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# Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

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Chair: Mrs. Jenica Atwin





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Monday, May 29, 2023

• (1600)

[English]

**The Chair (Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

[Translation]

Welcome to meeting number 67 of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of Thursday, June 23, 2022. Members of the committee are participating in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. Just so that you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entire committee.

[English]

For those participating virtually, I'd like to outline a few rules to follow. You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting in French, English and Inuktitut. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either floor, English or French audio. Please select your language now. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately, and we will ensure that interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings.

For members participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in a committee room.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those in the room, your mike will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer.

[Translation]

A reminder that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

[English]

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly, and I will try to take my own advice. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do the best we can to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members, whether they are participating virtually or in person.

[Translation]

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the committee is beginning its examination of the following votes in the 2023-24 main estimates: vote 1 under Canadian High Arctic Research Station; votes 1, 5, 10 and L15 under Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs; and votes 1, 5 and 10 under Department of Indigenous Services. The votes were referred to the committee on February 15, 2023.

[English]

With us for the first hour are the Honourable Dan Vandal, Minister of Northern Affairs, and the Honourable Marc Miller, Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, as well as their officials.

Thank you very much for joining us this afternoon.

In our second hour, we will be joined by the Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Indigenous Services, and her officials.

Each of you will have the floor for five minutes.

We will begin with Minister Vandal.

**Hon. Dan Vandal (Minister of Northern Affairs):** Thank you so much, Chair.

Hello, everybody. *Bonjour. Ullukkut.*

I'd like to begin by acknowledging that Canada's Parliament is located on the unceded, traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss and respond to your questions on the 2023-24 main estimates for Northern Affairs.

CIRNAC's 2023-24 main estimates include a total of approximately \$9.2 billion in funding, of which \$968.3 million is for Northern Affairs.

The main estimates include \$74.8 million allocated for climate change and clean energy.

• (1605)

[Translation]

The department continues to encourage and support community-led adaptation and clean energy projects with northern, rural, remote and indigenous communities to address the impacts of climate change, displace fossil fuels, and advance reconciliation and self-determination.

Through five climate change adaptation and mitigation programs, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada continues to invest in initiatives to support clean energy projects in northern and indigenous communities.

[English]

The Government of Canada is also supporting co-development of an indigenous climate leadership agenda to chart a path forward to self-determined climate action.

The main estimates also include \$489 million in spending for the northern contaminated sites program to manage the cleanup of contaminated sites such as abandoned mines in the north. The Government of Canada is responsible for the management of a portfolio of contaminated sites in Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

The contamination of these properties is the result of private sector mining, oil and gas activities and government military activity that occurred more than 50 years ago. The program creates jobs and skills development opportunities for indigenous partners and local workers, as much of the work is carried out by indigenous-led businesses.

[Translation]

These estimates also contain planned spending related to our nutrition north Canada program, which is more important than ever. The main estimates include \$182.7 million in investments to support this program.

[English]

The program helps eligible northern communities through the nutrition north Canada retail subsidy, the harvesters support grant and community food programs fund, nutrition education initiatives and the food security research grant. Through this program, we work with local communities to provide culturally relevant programming to meet the needs of northern residents and increase access to affordable and nutritious food.

I'd also like to take a moment to discuss how some key investments identified recently in budget 2023 will benefit people in the north and in the Arctic, in particular \$4 billion to implement a co-developed urban, rural and northern indigenous housing strategy, which I believe originated at this committee several years ago. These proposed investments will help northerners to access safe and affordable housing, which we know is critical to improving health and social outcomes and building a strong and prosperous north.

Other important investments from budget 2023 include \$19.4 million to increase the participation of indigenous people and other northerners in environmental and regulatory assessments of major projects in the territories. An additional \$1.6 million has also been proposed for coordinating federal participation in environmental assessments and associated consultations with indigenous communities on these major projects.

[Translation]

The 2023-24 estimates also propose \$8.7 million for deeper engagement on a national benefits-sharing framework that will im-

prove the quality and consistency of benefits indigenous communities derive from major resource projects in their territories.

[English]

In concluding, thank you for inviting me today, and I look forward to any questions you may have.

*Qujannamiik.* Thank you.

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

Now I move to Minister Miller for five minutes.

**Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations):** Thank you, Chair. *Kwe, unusakut, tansi,* hello.

● (1610)

[Translation]

Good afternoon.

I'd like to begin by thanking Mr. Vandal for acknowledging that we are on unceded territory.

I would also like to thank the committee for inviting me today.

I am pleased to present the 2023-24 main estimates for the Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, as well as related information from budget 2023.

[English]

As this committee has seen, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada's 2023-24 main estimates are approximately \$9.2 billion. Of this amount, \$8 billion is for Crown-Indigenous Relations.

The main estimates reflect a net increase of \$3.3 billion compared to last year's main estimates. This is a crucial increase in funding in order to expedite work at the negotiation tables, settle historical grievances and advance reconciliation.

This includes \$3.5 billion towards claims resolution, most notably earlier in the year \$2.9 billion that will go towards the Gotfriedson Band class settlement agreement. This settlement will establish an indigenous-led trust for communities that have opted into the class action, to support the revival and protection of indigenous languages, cultures, heritage and wellness for indigenous communities and their members.

Another \$1.9 billion will be put towards the resolution of a number of specific claims. As this committee knows, last year was a record year for these types of settlements, with 56 claims resolved, for a total of \$3.5 billion in compensation. This is something that we need to continue as we work to pay Canada's overdue bills.

The main estimates also include just over \$2 billion for the management and implementation of agreements and treaties, essentially transfer payments; \$53 million to support first nations jurisdiction over land and fiscal management, which this committee has had an opportunity recently to study; and \$194 million for the negotiation of treaties, self-government agreements and other constructive arrangements of the sort.

[Translation]

As part of budget 2023, our government has undertaken other investments to support indigenous peoples, including to advance economic reconciliation. For example, through the budget, the government proposes to provide \$35.3 million over three years, starting this fiscal year, to Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada and Natural Resources Canada to co-develop, with the Lands Advisory Board, a new first nations-led national land registry that will provide communities in first nation land management with more opportunities to realize the economic benefits arising from local control over their lands.

[English]

Along with these important investments, budget 2023 proposes to invest funds to continue implementing the work of the missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA+ people national action plan.

As we approach June 3, which is the anniversary of the launch of the national action plan on missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and LGBTQ people, it is important to highlight that these new investments will support the government's ongoing work to end this crisis.

[Translation]

This funding will help to support families and survivors, while heeding their call for increased accountability. Here are some examples of those investments.

The government will invest \$2.6 million over three years, starting in 2023-24, to support the National Family and Survivors Circle in keeping families and survivors at the centre of the implementation of the national action plan and the Federal Pathway to Address Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQIA+ People.

The government will also invest \$2.2 million over five years, starting in 2023-24, to establish an oversight mechanism to monitor, and report on, the progress of implementation.

In addition, the government will invest \$1.6 million over two years to support the ministerial special representative appointed to provide advice and recommendations on the creation of an indigenous and human rights ombudsperson.

Furthermore, the government will invest \$2.5 million over five years, beginning this year, to facilitate and coordinate work on ad-

vancing the national action plan by establishing a standing federal-provincial-territorial-indigenous table on missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and LGBTQ+ people. This table will provide a specific forum to take action on areas of shared roles and responsibilities regarding missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and LGBTQ+ people, including prioritizing discussion on how to launch a "red dress alert" to notify the public when an indigenous woman or two-spirit person goes missing.

[English]

These and other expenditures reflect our government's commitment to reconciliation with first nations, Inuit and Métis. I recognize, at the same time, that there is a tremendous amount more work to do.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with a broad-brush-stroke overview of the estimates. I welcome any questions that you surely have.

*Meegwetch. Qujannamiik. Marsi. Thank you. Merci.*

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll now move to our first round of questions, beginning with Mr. Zimmer for six minutes.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC):** Words matter.

My questions are for Minister Vandal.

This is from Nunakput MLA Jackie Jacobson, who recently said, "[W]e're really hurting.... Single mothers are having to choose to buy Pampers or pay their cell bill, or pay their power bill, or pay to buy food, and people are going without."

I'm going to refer to an article that was done by Cabin Radio not that long ago, on March 30 of this year. It was just a couple of months ago.

You insisted, when interviewed, that federal changes to the carbon tax, which were the subject of extraordinary division in the NWT legislature that week, a few months ago, were "not going to cost any families, anywhere in Canada, any more."

We know that simply isn't true, Mr. Vandal. We know from the Parliamentary Budget Officer that it varies between provinces from \$1,000 all the way up to \$4,200 per family. I can only imagine that in the territories it's even worse.

Do you stand by your statement?

• (1615)

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** We are actually very conscious of the affordability issues with all Canadians, including those living in the north, which is why we brought forward a host of affordability measures in the last budget—

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I'm sorry, Minister. The question was whether you would stand by that statement.

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** —including the grocery rebate. We've brought forward an entire host of affordability measures.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I'll move on to my next question.

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** On the carbon tax—

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** You actually just mentioned the grocery—

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Are you going to give me time to answer?

**The Chair:** Mr. Zimmer, we'd like to hear the answer.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** You're not answering the question. I asked you whether you're going to stand by the statement.

**The Chair:** He's getting to it.

Mr. Vandal.

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** That's your opinion.

It's well documented that every province and every territory in the comment—

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** The Parliamentary Budget Officer made it very clear that it was not—

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Every territory and every province in the country receives a rebate equal or greater than—

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I'm sorry, Madam Speaker, but I have the floor. It's my time.

I'd like to get some time back if this keeps going.

**The Chair:** Mr. Vandal, can you answer his direct question? Then he can move on to his next one.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Are you going to stand by your statement that it's not impacting northerners more than they're getting back?

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Every province, every territory and every individual receives a rebate. That is to offset the increased use of the carbon tax. I understand the north has special circumstances—

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I take that as a “no”, because it's not an explicit answer.

I'll go to this interview, because the interviewer asked you some great questions in good context.

You just mentioned the grocery rebate.

Reading from them, the interviewer says, “[T]here's a few hundred bucks in the form of that one-off rebate. There are northerners who might say, 'Look, that's half of one grocery trip up here.' What else are you going to do to help people really make ends meet, because that alone, up here? It's a drop in a bucket.”

You're talking about a lot of measures, and it's a lot of hollow words, especially if you're somebody from the Northwest Territories, Yukon or Nunavut.

What are you going to say to them that's really going to help pay the bills? I just quoted a member who said that single mothers are hurting up there. They're having to decide between paying their heating bills in the winter, buying diapers or paying for food.

Words just don't cut it. What are you going to actually do to make sure you're stepping up to the plate and delivering on what you promised to northerners?

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** We were in Inuvik last October. We announced \$163 million of new money for the nutrition north funding program, including an increased subsidy rate for nutritious foods in Northwest Territories and—

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I have to move on.

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Can you let me answer, please?

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** My time is just about over here.

We talked about the cost of living, too. I'm going to move on to carbon tax. We talked about affordability, and it's really all the same topic. Again, the interviewer asked you these questions previously, so you should have the answers.

As we talk about the cost of living and some of the measures, your government is imposing a carbon tax that literally every territory's MLA says makes no sense given the inability of anyone in this territory to move off carbon-based fuels.

Last night we had the nearest thing in the Northwest Territories to a constitutional crisis over a government bill regarding the carbon tax, which nearly became the first government bill to be voted down in goodness knows how long.

Why is the federal government not listening to the Northwest Territories on this? Why is it that Ottawa knows best once again?

For the public that is watching, the Northwest Territories actually tried to stop and stem the effects of the Liberal carbon tax, but guess what the federal government said. They said that Northwest Territories cannot rebate its citizens the equivalent amount that it really is costing them. It's going to stop it from doing that.

I guess the question I'll ask is simply, why would you do that?

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Your previous question was about affordability, and I was telling you what we were doing with affordability.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** If you can make that in—

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** It's \$163 million in new funds not only for increased subsidy rates for nutritious food, but also for the harvesters support grant, which helps offset the expenses with traditional harvesting and hunting for people who live in the north and our indigenous partners.

• (1620)

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Minister, I'm going to go back—

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** The first year, there were 550 harvesters—

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Again, I have very little time left—

**The Chair:** I'm going to stop us right there. We're going to pause.

**Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.):** I have a point of order.

I believe the rule is that the minister, in responding, gets at least the same amount of time as the questioner. This clearly is not what is happening here.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** It's my time, Mr. Powlowski.

**The Chair:** I'll just direct your attention to the chair.

I will remind members that we want to hear the answers, of course. We want to respect our guests as well, so let's try not to interrupt. I know your time is limited. I'll give you an additional 20 seconds, so you have 40 seconds now.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** No, that's time you're taking for yourself, because this is my—

**The Chair:** I've paused your clock.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Okay.

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** The \$163 million in new money for the harvesters support program aided 150 harvesters in the north in one year alone, 150 hunts, as well as 120 food sharing initiatives.

That would be the answer to your question on what we are doing to address affordability and food security issues in the north.

The price on pollution is exactly that. There's an environmental crisis going on all over the world. I know the Conservatives don't recognize it. I know in your annual general meeting you voted to not recognize the climate crisis.

We are actively engaged with territories and indigenous partners to not only address affordability issues, but also to fight climate change.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Zimmer. That's your time.

We're going to move on to Mr. McLeod for six minutes.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I thought I had time. You said that was going to be 20 seconds and my clock was stopped.

**The Chair:** I gave you an additional 40 seconds. You had six minutes and 40 seconds.

Mr. McLeod.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** This is really unusual.

**Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Welcome to the minister—

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I have a point of order, Chair.

You just made it very clear that...in committees, members should have control of their own time. The minister clearly was not answering my questions. I tried to ask other questions. You said he could have the floor to answer my question. He still did not answer the question, and then you said I had no time left.

What is it, Madam Chair? Do I not have time left? You just allowed the minister to run the clock, and I wasn't able to ask some simple finishing questions.

**The Chair:** We very clearly have an allotment of time per round. I did give you an additional 40 seconds after pausing the clock as well. You had more than enough time to ask questions.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** You said he was going to have 20 seconds to answer the question and then I would still have time. You were going to hold my clock. You said my clock was stopped; we would wait for the minister to answer, and I would have some time afterwards. It's clearly the impression you gave me.

**The Chair:** I said I would give you the additional 40 seconds, which I did.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Did you? Did you give me 40 seconds, or did you give him 40 seconds to not answer a question?

**The Chair:** That's not what I said. I said I would give you an additional 40 seconds after my clock was—

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I'd like to request a review of what we talked about. I'd like to revisit this, because it's simply not the impression that was left.

**The Chair:** That's fair enough. In the meantime, we'll move on to Mr. McLeod for six minutes.

**Mr. Michael McLeod:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I want 40 seconds extra, too.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Michael McLeod:** Thank you again to the ministers for joining us, and thank you to their teams.

My first question is going to be for Minister Miller. It's probably not going to come as a surprise.

The Northwest Territories has 15 tables where discussions are being conducted on negotiations. Some of them are going very well, and some of them are still struggling.

For sure, we're still feeling the effects from the Conservative government's decision in 2014 to make cuts in the budget for band councils, tribal councils and the negotiating processes. It's something we're still struggling with in the communities.

I think I've raised many times with you, Minister Miller, that we need a better investment in the process, the whole self-government and land claims process. We also need new policies.

I'm very encouraged to see that your department has increased its investment in negotiations and in the implementation of land claims and self-government agreements and treaties by nearly half a billion dollars year over year.

I want to ask you to explain how this increase in funds will support addressing the priorities of the communities, especially those in the north.

• (1625)

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Thank you.

This is the first time I've heard Minister Vandal being accused of talking too much. He's a man of few choice, pointed words, so that's a first.

To answer your point, you're absolutely right. The mains reflect increased transfers to modern treaty holders, a good number of which are situated in the Northwest Territories, as well as the second component of your question, which is increased support for the negotiation process. That means just sitting at the negotiation table and hammering out what could be some groundbreaking, historic settlements with communities in the Northwest Territories.

I think we're a whole heck of a lot closer than we were this time last year, and, indeed, there are a number of communities that are happy with the agreement being put in front of them and will take that next step of talking to their community members.

When we talk about modern treaties, we talk about how we reflect our relationship as a government with indigenous communities that have section 35 rights. That presumes a relationship of equals, so we are making sure those tables are properly funded. Making sure those communities have the ability to deal on a nation-to-nation, equal-to-equal basis is critical.

What we see in the estimates are two things. One, as I said earlier, is increased funds for making sure we are doing as we should, which is sitting at the table and negotiating some very difficult points. I can't guarantee all of them get solved.

Also, increasing the transfer payments, for lack of a better word, in the modern treaty relationship means that this is not enveloped programming that people have to apply for, but really grant-type format funding that goes to infrastructure and housing and is game-changing for the communities. A lot of what you're seeing year over year is that increased investment into those relationships, a good number of them being in the Northwest Territories.

**Mr. Michael McLeod:** Thank you for that response.

I'm also very pleased to see that Northern Affairs is increasing its support related to contaminated sites and abandoned mine reclamation by almost \$150 million year over year. The Northwest Territories has many of these projects, and Minister Dan Vandal is quite familiar with the Giant Mine, the Silver Bear Mines and the Canol Trail.

Can you explain how these funds will help the government work with indigenous partners to clean up these sites, while supporting local decision-making and economic participation?

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Actually, I had the opportunity to visit Giant Mine last July, when I was up on my northern tour. I went to Inuvik for nutrition north and visited the people of Giant Mine. I can tell you that this is part of our government's commitment to clean up and to remediate the top eight mines in all three territories. We're doing so with the perspective that those who have suffered throughout the years—the local communities, the first nations and other in-

igenous nations—should benefit now from the cleanup and the remediation.

As of May 2022, 51%—or approximately \$315 million in contracts—has been awarded to indigenous contractors for Giant Mine alone.

As well, thanks to your leadership, MP McLeod, in August 2021, the Government of Canada and the Yellowknives Dene First Nation signed a co-developed community benefits agreement to make sure that the Yellowknives Dene will benefit from the remediation.

That's a principle we are going to operate on in all of the major mine cleanups in the north in the years that come.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. McLeod.

Go ahead, Mrs. Gill. You have six minutes.

**Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the ministers, Mr. Vandal and Mr. Miller, for meeting with the committee today. This gives us an opportunity to follow up on discussions we began earlier in the year.

Mr. Vandal, I'd like to talk about the nutrition north Canada program, which we've discussed before. As you mentioned, through the budget, the government is investing in the program once again. The needs of the various communities are tremendous.

You said that your department wasn't the only one responsible, that other departments play a role in fulfilling this responsibility of the government's. I'd like an update on that. If I'm not mistaken, the government is investing \$180 million in the nutrition north Canada program.

What work is being done in other departments? Do you always work together as a team? I know you asked about a round table or working group, since a number of departments are involved. What exactly is your role in delivering that \$180-million investment? How do the other departments help you to ensure food sovereignty or make it less expensive for northern populations to put food on the table?

• (1630)

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Thank you for that excellent question.

In the past few years, we have worked closely with Marie-Claude Bibeau, the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, on food programs. We've also worked with Fisheries and Oceans Canada to deliver surplus fish at a time when Canadians were struggling.





**Hon. Dan Vandal:** I can say that the evaluation of the program is something that goes on regularly. We have an advisory council that gives us advice for nutrition north. It's community based. In the latest new funding that we've invested, there is a research component to it. If there was an organization that wanted to do research for a better model or to improve the program, we would be willing to consider that, using sound research methods.

Nutrition north is but one program. I think we need to keep it in context that one program is not going to solve the food insecurity issues in the north. We work with other departments. We work with other levels of government. We work with ITK to try to make it a better program, which we have, I think, in the last several years, but there's always room for improvement.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** Thank you.

I've asked you questions about nutrition north in the past, and you have mentioned this advisory committee. Could you commit to sharing the minutes of the advisory committee meetings with this committee?

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Sure, yes.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** Thank you so much.

I have questions for Minister Miller.

I've heard from chiefs in northern Ontario that community police officers in their communities are not deemed essential services, and that your government is refusing to negotiate new funding for the services that these officers provide. I know there's a lot of overlap between your department and Minister Mendicino's department on public safety, but can you share with this committee what your department is doing to ensure northern first nations can keep their communities safe?

• (1640)

**Hon. Marc Miller:** There are a couple of things. It depends on the program you're referring to. Community safety officers would be under Minister Hajdu's department, and the other would be Minister Mendicino, with the trilateral agreements. I'm sure you're familiar with the budget in 2022, which increased the trilateral funds available for policing services in indigenous communities. Indeed, Minister Mendicino has made commitments to new police services in a number of communities across Canada. It's not enough, and I think that's why the Prime Minister committed to introducing legislation to treat first nations policing as an essential service, because what is more essential than keeping people safe and alive?

We support that. There have been significant budgetary increases. I am not familiar with the particular fact pattern that you're speaking to, but it isn't, as a generality, something that doesn't happen in this country. Those police services at times are struggling and need more support.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** I know there are different responsibilities in each department, and we know that time is really important. Communities are running out of funding, and quickly more communities are becoming more in danger. I wonder if you can take this issue back to the cabinet table and ask that the government take representatives to be sent with a mandate to negotiate in order to make sure this community program continues.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Yes, absolutely.

I know I spoke about the departments and the various responsibilities, but I asked the Prime Minister, when I took this role, to put that specifically in my mandate letter, to help coordinate that. It is something that I care about and take to heart, and I will absolutely do so.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** Okay. Thank you.

How much time do I still have?

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** Can I save it for my next round?

**The Chair:** We do have a condensed second round. I can give you the 20 seconds there.

We'll move on, as I mentioned, to a condensed second round. We'll begin with Mr. Schmale for five minutes.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC):** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ministers, for being here today.

I'm going to pick up where Mr. Zimmer left off, regarding nutrition north and food security up north.

Mr. Vandal, on page 35 of your departmental plan, there doesn't seem to be a target there on where your department hopes to make headway into this situation. Do you have a timeline on that?

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** The programs aim to provide nutritious food at a more affordable price for people who live in the north. There are five key components. There is, of course, the retail subsidy, which is probably the most well known. There's the harvesters support grant, which has rolled out in the last few years and has been very successful in providing traditional country food to people in the north. We've adopted the new community food programs fund in the last iteration of nutrition north, which looks at school food programs and food sharing initiatives, food sovereignty initiatives and greenhouses. We have nutrition education initiatives to continue to support culturally appropriate and community-based nutrition education activities, and last, of course, is the food security research grant, to try to work with community partners—

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** I appreciate that.

I'm sorry, Minister; my time is really short. I appreciate all that, but I'm really looking for an answer. Why in your departmental plan, on page 35, are there no targets set?

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** I believe that we're always trying to provide the greatest outreach that we can to help as many people as possible. On the target sector, perhaps I'll turn to the—

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** That's okay, Minister. Thank you very much; I appreciate that. I have to go to Minister Miller. Unfortunately, my time is very short.

Minister Miller, you mentioned in your opening words that you're making progress on the murdered and missing indigenous women and girls file. I only had to look at APTN News a few minutes ago to see that pretty much a whole slew of very sad stories are talking about how the situation is getting worse, including a quote here from an FSIN vice-chief, saying that as we approach this fourth anniversary of the release of the report, she, Aly Bear, believes the crisis has only deepened.

What is your department doing? I can bring up more stats here, which I will get to momentarily.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** We're talking about people, and those people often become statistics, tragically. It's hard to dispute that, and it's hard to dispute the fact that, coming out of COVID in particular, the situation has possibly become worse. That doesn't mean there haven't been investments, and it doesn't mean we haven't made historic investments as a government in keeping people safe. Some of those are game-changers and will keep people alive, which is important to recognize.

On June 3, this coming weekend, or on Monday, we will be releasing a departmental report that focuses specifically on those items. I encourage you to read it. One thing we've heard in particular this year is that we have to make sure we proceed towards accountability, because people can listen to me as long as the day is, but it's not necessarily credible if I'm giving myself grades. This is an area where we really need an ombudsperson, someone who can assess where we are at this stage, and it isn't rosy. I'll concede that there's work to do.

• (1645)

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** Well, I'll tell you this. I'm sure you know this, Minister—I'm sorry; my time is short—but according to APTN, indigenous and women and girls accounted for 65% of all female homicides from 2018 to 2022. According to APTN, during 2007 to 2017, 34% of female homicide victims were indigenous women, so that's a pretty significant jump. APTN also says that indigenous women account for every single unsolved female homicide in Canada in the last five years.

We're going up, not down. Your government needs to deal with bail reform. It needs to stop going after hunters and farmers. I don't think going up like this in this significant category in this significant file, where people's lives are being lost.... Ross River Dena Council just a few weeks ago declared a state of emergency after Ramona Peter went missing.

This is not getting better, Minister. I know you're saying to look forward to this work, but we have women going missing, and

they're being killed. Just look at Winnipeg right now. It's a very sad situation that is not getting any better.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** I don't dispute those statistics, and I think we have to look them straight in the eyes, but I think you also have to take stock of some of the positions your leader has stated with respect to this so-called "tough on crime" strategy, which will have a net result of keeping more indigenous women and racialized folks in jail and making people more vulnerable, so when we talk about bail reform, let's talk about exactly what that means.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** Minister, indigenous women accounted for every single unsolved female homicide in the last five years, and that's under your government's watch—every single unsolved murder.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** You're well aware of the role we play to not only accompany victims but to make sure that the police are investigating and doing their job in investigating those murders. A lot of those cases go unsolved. A lot of them are under the jurisdiction of provincial government, so there's a role for everyone to play. We wear this on our shoulders, MP Schmale, and that is clear. It doesn't mean the investments haven't been made.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** Absolutely. I'm saying that the path you're taking from 2018 to 2022, according to APTN, means that indigenous women accounted for 65% of all female homicide victims.

**The Chair:** Mr. Schmale, that's your time.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** That's right, and this is an ongoing strategy. I've conceded that coming out of COVID, it is very conceivable that this situation has gotten worse. The awareness has also made it the case, and I think we have to be quite honest about what we're looking at, and the tragedy ongoing.

It doesn't mean that we lower our hands and we do nothing. There has been \$2 billion dedicated to this. Dozens of shelters have been announced over the last couple of weeks. That is important, and that will save lives.

The groundbreaking investments we have made in settling litigation and fixing a broken system of children in care will change and save lives. It's just that it is extremely difficult to measure right now, and the change is brutally slow, particularly for families who are feeling the effects of it every day.

Again, it doesn't mean we drop our arms and give up. We have to continue, and we have accountability for it at the provincial and municipal levels as well.

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

Mr. Battiste, you have five minutes.

**Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Ministers, for your time in answering these questions.

When we come to INAN, we often talk about all the problems we've seen for over a century and sometimes for many generations going back, in terms of the systemic racism that's in place.

We've probably heard nothing worse than some of the discussions and some of the things that have come to light over the past three to four years on Indian residential schools, and in our work we're trying to ensure that we're doing everything we can to fulfill our obligations under the calls to action, especially around 72 and 76. I want to give the minister a chance to talk about some of the work that the department's been undertaking on that file.

As well, you mentioned that there was almost a \$3 billion.... It's the Gottfriedson case. I didn't get the exact numbers. I just wanted to give you a chance to expand on what we're doing on the Gottfriedson case and why that is important.

• (1650)

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Absolutely. Thank you.

Those are two very pertinent questions to the funding estimates that are contained in this year's document that you have before your eyes.

Two years ago, Kamloops announced the tragedy of the 200 suspected unmarked graves. Their community's still hurting. The conscience of Canadians was shocked and continues to be shocked as we see further announcements. At times it's almost daily.

Until then, communities were taking it upon themselves to scratch together funds to look for their lost ones. Despite modest investments to address calls to action 72 to 76, which deal with the locations of loved ones as well as the documentation of their lives lost, there had been insufficient funds allotted. I think it's important to be clear about that.

Going into the 2021 election, we announced several hundred million dollars to support communities that wish to search for their loved ones, as well as other affected communities. It was to support the meetings of elders, the gathering of documentation, and the search and disclosure of documents in order to make sure we are putting a better foot forward for people who are simply looking for answers. It was to give them a bit of closure and perhaps a bit of accountability. That takes expression in many forms.

It's notably in the funding for the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, in a new building and with capacity funding, so there's a third party that's neutral to the federal government that will actually welcome survivors in a culturally sensitive space to get more answers or to support searches. There are about 100 searches going on around the country. For the Crown-Indigenous Relations portion of the money, that represents over \$100 million.

There's money that comes from Indigenous Services Canada, Infrastructure and other sources. At times it's to rebuild—or tear down, even—old sites that communities have wanted to get rid of and out of their minds so they can rebuild anew and so kids in particular can have a place to look forward to going to, if it's a training or health centre, or anything that the community would want.

That work is ongoing. It is not close to being over. Nor should it be, necessarily. It's work that we'll gladly support in the coming years.

On the Gottfriedson class action, members will note that there's about \$3 billion that has been attributed to what has been called the fifth piece of the residential school puzzle that the federal government is responsible for. It has been called by many observers and journalists some of the last pieces of the large puzzle dealing with residential school litigation and reconciliation. It deals with the collective trauma that occurred to communities' language and culture over decades. It contemplates a historic sum placed into trust, which should be done relatively shortly, as we wait for the expiration of an appeal period.

That money, the \$3 billion, has been allocated to be put into that trust mechanism. It will be run by indigenous people for indigenous people for the conceivable future, as they try to revitalize their languages and support cultural events in their own communities.

Those are two very large pieces of the estimates you're looking at. I think everyone here would agree that they're well worth it.

**Mr. Jaime Battiste:** Thank you, Minister.

There were several Indian residential schools all across Canada. I know you've done a lot in going out to meet with the communities in these areas to talk about the next stage in these areas where such tragedies happened.

I'm wondering if you can go a little into what you're hearing from the communities about what they would like to see from the federal government, and what response we have in terms of after the searches are done and the work has been done to find the truth in these grounds. What are the communities asking for? What are the indigenous leaders asking of you for the next phase of what we're doing about these sites, which aren't, in a lot of places, properly commemorated?

**The Chair:** I'm going to note, Mr. Battiste, that your time is up, but I would like to hear this response.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Certainly, commemoration, which has been done, in part, imperfectly at times.... There's work that Heritage will be supporting in the near future to make sure that there's proper commemoration for all Canadians to consider these things.

However, what you often hear from survivors is a lot of hope, not sort of unbridled.... There are still clear distrust words with the federal government, but you hear a lot of hope that what we're doing now will not be reproducing the model that got them where they are in the first place, and that it will be one that is focused on their own needs and the needs of their children. Whether they see the building of schools or health centres, or a proper commemoration, it's all an attempt to address elements of closure and accountability.

Some elders are speaking for the first time. It takes a whole heck of a lot of courage. Some will suffer in silence the rest of their days for very legitimate reasons. There are nuanced opinions and views as to how this process that we are all in as a country represents those, so I don't want to betray it by generalizing, but I see a lot of hope. It's hope that has to come with proof.

Anyone willing or wanting to run this country has to make the commitments that this government has made, and perhaps even more, if they want to gain the confidence of Canadians and the respect of those elders.

• (1655)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Battiste.

[Translation]

Now we go to Mrs. Gill, for two and a half minutes.

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Vandal, I'd like to talk about food sovereignty in the north more broadly. As Mr. Schmale pointed out, nutrition north Canada doesn't have clear and specific targets. I realize you want to help as many people as possible, of course, and keep improving how you do things, but people are being overlooked. Are you planning to set clear targets? It's always possible to do better, but we don't know how much farther there is to go, perfection being the ultimate goal.

We also talked about the burden that falls on communities. I have been on the ground. People don't have fresh produce, deliveries never make it and prices are through the roof. A can of coffee can cost \$50 in northern communities. That's just the first example that comes to mind.

I know that millions of dollars are being allocated and that reviews are done from time to time, but it may be necessary to overhaul the entire nutrition north Canada program. People often tell me they wish the businesses weren't running the program, so people could have more money in their pockets. They're worried that money is disappearing somewhere, and they wish that money was in their pockets instead of the businesses'.

Would it be possible to overhaul the current program, to set clear targets and establish a plan that genuinely includes other departments, as we talked about earlier? Would that help tackle the problem? I realize greenhouse and other initiatives have been undertaken, as mentioned, but it's going to take more than just a few million dollars in funding with the skyrocketing price of food.

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

First, in response to your question about targets, I would say that we are working on that with our indigenous and northern partners. It's indicated on page 35 of the departmental plan. This is a very important conversation, one that goes beyond a single program like nutrition north Canada. We have to sit down not only with the other departments, but also with the other governments to tackle the important issue of northern food security.

On our end, we are doing what we can through nutrition north Canada. We are partnering with communities and schools on programs in an effort to broaden our outreach and support. The har-

vesters support programming is one example. An issue as significant as this certainly warrants a broader response.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[English]

Ms. Idlout, you have the floor for two minutes and 50 seconds.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** *Qujannamiik.*

I have three big questions in two minutes and 50 seconds, so maybe what I will do is ask the first two questions and maybe ask them to be given back in written form, and then I'll give an opportunity for the third question to be responded to here.

My first question is on Arctic sovereignty. This government has committed to major spending toward military equipment in the Arctic. Arctic communities face a major security threat. Rapid coastal erosion and melting ice are opening the Northwest Passage. This will bring illegal fishing, leaks from cargo ships, and strains on local search and rescue capabilities.

Can the minister push for a national defence policy that protects and supports our Arctic communities? That's the first question.

The second question is on the Canadian Rangers. We know they are the front line of defence in the far north. At a time when this government is investing more and more in Arctic sovereignty, Arctic security, the equipment usage rate for the Canadian Rangers has not been increased to keep up with inflation. When will this government increase the equipment usage rate and improve the process for Canadian Rangers to get their reimbursements? I have been told that it takes a very long time, sometimes upwards of six months, for Canadian Rangers to get their reimbursements.

The third question that I would love a response on is on children aging out of care. We know that Canada's residential schooling system was a huge genocidal policy that still has impacts to this day. It's well known that the foster care system and the child apprehension system are another form of that, and there are a huge number of first nations, Métis and Inuit children who are going to age out of care.

What will this government do to ensure that those children who are aging out get the housing they need, so that they can feel safe after they have left the system?

• (1700)

**Hon. Marc Miller:** I recognize there's not a ton of time left, but we will work with our teams to get you answers on the first questions, on Arctic sovereignty and the rangers.

During COVID, there were a number of measures that were extended for kids who were aging out of care, and we just saw the benefit of what it could produce. There are currently negotiations ongoing as we deal with the reform in long-term care, with the Caring Society, the AFN and the Chiefs of Ontario, among others, as part of the resolution of the class action into children in care.

I can't share with you a number of those initiatives right now, but I venture to think that they will be positive as we address the critical element of people who are coming to adulthood and therefore aging out of care. Those people are vulnerable, and they need the support of the Government of Canada. It is not an uncomplex situation, particularly given the extreme needs in housing, but we could do better with them.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister Vandal, Minister Miller and your officials, for joining us this afternoon. I think you can tell our committee is very passionate about supporting indigenous communities and their needs.

We will briefly suspend as we set up for our second panel.

• (1700)

(Pause)

• (1705)

**The Chair:** We're good to go.

Welcome, Minister Hajdu. You have eight minutes for your opening statement. Welcome to your officials as well.

You can begin now.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Indigenous Services):** *Kwe kwe. Ullukkut. Tansi. Hello. Bonjour.*

As we all know, Canada's Parliament is located on the unceded and traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

Thank you for having me back here to speak to the main estimates for Indigenous Services Canada.

As I begin my remarks today, I'm reflecting on the many first nations in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, the Northwest Territories, New Brunswick and most recently Nova Scotia, who are all facing incredible and heartbreaking challenges this wildfire season. I've had many early-morning and late-night calls from leadership. What they're going through right now is truly devastating.

[*Translation*]

We know that wildfires are happening more frequently because of climate change and that first nations communities, which are often located in remote areas, are on the front lines.

[*English*]

The community leaders I've been speaking with are all focused primarily on protecting lives first of all, supporting their members in temporary and fragile evacuee situations, and of course working throughout night and day to save the infrastructure that they can. Last week I received a photo from Chief Conroy Sewepagaham of Fox Creek in Alberta, showing his crew of firefighters and first responders. Crews had been working around the clock in every loca-

tion, coordinating evacuations, fighting fires and supporting members to keep people safe.

For as long as we need to, we will continue to support evacuations and the protection work to ensure that community members are safe and will be there for the long term as communities begin to plan and rebuild through the emergency management assistance program. However, these challenging situations illustrate the importance of self-determination and the ongoing efforts of work with first nations leadership and the provinces and territories to rapidly transform emergency management service agreements, particularly in Alberta and Ontario.

• (1710)

[*Translation*]

I would like to highlight the current concerns of the community of Kanesatake. We are in contact with Grand Chief Bonspille, and the band council has found ways to mitigate the environmental impacts and potentially restore the site. On Thursday, I will be meeting with Minister Lafrenière and Grand Chief Bonspille to discuss solutions, because I am also very concerned about the project's impact on the community.

[*English*]

The real success in managing climate-related disasters and environmental concerns will come when we work in partnership with indigenous peoples. The days of the federal or provincial governments dictating how to manage a crisis with an "Ottawa knows best" approach are increasingly over. First nations are increasingly taking on services and programs as we look at new, more flexible funding agreements that allow them to make the choices that are right for their communities. The outcomes are better. Communities have the knowledge of their lands, members and solutions, which are often more effective and less traumatic than the ones that were imposed in the past.

The main estimates that I'm here to speak to today reflect the ongoing work that's required to make historic change in our relationships with indigenous peoples. Together, we are doing the hard work of changing colonial structures, building meaningful relationships and ending the generations of racist and discriminatory policies. Since 2015 we've made significant distinctions-based investments and supported communities and partners with the delivery of service and community infrastructure needs. COVID, the supply chain and workforce shortages have indeed had an impact, but we're doing everything we can to support partners and to continue to make these changes that increase the successes of leaders, communities and indigenous peoples.

Within this context, the main estimates for fiscal year 2022-23 for the department are \$39.6 billion. This amount doesn't include additional approvals or funding from budget 2023. These will be accessed through future estimates. Through these main estimates, we will build on the billions of dollars in significant investments made since 2015. We will continue essential work with indigenous partners in such priority areas as health, child and family services, education, infrastructure, the environment, economic development and governance.

For the upcoming year, in partnership with indigenous peoples, the department will focus on priorities that are linked to six service areas.

The first area is health, where planned spending amounts to \$5.4 billion. The overarching shared goal is to ensure that indigenous people have access to quality, culturally safe health care. A new \$2-billion, distinctions-based indigenous health equity fund will support communities to work on improving equity and access to health care and to improve health outcomes.

First nations children deserve the best start in life, including well-funded family and child services, education and the supports required to be successful in their education. Included in these estimates is \$25.4 billion in spending on children and families. This amount includes funding set aside for the revised final settlement agreement to compensate those harmed by discriminatory underfunding of the first nations child and family services program and the federal government's narrow definition of Jordan's principle.

It also includes funding for income support services, continued implementation of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal's orders and continued implementation of the Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families.

As I mentioned at my last appearance, we've signed seven agreements across Canada to date, in four provinces, to coordinate child and family services, and we expect more to be concluded soon. Over 200 communities are working toward developing their own laws and policies, and we're supporting that work.

There is \$3.5 billion to support indigenous education that is also built into these estimates to ensure that first nations children get the best start, that first nations have control over their students' education, and that students are able to learn indigenous languages.

This money continues our work to end the discriminatory funding upheld by previous governments with short-sighted policy that undermines the excellence of the next generation of innovators and workers.

Also included is funding for post-secondary education to support about 24,000 students annually.

There is \$4.2 billion included in the estimates for infrastructure and environment. This amount will move forward meaningful progress on safe drinking water, housing, buildings and renovating school facilities.

There are also investments to advance self-determination. There is \$262 million earmarked to support economic development that will create wealth and prosperity, and another \$585 million will support indigenous governance and capacity supports.

At Indigenous Services Canada, we are working to close the gaps that have existed since the beginning of our relationship with indigenous peoples. This work is not easy. It is not inexpensive. However, it is overdue, and it's the right thing to do.

I'm sure that members are all committed to the vision and hard work of reconciliation. I welcome your questions.

*Meegwetch. Qujannamiik. Marsi.* Thank you.

• (1715)

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

We'll move to our first round of questions, beginning with Mr. Vidal for six minutes.

**Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC):** Thank you, Minister and your team for being here.

I want to echo your comments about the support to the communities dealing with the forest fire situations. As you and I spoke about last week, many of those are in my riding in northern Saskatchewan. I wanted to echo those comments.

When I was first elected in 2019, I visited the community of Denare Beach. At that time, it was brought to my attention that the community was owed a significant amount of money by the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation.

To put it in perspective, the population of Denare Beach is about 800 people. Part of their community consists of the Amisk Lake reserve and some properties that are connected right in the community. There are 37 of these properties out of a total of about 500 in the whole community.

PBCN and the Village of Denare Beach have a service agreement that includes water and sewer, fire, animal control, street maintenance, recreation, garbage and recycling, etc. In essence, it's an agreement that takes care of property taxes and other services.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Mr. Vidal. There's a point of order.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm really having problems with my audio. I hear an echo when I speak, and I didn't get the interpretation of anything Mr. Vidal just said.

[English]

**The Chair:** We're going to briefly suspend, so we can ensure that interpretation is resumed.

• (1715) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1715)

[Translation]

**The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Audrée Dallaire):** Mrs. Gill, let's do a few tests. I'll say a few words in English, and you tell me whether you can hear the French interpretation.

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** Yes. Thank you.

[English]

**Ms. Audrée Dallaire:** Hi. This is Audrée Dallaire, committee clerk. I usually sit on the official languages committee. I'm happy to be here on INAN.

[Translation]

Can you hear the French interpretation?

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** I can hear you clearly.

**The Clerk:** Is the interpretation coming through?

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** Yes, but I hear an echo when I speak. Someone's mike may not be on mute. I'm not sure.

**The Clerk:** I'm going to let the chair take over.

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair:** We'll continue.

Mr. Vidal, take it from the top. You have six minutes.

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

As I said, when I was first elected in 2019, I visited the community of Denare Beach. It was brought to my attention that the community was owed a significant amount of money by the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation. The population of Denare Beach is about 800 people. Part of their community consists of the Amisk Lake reserve, which is one of the eight communities of Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation. There are 37 properties that are part of the Amisk Lake reserve in this community of about 500 properties.

Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation and the Village of Denare Beach have a service agreement that consists of water and sewer, fire, animal control, street maintenance, recreation, garbage and recycling. In essence, it's an agreement that basically is in lieu of property taxes and municipal services.

I raised this issue with your predecessor and his chief of staff, starting way back in March 2020 and many times after. I brought this issue up with your deputy minister on January 24, 2022, shortly after you were appointed minister. I was assured that the ministry was aware of and had approved this agreement, and we received promise after promise of the region's being committed to resolving this issue. It still hasn't. That's over three years later, Minister.

On January 2, 2023, the village was owed about \$240,000. That doesn't include the 2023 invoice yet, which will bring the total to over \$300,000. Again, to put this into perspective, the village's total

annual property taxes are just over \$500,000, so \$300,000 owing to them is very, very significant to their community.

At my request, the village leadership has shown significant patience with the process as we have tried to work at this behind the scenes. Quite frankly, I think that patience is becoming undeserved. Minister, the leadership of the village has been put in an untenable situation because of the unwillingness or the inability of ISC to ensure that the service agreements they have approved and funded are honoured and paid, but this community's patience has run out. Denare Beach does not want the promise of more meetings, nor the promise of phone calls or follow-ups. In their own words, they just need ISC to pay the bill. If not, they're going to be forced to shut off the water and stop responding to fire calls, animal control and all the other services in this agreement in order to collect what is due to them.

Minister, my question is actually quite simple. Can you commit to the people of Denare Beach—who, by the way, are watching today—that this will be resolved immediately to ensure that there is no disruption of service? In other words, is there a commitment in these estimates to just pay this bill?

• (1720)

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Thank you very much.

Through you, Madam Chair, I will commit to the residents of Denare Beach to continue to investigate what is happening. Certainly, Indigenous Services Canada would not have a direct agreement with Denare Beach. They would be supporting the community to procure services. We will need to work with the community to determine why the bills remain unpaid.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** I appreciate that, Minister, but just for clarity, I've had that commitment many times over the last three and half years. If we can get some assurance that this will be taken care of... It's absolutely imperative, because we don't want to see a child mauled by a dog, or a fire at a house, or any of these horrible things that could happen if services are ended. Let's just make sure it gets done, please.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** We'll certainly connect back with you, Mr. Vidal, to give you more information on this situation.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Thank you. I appreciate that.

My second question is actually pretty simple as well. I have a picture here that was sent to me by a constituent. It's a picture of a package of stuff that was found on the ground outside a service station in my riding. It's a zip-lock bag with a Canada flag, an Indigenous Services of Canada logo, that's identified as a safer inhalation meth kit.

My question is really simple in regard to the estimates. Can you tell me how much was spent on these kits last year in Canada and what the plan is in these estimates for how much we're going to spend on these kits in the coming year?



**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** We can get back to you, Mr. Vidal, on the estimated cost for a safer inhalation kit, but I can tell you that it will be enormously cheaper than the treatment of a variety of different infectious diseases from using contaminated inhalation kits. The purpose of safe consumption materials, such as safer inhalation kits and the provision of clean needles, is to reduce the rate of invasive group A strep, of hepatitis C, of HIV and of a variety of other related health issues. It is far more affordable to try to help people when they are seeking to try to protect what health they have—to give out supplies—than to treat sometimes very resistant diseases like that, which can spread very quickly and cost communities astronomical amounts of money to support.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** I'm sorry. My time is really limited. I want to make my point on why I bring that up.

On the comparison of what we spend on that, I've brought forward a number of initiatives of indigenous-led, land-based treatment opportunities that treat families for addictions and for mental health issues. I've brought those forward to the department on a number of occasions, and the people I have represented who bring those forward can't even get a response from the department.

To me, the challenge is the comparison between what we're spending on something like these safer inhalation meth kits and the treatment options I've brought forward. One, for example, is the White Lightning organization in Beauval. They were looking for \$50,000 to invest in a facility that's already there to do land-based, indigenous-led treatment, and they can't even get a response. That's the frustration that I'm bringing forward to you today.

• (1725)

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Well, certainly, two things.... One, I would say that the amount that is spent on harm reduction would be far outweighed by the amount spent on mental health and substance use supports, including treatment.

We will look into communities that have not had responses, and that's not acceptable, quite frankly, if a community is not receiving a response, but I will tell you that we receive requests all along the continuum, from conceptual to fully programmatic and designed and ready to deliver.

We work with communities, no matter where they are on that continuum of design, to make sure that whatever they're proposing is going to actually be implementable in a community, and to ensure they have the right suite of supports, including financial support.

We'll follow up on the specific proposals, and my department will get back to you.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Thank you. I can assure you that this one was fully developed.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I'm not judging that particular proposal. I just want to make sure you understand that communities are along the continuum of design.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Vidal.

We'll now move to Mr. Powlowski for six minutes.

**Mr. Marcus Powlowski:** Thank you.

Minister, since we started talking about health care, I'll continue with that. I know that our government has recently committed to \$2 billion in further funding for indigenous health care. If somebody—either you, Minister, or one of the members of the department—can get a little more specific as to where exactly that money is going, maybe I'll start with that.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Thank you very much, Mr. Powlowski. I will just say that this is a really exciting and brand new, innovative fund for first nations indigenous partners to be able to access.

The intent behind the indigenous health equity fund is, first of all, that the fund will be self-determined—that indigenous groups, whether they're health care providers at the community or regional level or other experts who are indigenous-led, will be able to access the health equity fund to pursue projects that look at increasing access to equity.

Some of the most exciting announcements I've made with indigenous partners are projects that work on system navigation—for example, within the non-indigenous or what I would call mainstream health system. For example, in Manitoba there is now an ombudsman for people who are not able to access service through a mainstream health care system. They now have an ombudsman that is indigenous-led and can provide indigenous people with access to health care or with the ability to make complaints about the refusal of health care.

I know that as a practising ER physician, you have seen a great many things in your practice, and one of the things you may have observed is the ongoing systemic racism that indigenous people face in provincial and territorial health care systems across the country. This health equity fund is about empowering indigenous people and practitioners to come up with innovative ways to close that gap and to work more closely with provinces and territories.

Finally, I'll say that some leaders may use the indigenous health equity fund to further their work on the creation of self-determination, of self-determined health care legislation. That is work that's exciting. It's happening across the country. It will empower first nations indigenous people to have broader control over how health is delivered within their territory and in partnership with provinces and territories.

**Mr. Marcus Powlowski:** As you know, coming out of COVID we've had a lot of discussion and a lot of concern about mental health and needing more resources both for mental health and for substance abuse. Will that come out of the \$2 billion, or is there further funding to deal with those problems?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** The \$2 billion is very separate and is unique to health equity programs.

The mental health and substance use treatment will continue as a separate line item. It is delivered in a variety of different ways. Through first nations leadership, there are direct health and mental health support lines that the Government of Canada provides, and we contract services for communities that need additional care in a variety of different circumstances.

**Mr. Marcus Powlowski:** Can you give me some numbers as to how much money is going to both—

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Valerie Gideon will provide us with those.

**Ms. Valerie Gideon (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services):** In mental health, we have over \$600 million a year that is invested in mental health services across the country.

• (1730)

**Mr. Marcus Powlowski:** What about substance abuse?

**Ms. Valerie Gideon:** It's within the context of that, but I can tell you that in budget 2021, for example, we increased the number of opioid agonist sites, treatment sites, from 40 to 78. We're continuing to expand access to substance use services.

It's important to remember that we have flexibility in our agreements. First nations have flexibility to design mental health services according to the needs they have.

**Mr. Marcus Powlowski:** I'd like briefly to switch to another topic, and that is funding for post-secondary institutions in first nations communities. I'm glad you're shaking your head, Ms. Gideon, because I think you were the one who responded about a year ago, when I asked the same question, and I think, at that point, there was some consideration in Indigenous Services as to changing the funding or making more funding available.

If you could tell me.... I'm not looking for a specific figure, but how are those institutions being funded, and is that being reconsidered? I know Seven Generations, which is in my riding, in Couchiching, has certainly had problems with ongoing funding.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I'll take a stab at the overarching thought and then turn it over to the officials.

Largely, the funding that Indigenous Services Canada provides is to first nations to direct post-secondary supports for their students. It may go out in a variety of different ways. Students, of course, benefit from the Government of Canada's changes, under our government, to the Canada student loan and grant program. There's a doubling of student grants, as well as the forgiveness of interest. These are all beneficial to low-income students.

In addition, Indigenous Services Canada has funding to provide additional supports for post-secondary students from first nations across the country to pay for some of the extraordinary costs that are associated with going away for school, or for other kinds of related costs.

In some cases, communities use that money to provide wraparound supports for post-secondary students, so that they have connection to the community while they're studying. In my own riding, Biigtigong is a community that does exactly that, and it has had over an 80% post-secondary graduation rate because of the

connection to community and the ongoing support for its students while they're away and studying.

In terms of the future, every dollar we spend in supporting people to access post-secondary education is a positive dollar spent for the growth agenda of Canada, because it produces professionals, skilled tradespeople and people who can fill the significant labour force gap that we see across the country.

Valerie can maybe speak to some of the institutions.

**Ms. Valerie Gideon:** I can speak a bit to the funding.

In budget 2019, we were able to secure \$320 million over five years for first nations post-secondary education, but we have been working with first nations on a strategy and continuing to advocate for greater resources, because, as you noted, the demand is high within communities, which is a good thing.

We also introduced post-secondary education funding for Inuit and members of the Métis nation. There's \$125.5 million over 10 years for Inuit, and, for the Métis nation, there's \$362 million over 10 years. There is also ongoing funding.

That was an expansion of a traditional role that Indigenous Services had.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Powlowski.

I'm going to need unanimous consent from our committee members to sit through 10 minutes of the bells. Do I have unanimous consent?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll continue.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mrs. Gill. You have six minutes.

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for being here today, Minister.

The committee met with you not long ago to discuss the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer's report. That's helpful because it ties in with the current estimates. An issue that was raised had to do with the fact that a lot of money was invested after the main estimates came out, through the supplementary estimates. Department staff, however, had trouble using that supplementary funding because they didn't have enough capacity. I don't have the exact figures for every budget item, but it was one of the things that stood out.



The first question I have is for Indian and Northern Affairs about the funding that is given by northern affairs to NIHB.

If you have kept a record of all the changes and all the programs that you have implemented so far, I would like to see it. There was talk about increasing mental health programs for the people in the communities who need to see specialists—special doctors—because they cannot be treated by the health professionals in community health clinics.

[English]

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Yes. Through the NIHB, there is mental health counselling available. It depends on the particular individual. The program is intended to provide coverage for professional mental health counselling that can complement other services available in the community.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** I'm so sorry to interrupt you, but I don't know that my interpreter understood what I was trying to ask, so I'll ask it in English.

In the last budget, it was announced that there would be a couple of changes to the non-insured health benefits program, in two areas. Those areas of change were to services for mental health, and the second area of change that I seem to remember was announced in the budget was medical travel.

I wonder if you could explain what those changes might be, according to what was announced in the budget.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** There were additional dollars dedicated to mental wellness in the budget, but I'll have to turn to the officials to talk about NIHB-specific changes.

**Ms. Valerie Gideon:** I know NIHB went through some changes with respect to mental health counselling a few years ago, essentially by expanding the counselling benefit so that it's not strictly associated with crisis counselling, and also ensuring that it was clear that although on average most individuals use up to 22 hours of counselling, they can absolutely be approved for additional hours of counselling as needed.

The other change was that instead of just relying on fee-for-service professional counselling services, where we pay registered providers in the program, we have been using funding agreements with communities or organizations, tribal councils, for them to then bring in providers to their communities instead of having individuals travel out. We have been increasing the use of the benefit in that area.

On medical transportation, we have been undergoing a review of the benefit with first nations to come up with a number of system improvements. What was noted more recently in the budget is funding that is specific to supporting the Government of Nunavut with respect to its increased expenses relating to medical transportation for clients who are eligible for non-insured health benefits.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** Thank you for that clarification.

I also know that, unfortunately, there has to be a heavy reliance on service providers who are not indigenous. We have to rely on dental hygienists and dentists who are non-indigenous.

I have also been approached by Canadian-certified counsellors, who used to be able to provide mental health counselling and were paid through the non-insured health benefits program. The reason they reached out to me was that they had been removed from the list of those who can provide services under the non-insured health benefits program.

I wonder if you could provide us with an update as to the whole licensing or the regulation or the selection of who provides services to first nations, Métis and Inuit under the non-insured health benefits program.

● (1745)

**Ms. Valerie Gideon:** With respect to that particular situation, we will have to follow up with your office to understand exactly why individuals would be removed. I would say that while we have registration of providers if they are directly billing the program, when we are funding indigenous organizations to bring in counselling services there is greater flexibility in that context.

We will follow up with your office to see what we may be able to do.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** Okay. Thank you.

**Ms. Gina Wilson (Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services):** I have one more thing. I was contacted recently by a group of therapists who had indicated that there were some adjustments in the province of Quebec. I don't know if that's the issue, but I was following up on that one. It could be related.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** Very quickly, maybe you can answer in the next round about these non-indigenous service providers. I've heard from many that it takes forever to get paid by non-insured health benefits. Some of them go into debt by thousands and thousands until they finally get paid by NIHB. If you'll recall, the indigenous and northern affairs committee studied the NIHB program, including the administration of it. We did receive a response, but I wonder if in the next round you could provide us with more information as to what happened after our report was tabled.

*Qujannamiik.*

**The Chair:** We're out of time. If you could provide that in writing, that would be great. Thank you.

That's all the time we have for questions today. Thank you so much to the minister and her officials for joining us.

We will now move to vote. Pursuant to Standing Orders 81(4) and (5), the committee is considering the main estimates for 2023-24.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the committee will now consider the main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2024.

[*English*]

We have two options, committee members. We can vote on the allocations together in one motion, or we can vote on each of them separately.

[*Translation*]

Do I have unanimous consent to vote the main estimates in one motion?

[*English*]

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** That's great.

Shall vote 1 under the Canadian High Arctic Research Station, votes 1, 5, 10 and L15 under the Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, and votes 1, 5 and 10 under the Department of Indigenous Services, less the amounts voted in the interim supply, carry?

CANADIAN HIGH ARCTIC RESEARCH STATION

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$29,961,393

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

DEPARTMENT OF CROWN-INDIGENOUS RELATIONS AND NORTHERN AFFAIRS

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$4,246,075,402

Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....\$140,000

Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....\$4,851,166,848

Vote L15—Loans to Indigenous claimants.....\$25,903,000

(Votes 1, 5, 10 and L15 agreed to on division)

DEPARTMENT OF INDIGENOUS SERVICES

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$23,462,199,484

Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....\$6,102,934

Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....\$15,990,911,482

(Votes 1, 5 and 10 agreed to on division)

**The Chair:** Shall I report the main estimates of 2023-24 as amended, less the amounts voted in the interim supply, to the House?

**Some hon. members:** On division.

**The Chair:** Our next meeting will be on Wednesday, May 31. We will continue our study on land restitution and consider our draft of the indigenous languages report, which was distributed on May 19, 2023.

The meeting is adjourned.





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