have said, human trafficking is one of the most heinous crimes, and indigenous women and girls are very much overrepresented in this terrible crime.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: One of the key recommendations consistent in both of these themes is the focus on the prosecution of pimps and johns rather than the prostituted and trafficked women. Do you agree with the national inquiry's recommendations to focus on the demand, rather than to target the supply?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The government, as you know, has launched a new comprehensive national strategy to combat human trafficking in all its forms, as well as to protect the victims who are the most vulnerable. This is \$75 million in additional investments. The national strategy to combat human trafficking will be able to increase Canada's ability to fight this attack on basic human rights and dignity.

• (1900)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Will any part of the national action plan, in response to the national inquiry, have a piece around human trafficking, sex trafficking or modern-day slavery?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Absolutely. This is, again, very important in terms of responding to the national inquiry and the work that will be done with the provinces and territories as well. I know as a physician that one of the areas where we really need to do better is in educating front-line health workers to be suspicious that perhaps this young woman who comes with another person might be the victim of trafficking. We need to be able to have people think of it. If you don't think of it, then you don't diagnose it and you don't actually find that person a way out.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Minister Bennett, your mandate is about restoring the relationship between Canada and first nations. I have been in the COVID committee, asking Minister Anand about the procurement process in Canada. Have you been facilitating the procurement at all of PPE from first nations communities for the federal government?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I do not sit on the COVID committee, but Minister Miller and Minister Anand are working together, and I know you'll have the opportunity to ask them both that question on Friday.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: So your office has not been facilitating any indigenous companies that are looking to supply PPE to the federal government. You're not aware of any of those kinds of accommodations.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I am not aware that those companies have approached our office, but I would certainly be supportive of getting people to the right places. As you know, very many companies have approached both Minister Bains and Minister Anand. We do think that the response from indigenous communities is impressive. I've been so impressed with the cloth face masks that they've been able to provide for their communities, but I am not aware of what the link to the federal government procurement has been.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Are you aware of any indigenous companies that have a contract with the federal government?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I am not aware of that. I know you've asked that question in the House of Commons, and I hope we can find that for you.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: How about Mr. Miller?

Hon. Marc Miller: MP Viersen, thank you for that question. In fact, I would probably encourage a more developed question or at least more time to respond on Friday. We do have a number of examples. They are too few, but clearly it's something we're very aware of, and we're moving to make sure that we do fill that need and demand from indigenous PPE providers.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thanks, Mr. Viersen.

Ms. Zann, your five minutes are ready to go. Please go ahead.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you very much, Chair.

Thanks again, everybody, for all of your questions. They are really good and respectful questions from the committee and very interesting answers from the ministers. I really appreciate it.

I want to talk again about self-governance. We know that when indigenous communities move towards self-governance and self-determination, they really have better outcomes right across the board. Jaime can tell us that is the case with education, for instance, and also with health care, and one would imagine with policing. If we can go in that direction and prevent all these terrible atrocities that are happening.... Two in New Brunswick just in the last while were health wellness checks, and people ended up with five bullets in them or two bullets in them. It's just terrible.

My question involves the \$24 million that was allocated to the band support program in the supplementary estimates. That was to help first nations move towards self-determination. Do you know yet—this is to any of the ministers—how that's being used? What else do we need to do to help first nations people and communities move towards self-determination?

Perhaps all three of you could give a quick answer; I'd really appreciate hearing from all three of you.

• (1905)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Both Minister Miller and Minister Blair have the mandate now to move on first nations policing. We have seen what has happened in Yukon, and we've seen the results when you have a more community-based approach. I think that the legislation that Minister Blair has committed to bringing in is the kind that changes it from the kind of program under which, for years, even those with first nations policing have worried every March whether the money would be there again or whether they'd be laying people off. Moving it to statutory funding as an essential service will make a big difference in people having the confidence to go forward with designing a regional force to be able to do the things they know work well, whether it's in their community or as a treaty group.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you.

Minister Vandal, would you comment?

Hon. Dan Vandal: That's a great question. I don't have a lot of detailed information on the initiatives Minister Blair is moving forward on, but I think just philosophically that self-determination and letting indigenous nations take care of their own governance and take care of their own community, whether it's child and family services or whether it's policing or health, is going to bring many more positive returns than what we've been doing thus far, so it's time for a change.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you.

Minister Miller, would you comment?

Hon. Marc Miller: As an equally overarching comment, one of the observations I've had in the short time in which I've had the honour to serve as indigenous services minister is that at some point you realize that the pace has to be dictated by indigenous communities, and not the reverse. That means we talk on their terms and according to their priorities, and that we realize there's not a one-size-fits-all answer, which is so self-evident.

You may go into a particular community and say this framework we've proposed works perfectly. You may go into a different part of the country and hear “No, we have a treaty basis and we would like to proceed along those terms”, or in a different part of the country it might be rejected entirely and there's a different nature of discussion.

This is self-evident to the communities you're discussing, but perhaps not to a number of well-meaning, non-indigenous people, including me a couple of years ago, for sure. This is a long process. It is indeed sometimes frustrating, but I think this government has been dedicated to doing its best to get it right.

It requires patience. It requires dialogue first and foremost, but also recognition that it is key to support those pillars that I mentioned in response to Adam. They are pillars to identity and self-governance and nationhood that we take for granted, but they are very important in fostering and continuing to foster in the right way.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you so much. I appreciate that.

The Chair: That brings us to five minutes.

Next up is Jamie Schmale, for five minutes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

I appreciate the testimony from all our witnesses.

Minister Bennett, according to your last departmental report, which I have here, spending at CIRNAC was estimated to drop by \$1.5 billion by 2022-23. Obviously, that was pre-COVID.

Can you tell us the estimates for spending over the next two years?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: As you know, as we move in nation rebuilding with the kinds of investments we're making, some of the money we have is also for settling land claims and these various court cases and lawsuits, so I'll ask the deputy to let us know what he thinks is coming in those obligations Canada has.

• (1910)

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: Sure. I'll give a quick visit to the CFO, but obviously we will continue to pay out on the treaty obligations we have.

As the minister has noted, the work on MMIWG will be absolutely critical, as well as the continuation of the conversations in reference to some of the points that Minister Miller made. Listening to first nations, engaging and hearing what they want and crafting solutions that they see are appropriate for the particular priorities they have will be the most critical pieces.

Perhaps for a more technical look at it, I'll ask our chief financial officer, Annie Boudreau.

[Translation]

Ms. Annie Boudreau (Chief Finances, Results and Delivery Officer, Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs): Good evening.

[English]

Thank you.

You will remember that when we went to present the supplementary estimates (B), we had a big amount of about \$1 billion for loan forgiveness. It was one amount for one time, so you cannot find that this time around in the total main estimates, because the amount was only for one year. That will explain a big reduction from last year to this year.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Minister, in your latest departmental report we see that a number of targets weren't hit. I will refer specifically to the indigenous entrepreneurship and business development program. It is described as a dollar value of federal procurement contracts set aside for indigenous businesses. Your target was 5%, but your actual result was 1.4%. The target date was as of April 2019.

Do you have an update on that?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I would have to defer to the deputy or the chief financial officer.

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: Following up on the question you last asked on this front, we have some further information. Some of these pieces have transferred to Indigenous Services Canada as part of the work we are doing. I'll let our chief financial and results delivery officer explain that in a little more detail.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: Thank you very much for the question.

Indeed, there was an order in council last year, and that transferred two programs from Crown-Indigenous Relations to Indigenous Services Canada. Those two programs were land and economic development. I think your result that you're referring to has now been transferred to Indigenous Services Canada as part of the order in council of July 2019.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you.

Minister, we've been told through Treasury Board that there is a new leave associated for public servants with COVID-19. Can you tell us how many in your department have taken advantage of this new leave and, on average, what justification was given for these requests?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I first want to thank all of the public servants for how hard they've been working. As we say, there's a dif-

ference between working from home and being at home trying to work, and it has been extraordinary what departments have been able to do.

In terms of those who have requested leave, I would defer to the deputy.

The Chair: You have just a few seconds.

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: In fact, our CFRDO has those specific numbers.

The Chair: Ms. Boudreau, give a very quick answer, please.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: Thank you for the question.

As of today, it is 3% of our workforce, and we are approximately 1,800 employees. It's only 3%, and the reasons will be to take care of kids at home or to take care of a sick person, a sick family member.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. van Koeverden, you have five minutes.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Minister Vandal.

Surprisingly, there are connectivity issues in my riding, just 30 minutes from the Toronto airport, so I can't imagine how some of the connectivity issues have impacted people in your riding and certainly the people you represent across the north.

How will the investments that are in these supplementary estimates go to connecting people living in the north and remote communities across Canada so that they can achieve better outcomes in health and education through telehealth and telelearning?

● (1915)

Hon. Dan Vandal: Thank you so much for that very important question.

If there's anything that we've learned through these difficult times, I think it's that we need to do a better job of making sure that we are constructing more Internet communications and fibre optics throughout the north. I know that's a priority. Since I've been minister—for about six months now—I've heard that quite often in my consultations.

I can tell you that our government is spending billions of dollars over a 10-year period to improve connectivity in the north, in the Arctic and in northern provinces. It's something that's absolutely essential. We're doing it in partnership with first nations, with Inuit, with Métis communities and with rural municipalities.

As I stated earlier, the benefit has really become apparent through these difficult times. When you look at the opportunities for education and the opportunities for provision of health services to isolated communities, this can't happen fast enough. I know that several ministries within our government have prioritized this, and there are literally billions of dollars over a prolonged period that are going to be invested in this service.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, how much time do I have remaining?

The Chair: You have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you.

I would ask the same of somebody from the department, perhaps. Recognizing that there are connectivity issues in other indigenous communities that are not in the north, could Minister Miller or Minister Bennett or somebody from the department shed a little light on how these connectivity issues are having an impact on education outcomes for kids?

Hon. Marc Miller: I could say a few things.

You're right, Adam, that it isn't necessarily a remoteness issue. We've seen that in the Six Nations, and Pam has been instrumental in making sure we're aware of that and that there is a response.

This isn't necessarily for our ministries. Minister Monsef is in charge of ensuring that we move forward on connectivity. Clearly, when it comes to education, and being able to study at home and have more people connected at the same time, the needs are more acute and the disparities are greater the further north you go, but it isn't limited simply to more northern areas, although that need is acute as well.

There are reflections that we need to have as we deploy, as part of our governmental undertaking in prior budgets, connectivity solutions to communities and get people wired, particularly in a COVID environment, where there are issues with making sure contractors are observing the proper protocols. That will be largely insufficient, and as we move forward, we have to continue having that reflection and making sure that people do have access to connectivity solutions.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: When I've had the chance to engage with youth through the Canada We Want project or with the Prime Minister's Youth Council, mental health has been one of the number one issues. That ability to connect, that ability to stay connected and to develop that sense of connection to people across the country has been something they've pointed out, so I'm happy to hear it's on everybody's agenda.

Mr. Chair, am I at time? If not, I'll concede the rest of my time to the NDP.

You're on mute, Chair.

The Chair: Something's gone funny with my space bar, which is my mike switch. It didn't work that time. I apologize for that.

We now have the two-and-a-half-minute round of questioning.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Bérubé, you have the floor.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Minister Miller.

Is Indigenous Services Canada considering additional funding under the indigenous community support fund? Do you plan to create additional funding to deal with the second wave, if it occurs?

• (1920)

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you.

I will provide a two-part answer.

With respect to the first question, which concerns the similar amounts that are part of the allocations to communities, this is that good old \$300 million plus allocated at the very beginning. The Government of Canada gave the money to the communities to ensure that they had the financial means to make their own decisions and to mitigate a potential outbreak of COVID-19. It worked well.

Of course, since nothing can be taken for granted and we need to prepare for a second wave, an additional fund of over \$200 million has been allocated specifically to mobile solutions for screening and isolation. These are internal resources that can be strategically deployed in communities.

Now, since we cannot predict how the pandemic will evolve, we are trying to determine what support communities need so that we can target it better than before. We have been asked for resources, for additional security, for example, or envelopes for better preparations; these are not financial choices made at the expense of decisions that should always be health-focused first and foremost.

With respect to the first part of your question, it remains to be seen, but we are always prepared to reevaluate envelopes that were previously allocated.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Are you compiling statistics on COVID-19 to better predict the second wave?

Hon. Marc Miller: The nature of the data always has to be carefully scrutinized. Across the country, the old debate about disaggregated data rages on.

We do compile statistics on what we can control, so to speak, that is, data on resource deployment on reserve, as well as data provided to us either by the provinces or territories or by the communities themselves. The work, which is not perfect, is continuing so that we can shape public policy appropriately and be able to predict the second wave, as you said.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Qaqqaq from the NDP, you have two and a half minutes. Please go ahead.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: *Matna.* Thank you, Chair.

Before I get into my questions, I will say that it's been very difficult to listen to the conversations that have been going on and to indigenous experiences being discussed as if non-indigenous peoples will ever be able to fully grasp what it means to be indigenous in Canada.

Minister Vandal, could you tell me who is part of the decision-making process to determine what items are included and what are not in the subsidies for the Nutrition North program?

Hon. Dan Vandal: Thank you for that important question.

I know that the Nutrition North program has an advisory board. Nellie Cournoyea from Northwest Territories—I hope I'm not wrong there—is the chairperson. I met with her recently.

There is a committee, the Nutrition North Canada Advisory Board, that meets regularly with the administration. They go over the parameters and the terms of reference. They were instrumental in the rollout—as was ITK—of the harvesters grant program, which subsidizes indigenous nations and individuals getting out onto the land and going back to traditional food gathering, hunting and fishing. We take a lot of advice from the Nutrition North Canada Advisory Board.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: Thank you for that.

I know that it is supposed to include country food, but the barriers in that process are enormous, especially for people in Nunavut.

I have a constituent from my hometown, Baker Lake, who wants to ensure that she is feeding her baby healthy foods. She went to the

local store and bought two six-ounce packages of raspberries and two six-ounce packages of blueberries, which ended up totalling \$31.96.

What reasoning would the Minister suggest I give to a mother trying to feed her baby healthy foods at such ridiculous prices?

• (1925)

Hon. Dan Vandal: There's no good answer for that. I know that raspberries and strawberries, based on what you've just said, are really unaffordable. We are working closely with the advisory committee. We're working closely with people on the ground in the north and in the Arctic to try to make our programs better. An example of that is the harvesters program.

I have no doubt that there's much more we can do, so I would suggest you call my office, or I'll call your office, and we can have a further discussion on the ideas that you have to make Nutrition North a better program. I know there's opportunity and I think a good partnership would benefit the citizens you represent.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Thank you, Minister.

Thank you to all of our ministers for appearing today.

Thank you to the staff, as well, and I also want to thank our clerk and the technical people who helped get us through a very difficult day. I used to run marathons, and this is a little tougher than Boston, trying to juggle everything today, but it all worked out for the benefit of broadening our knowledge, and that's why we're here.

Thank you to all. That will conclude our meeting today.

The meeting is adjourned.

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