



Select Standing Committee on Finance and
Government Services

INTERIM REPORT ON STATUTORY OFFICES

June 2023



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
of BRITISH COLUMBIA

First Report
Fourth Session, 42nd Parliament



June 28, 2023

To the Honourable
Legislative Assembly of the
Province of British Columbia

Honourable Members:

I have the honour to present herewith the First Report of the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services for the Fourth Session of the 42nd Parliament titled, *Interim Report on Statutory Offices*.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Committee,

Mike Starchuk, MLA
Chair

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COMPOSITION OF THE COMMITTEE

Committee Members

Mike Starchuk, MLA, Chair
Surrey-Cloverdale

Tom Shypitka, MLA, Deputy Chair
Kootenay East

Bruce Banman, MLA
Abbotsford South

Susie Chant, MLA
North Vancouver-Seymour

George Chow, MLA
Vancouver-Fraserview

Ronna-Rae Leonard, MLA
Courtenay-Comox

Ben Stewart, MLA
Kelowna West

Adam Walker, MLA
Parksville-Qualicum

Henry Yao, MLA
Richmond South Centre

Committee Staff

Jennifer Arril, Clerk of Committees

Katey Stickle, Committee Research Analyst

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Natalie Beaton, Committee Research Analyst

Mary Heeg, Committee Researcher

Danielle Migeon, Committee Researcher

Mary Newell, Administrative Coordinator

Jianding Bai, Committees Assistant

Emma Curtis, Committees Assistant

TERMS OF REFERENCE

On February 21, 2023, the Legislative Assembly agreed that the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services be empowered to:

1. Examine, inquire into and make recommendations with respect to the budget consultation paper prepared by the Minister of Finance in accordance with section 2 of the *Budget Transparency and Accountability Act* (S.B.C. 2000, c. 23) and, in particular, to:
 - a. conduct public consultations across British Columbia on proposals and recommendations regarding the provincial budget and fiscal policy for the coming fiscal year by any means the Committee considers appropriate; and
 - b. prepare a report no later than November 15, 2023, on the results of those consultations.
3. In conjunction with general oversight of the following statutory officers, namely, the:
 - 1) Auditor General
 - 2) Chief Electoral Officer
 - 3) Conflict of Interest Commissioner
 - 4) Human Rights Commissioner
 - 5) Information and Privacy Commissioner
 - 6) Merit Commissioner
 - 7) Ombudsperson
 - 8) Police Complaint Commissioner; and
 - 9) Representative for Children and Youth
 - a. consider and make recommendations on the annual reports, rolling three-year service plans and budgets;
 - b. inquire into and make recommendations with respect to other matters brought to the Committee's attention by any of the aforementioned statutory officers; and

- c. consider and make decisions, on behalf of the Legislative Assembly, regarding the terms and conditions of employment of any of the aforementioned statutory officers arising as a request of an officeholder during their term of appointment.
- d. That the Committee be designated as the Committee referred to in sections 19, 20, 21 and 23 of the *Auditor General Act* (S.B.C. 2003, c. 2) and that the report in section 22 of the *Auditor General Act* (S.B.C. 2003, c. 2) be referred to the Committee.

That the Committee be designated as the Committee referred to in sections 47.02 and 47.03 of the *Human Rights Code* (R.S.B.C. 1996, c. 210).

That, in addition to the powers previously conferred upon the Select Standing Committees of the House, the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services be empowered to:

- a. appoint of its number one or more subcommittees and to refer to such subcommittees any of the matters referred to the Committee and to delegate to the subcommittees all or any of its powers except the power to report directly to the House;
- b. sit during a period in which the House is adjourned, during the recess after prorogation until the next following Session and during any sitting of the House;
- c. adjourn from place to place as may be convenient; and
- d. retain personnel as required to assist the Committee.

That the Committee report to the House as soon as possible; and that during a period of adjournment, the Committee deposit its reports with the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, and upon resumption of the sittings of the House, or in the next following Session, as the case may be, the Chair present all reports to the House.

INTRODUCTION

The Legislative Assembly empowers the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services (the “Committee”) to consider and make recommendations with respect to the annual reports, service plans and budgets of the province’s nine statutory officers. The Committee meets with each office in the fall to review budget proposals and in the spring to receive financial and operational updates. The Committee considers supplementary funding requests as required throughout the year. This interim report provides a summary of the updates and discussions from the spring 2023 meetings.

During these meetings, the Committee received supplementary funding proposals from the Office of the Auditor General and Elections BC as well as a joint submission presenting requests from the Office of the Merit Commissioner, the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner, Office of the Ombudsperson, and the Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner. The Committee’s next *Annual Report of the Budgets of Statutory Offices*, expected to be released in fall 2023, will include further detail about these supplementary funding requests.

Spring Updates

The Committee welcomed the opportunity to meet with all statutory offices to receive updates about the important work they undertake in service of British Columbians. As noted in the Committee’s *Annual Review of the Budgets of Statutory Offices* released in December 2022, Committee Members appreciated the efforts of statutory offices to find efficiencies in their operations and budgets and demonstrate how savings are being achieved while delivering core services.

Committee Members heard from statutory offices that recruitment and retention continue to be a challenge and were pleased to hear about efforts to fill key positions. Members also appreciated the updates on new initiatives being implemented by many offices to increase public awareness, improve accessibility, and respond to new or expanded

legislative mandates. Another key area of interest for the Committee was performance measurement, with Members looking forward to receiving further information on metrics and key performance indicators next spring.

With several statutory offices presenting requests for supplementary funding at these meetings, Members highlighted the importance of forecasting and expressed a desire for consistency in approaches to budget submissions. Committee Members also recognized that statutory offices are independent and may face unique circumstances that impact their proposals.

Meetings Schedule

The Committee’s consideration of statutory office financial and operational updates took place at the following meetings:

April 27, 2023

- Office of the Auditor General
- Office of the Ombudsperson
- Deliberations

April 28, 2023

- Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner and Registrar of Lobbyists
- Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner
- Office of the Representative for Children and Youth
- Office of the Human Rights Commissioner
- Elections BC
- Office of the Conflict of Interest Commissioner
- Office of the Merit Commissioner
- Deliberations

May 15, 2023

- Deliberations

June 12, 2023

- Consideration of Supplementary Funding Request from Elections BC
- Follow-Up: Office of the Auditor General
- Deliberations
- Review and Adoption of Interim Report

OFFICE OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL

The Office of the Auditor General presented its financial and operational update on April 27, 2023. In attendance were: Michael Pickup, Auditor General; Sheila Dodds, Deputy Auditor General; Marie Thelisma, Assistant Auditor General, Critical Audit Support Services; and Dave Murray, Director, Corporate Planning and Legal Issues. The Committee held a follow-up meeting with the Office of the Auditor General on June 12, 2023 to ask additional questions about the supplementary funding request.

Summary of Presentation

The Auditor General began his presentation with an overview of the office's role and mandate as the independent auditor of the government reporting entity as set out in the *Auditor General Act*. He explained that the office conducts an annual audit of the province's summary financial statements as well as performance audits on the efficiency, economy, and effectiveness of government programs and services.

While providing an update on operations over the past fiscal year, the Auditor General noted that the office met its reporting target of eight audit and information reports covering a variety of topics including fraud risk management and COVID-19 response. In addition to these reports, the office also produced two service plans, an annual report, and the financial statement audit coverage plan for the next three fiscal years. Regarding corporate activities, the Auditor General highlighted work to fill key leadership positions, implement a hybrid workplace, and develop a compensation framework.

With respect to finances, the Auditor General stated that the office has a surplus of \$1.8 million this year due to staffing impacts which delayed expenditures related to IT, human resources, and training, as well as an underspend relating to the leading workplace strategy. The Auditor General

explained that the process for assigning a project manager for the leading workplace strategy project, which involves renovations to the office space to support hybrid work, took longer than expected. As a result, work on this project was delayed and only about \$75,000 of the \$410,000 in operational project costs planned for 2022-23 were actually incurred; therefore, the office presented a supplemental budget request for the remaining \$335,000 in 2023-24. The Auditor General also noted that the leading workplace strategy would allow the office to reduce its footprint and sublease a portion of its space; however, due to the delay in the project, the office is unable to sublease this space until the start of fiscal year 2024-25. As such, the office also requested \$165,000 for occupancy costs to cover the full rent for fiscal year 2023-24. Regarding salaries, the Auditor General stated that increases related to government bargaining were higher than the office anticipated in its fall budget submission. He noted that the office absorbed the impacts in 2022-23, including retroactive payments, but is unable to absorb the increase for 2023-24. Given these impacts, the office requested supplemental funding of \$640,000 for salaries. Regarding the supplementary funding request for salaries, Committee Members found that the initial materials and presentation provided by the office were not comprehensive, lacking clarity and detail with respect to the rationale for the request. As such, they requested additional information in writing, followed by a subsequent presentation in this regard. Committee Members considered the requests, along with the additional information, and agreed to recommend that the Office of the Auditor General be provided access to the proposed supplementary funding. The Committee also reinforced its expectation that future requests and budget presentations should provide clear, comprehensive information to support a transparent process.

Committee Inquiry

Committee Members inquired about the impact of the delay to the leading workplace strategy project. Members asked about efforts to ensure funding was spent in the 2022-23 fiscal year to mitigate the request for supplementary funding. Office of the Auditor General staff noted that they did not have an opportunity to begin work without an assigned project manager. They added that some capital purchases have been made for meeting rooms to support the hybrid work model, but the delay has impacted the start date to restructure the space; therefore, the funds could not be used in 2022-23. In response to questions about the impact of the delay on the savings to be incurred by subleasing office space, Office of the Auditor General staff explained that there is an 11-year period to recover the costs of this project and there will still be a net savings over the remainder of the lease.

The Committee also had questions regarding the supplementary funding request related to salaries. Members noted that in the fall, the Committee approved the office's request for a nine percent increase for salaries and benefits in 2023-24 and asked how the current request for an additional \$640,000 was calculated. Office of the Auditor General staff stated that the \$640,000 was calculated by Treasury Board, and related to the BCGEU settlement and the four to six percent performance based in-range increase for positions subject to the Management Classification and Compensation Framework (MCCF). The office was able to absorb the effect of these increases on the 2022-23 budget, but to address the resulting impacts in fiscal year 2023-24 will require additional funds. In response to a follow-up question, Office

of the Auditor General staff clarified that approximately 80 percent of their staff fall under the management classification and about 20 percent are Schedule A which mirror BCGEU classifications but are excluded from the union. Members asked about performance-based compensation for staff in the management classification. Office of the Auditor General staff noted that they are developing a compensation framework to recognize performance and experience within band in a consistent and transparent way. The Auditor General added that the office has struggled with retention as it currently doesn't have a system to move staff up within their classification band. Members expressed a desire to see a more detailed breakdown with respect to funds for retention in the future which the Auditor General noted would be provided in the fall. In response to a question about the \$390,000 which was approved by the Committee last fall for in-band adjustments for management staff, Office of the Auditor General staff indicated that this funding was used to address salary inequities among staff with equal experience who fall under the same classification while the office develops a compensation framework.

Committee Members noted that the office has been able to fill more staff positions lately and inquired about the office's recruitment efforts. Office of the Auditor General staff stated that flexibility and hybrid work options have helped with recruitment. The Auditor General added that the office's high output and the fact that it does the largest financial statement audit in the province is also attractive for those in the sector.

OFFICE OF THE CONFLICT OF INTEREST COMMISSIONER

The Conflict of Interest Commissioner, Victoria Gray, K.C., presented the office's financial and operational update on April 28, 2023. The Commissioner was joined by the office's Executive Coordinator, Carol Hoyer.

Summary of Presentation

To begin, the Commissioner provided an overview of the office's role and mandate which is to ensure that Members of the Legislative Assembly act with integrity and are seen to do so. In particular, she highlighted the need to prevent Members from using their office to further their private interests to ensure that the public do not lose confidence in the institution of government. The Commissioner highlighted the office's three areas of focus: helping Members understand and comply with the rules of the *Members' Conflict of Interest Act*; helping Members to navigate the process of financial disclosures; and responding to complaints or requests from Members or the public about potential conflicts of interest. The Commissioner noted that the Act informs the office's work, and despite a review in 2012, there have been no recent changes to the Act.

Regarding operations, the Commissioner stated that 2023 financial disclosure meetings with Members were underway. In addition, over the first four months of 2023, the office received 45 requests from Members for advice. In comparison, the office received 137 and 113 requests in 2021 and 2022 respectively. The Commissioner attributed the high number of requests from Members in recent years to a culture of concern about conflicts of interest and to increased scrutiny from the media. To date, the office has only received three requests for inquiries this year compared to 12 in 2021 and 26 in 2022. Only one request from 2022 met the required threshold to investigate.

With respect to finances, the Executive Coordinator shared that the office was \$126,000 under budget for the 2022-23 fiscal year due to reduced travel and the lack of major inquiries. The Commissioner noted that the number of MLAs is expected to increase from 87 to 93 for the next provincial general election but she does not anticipate needing additional staff or funding to meet this increased workload. Further, the office does not anticipate any changes to its service plans or any supplementary funding requests for the 2023-24 fiscal year. The Executive Coordinator shared that due to space shortages on the legislative precinct, it is possible the office may need to find new space; however, she does not anticipate the need for additional funding since the budget approved by the Committee last fall included \$25,000 in capital funding to address this possibility.

To illustrate the cost effectiveness of her office, the Commissioner shared with the Committee the example of the Northwest Territories' Integrity Commissioner's 2021 inquiry into MLA Steve Norn's breach of the code of conduct. The Commissioner contrasted the almost \$805,000 cost of the inquiry with her office's \$780,000 total budget for the current fiscal year. She explained that procedural differences between the two jurisdictions can account for the cost difference.

Committee Inquiry

The Committee inquired whether the office would require additional resources due to the increasing number of requests for advice from Members. The Commissioner stated that most of her office's work consists of the annual disclosure process and being on call for requests for opinion. She added that many of the requests are straightforward and can be dealt with promptly.

Committee Members had questions about the possibility of expanding the office's mandate to include both senior

provincial government and local government officials. The Commissioner noted that while the office's mandate does not currently extend to the public service or to municipal officials, the Act could be broadened. She noted that the last review of the Act recommended expanding the scope to include senior bureaucrats but recommended against including local government officials. Further, the Commissioner stated that her counterparts in other jurisdictions have been assigned responsibilities related to public servants.

ELECTIONS BC

Elections BC presented its financial and operational update on April 28, 2023. In attendance were: Anton Boegman, Chief Electoral Officer, and Charles Porter, Deputy Chief Electoral Officer, Electoral Finance and Operations. The Committee also met with Elections BC on June 12, 2023 to consider a supplemental funding request.

Summary of Presentation

To begin his presentation, the Chief Electoral Officer provided an overview of the office's mandate. Under the *Election Act*, Elections BC is responsible for administering all aspects of general elections and by-elections as well as maintaining the provincial voters list, reviewing and publishing financial reports from registered political parties, and carrying out financial audits when necessary. Regarding local elections, the Chief Electoral Officer noted that the office is responsible for the administration of campaign financing and the advertising rules established by the *Local Elections Campaign Financing Act*. As established in the *Recall and Initiative Act*, the office is also responsible for citizen petition processes including the recall process and the initiative petition process to propose new provincial laws or changes to existing laws. Lastly, the office administers provincial referenda and plebiscites under the *Referendum Act* and the *Election Act*.

The Chief Electoral Officer discussed the office's work with respect to event delivery including closing out the unsuccessful recall petitions in Vancouver–Point Grey and Peace River North. The office is also conducting wrap-up activities for the 2022 general local elections. The Chief Electoral Officer noted that preparations are also underway for the next provincial general election, which is scheduled for October 19, 2024, as well as for the planned pre-election enumeration that will take place over August and September 2024. The Chief Electoral Officer informed the Committee

that the office is currently procuring the necessary technology for the next provincial general election for which the office received supplementary funding from the Committee last fall. Elections BC has also hired and begun the orientation process for district electoral officers and deputy district electoral officers. Lastly, with respect to recent vacancies in the Legislative Assembly, Elections BC is preparing for by-elections in Langford–Juan de Fuca, which must be called by September 30, 2023, and in Vancouver–Mount Pleasant which must be called by October 14, 2023.

With respect to Bill 25, *Electoral Districts Act*, Elections BC will need to implement the new provincial electoral boundaries through an electoral district and voting area redistribution. The Chief Electoral Officer noted that this requires the office to incorporate the new electoral district boundaries and names into its geographic information systems; draw the administrative voting area boundaries; assign new electoral district and voting area values to every address and registered voter in the province; and conduct necessary cartographic work such as updating maps. Given the significant material level of change proposed in the Bill, the Chief Electoral Officer estimated that it will take a minimum of eight months for the implementation of the new boundaries in Election BC's systems and maps.

Regarding modernization of voting services, Elections BC has now administered two by-elections under the modernized voting and counting model that was introduced by the *Election Amendment Act, 2019*. The Chief Electoral Officer advised that the pending by-elections would give the office an opportunity to test procedures for out-of-district voters if the by-elections are held concurrently. The by-elections will also provide Elections BC the opportunity to implement aspects of Bill 11, *Election Amendment Act, 2023*, including a number of changes to the vote-by-mail process including modernized processes for providing identification

when registering in conjunction with vote-by-mail and a process that will allow voters who made a mistake when completing their voting package to correct it. Additionally, the by-elections will provide an opportunity for prospective candidates and parties to use the new fully online candidate nominations application system. The Chief Electoral Officer noted that additional costs related to the impacts of Bill 11, *Election Amendment Act, 2023* would be reflected in increased budgets for specific events and not within the office's operating budget.

The Chief Electoral Officer discussed the office's efforts to improve accessibility and inclusivity. Elections BC will be conducting an enumeration in summer 2024 which includes provincewide registration activities with targeted outreach to communities who have traditionally experienced barriers to participation in the electoral process, including youth, people with disabilities, Indigenous peoples and people who are experiencing homelessness. Additionally, the office has convened an accessibility committee and will be preparing a formal accessibility plan over the coming months.

Regarding the office's efforts to build organizational capacity, Elections BC has made changes to its organizational structure to provide additional capacity on campaign finance audit and assessment. The office has also brought more information technology services in-house which was critical to ensuring that election IT infrastructure could be maintained and enhanced without undue risk.

On June 12, 2023, the Committee considered the Chief Electoral Officer's supplemental funding request for additional operating expenses for the 2023-24 fiscal year. The funding includes \$776,000 to administer the Langford-Juan de Fuca by-election and \$812,000 to administer the Vancouver-Mount Pleasant by-election. In addition, the request includes \$110,000 to fund election expense reimbursements for candidates and political parties in each of these electoral districts, for a total of \$220,000. The Committee agreed that Elections BC be granted access to the requested funding.

Committee Inquiry

The Committee inquired about the office's efforts to improve voter turnout. The Chief Electoral Officer stated that the office is focusing on administrative barriers such as accessible ID requirements, making voting events as accessible as possible for voters, and providing sufficient advance voting opportunities. To improve turnout in remote locations, he discussed the possibility of a one-day advance voting opportunity or sending a mobile team to serve those voters. The Chief Electoral Officer also expanded on how the office's outreach efforts in K-12 education, including the list of future voters, can help reduce barriers to voter turnout.

In response to questions about the office's efforts to improve accessibility, the Chief Electoral Officer highlighted that Elections BC launched a partnership opportunity with Elections Canada, whereby any new Canadian in British Columbia receives a letter from Elections Canada and Elections BC. He also noted that in the lead-up to an election, district electoral officers identify cultural organizations to work with and to provide information about voting opportunities. In the office's hiring practices, Elections BC makes sure that the district electoral officers and deputies, wherever possible, have language capacity in the languages of the districts in which they are going to be administering elections.

The Committee asked about the office's efforts to protect electoral integrity especially in response to growing concerns about foreign interference. Elections BC has embarked on a partnership with Elections Canada to make use of that office's foreign-language monitoring services in social media and is partnering with other election management bodies in the country to share information, discuss best practices, examine emerging risks, and make recommendations for further improvements. The office has also been enhancing its compliance and enforcement team in order to have additional resources to respond to this issue. The Chief Electoral Officer also noted the office's campaigns to build digital media literacy for British Columbia citizens including its outreach programs in schools. He added that Bill 11, *Elections Amendment Act, 2023*, will establish a

new mandate for Elections BC related to specific types of deliberate false statements and impersonations that harm free and fair elections. In preparing for the implementation of the Bill's provisions, the office will review whether it will need additional resources to meet these requirements and include any requests in future event and operating budgets.

In response to a question about the impact of electronic poll books, the Chief Electoral Officer noted that the office was able to use this technology in voting places to replace the paper voting books that were previously used. So far, the office has successfully conducted two by-elections using electronic poll books. The technology allowed the office to reform the staffing model and the flow of voters through voting places.

OFFICE OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSIONER

On April 28, 2023, the Human Rights Commissioner, Kasari Govender, presented virtually to the Committee, accompanied by Deputy Commissioner Stephanie Garrett and Chief Financial Officer Diane Buljat.

Summary of Presentation

The Human Rights Commissioner began her presentation by noting that her office's role is to protect human rights in the province through education, research, advocacy, and inquiries and monitoring. The Commissioner added that, since her appointment in 2019, she has also focused on hiring and building her organization. The Commissioner's six priorities for her five-year term are: discrimination; decolonization; hate and the rise of white supremacy; poverty as a human rights issue; the rights of people detained in the criminal justice and mental health systems; and building a healthy and diverse workplace. This year the office is shifting focus from interim work strategies put in place during the pandemic to long-term models that include flexible, remote, and hybrid work.

Regarding the office's budget, the Commissioner expressed gratitude for the Committee's approval last fall of her office's requested funding for an integrated web portal to be shared with the BC Human Rights Tribunal and BC Human Rights Clinic, as well as for a frontline position to manage public requests for information. The Commissioner added, in response to comments made by the Committee during its review of the office's 2023-24 budget proposal, that the office is now focused on sustainability rather than growth as it has reached the full staffing complement as originally envisioned. She stated that all additional hiring is to address staff turnover or small changes to organizational structure.

The Commissioner provided an update on the office's work on its five priorities related to systemic change and human rights in BC. Regarding systemic discrimination, the Commissioner

stated that one in 10 people say they have experienced discrimination in the past year; this is true for one in four people with disabilities. The Commissioner shared that about half of all people who said they have been discriminated against in the last year experienced that discrimination at work. In response, the office has developed an employment equity toolkit and has launched a public awareness campaign about ableism.

In terms of its work on decolonization, the office is focusing on monitoring the implementation of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*. The Commissioner is acting as an intervener in two BC Supreme Court cases, brought jointly by the Gitxaala Nation and the Ehattesaht First Nation, which are seeking a judicial review of the *Mineral Tenure Act*. The Commissioner emphasized that the office's role as an intervener is not to represent any side of the dispute but rather to provide a perspective on the interpretations of the Declaration Act and associated implications on human rights. The office also supports decolonization through policy and law reform, such as providing advice to government on the implementation of legislation regarding the collection of race-based data. The Commissioner shared that her office is also working on an engagement and research project to develop baseline data about human rights in the province. From this project, the office will create a brief on each community it engages with, a human rights report that will be released regularly on human rights trends in the province, and a database of community and public sector reports related to human rights.

The Commissioner provided an update on her other three priorities, the rise of hate, poverty as a human rights issue, and the rights of those detained by the state, together. The Commissioner shared that her office released its public inquiry into the rise of hate during the COVID-19 pandemic in March and her recommendations address all three of

these areas. The Commissioner described some of the report's findings, including the particular impact of hate during the pandemic on Asian-Canadians, Indigenous people, Jewish people, and people with disabilities. The Commissioner indicated that data gaps make addressing hate more challenging, and that community-based responses have been more effective than government and legal ones.

The Commissioner indicated that the agreement to share corporate services between the Commissioner's office and the Office of the Representative for Children and Youth is being revised. The Commissioner also informed the Committee that her office's draft year-end financials show a variance of less than one percent between the office's budget and its actual expenditures during the 2022-23 fiscal year.

Committee Inquiry

The Committee expressed interest in the Commissioner's role as an intervener in court cases. Regarding the cost of acting as an intervener, the Deputy Commissioner indicated that the office has an internal legal team but occasionally hires contractors with specialized legal expertise, which can cost between a few thousand dollars and \$20,000 per case.

Committee Members inquired about the data the Commissioner presented on police-reported hate incidents from 2015 to 2021. Members noted that hate incidents were broken into categories in the Commissioner's presentation, and were interested in knowing whether there were other significant types of hate crimes that were not identified in the presentation. The Commissioner emphasized that the definitions of hate incidents used by police are inconsistent, so the data collected can be a challenge. Regarding the location of police-reported hate incidents, the Commissioner indicated that these events are taking place across the province, but some patterns exist, such as a spike in anti-Asian hate in the Lower Mainland. The Committee also asked about the gender breakdown of people experiencing hate crimes. The Commissioner indicated that gender-based violence was investigated separately in the report, and disproportionately affects women and gender-diverse people.

She also noted that the report found that the perpetrators of hate incidents were disproportionately white men between 25 and 40.

Members inquired about the Commissioner's recommendation that the Human Rights Tribunal receive resources to be more responsive to hate. The Commissioner indicated that the Tribunal is experiencing a significant backlog and that it is not specific to addressing hate. She stated that she was pleased to see additional government funding announced for the Tribunal but will wait to see the long-term impact. Committee Members asked for the Commissioner's perspective on introducing restorative justice approaches as part of the Human Rights Tribunal. The Commissioner emphasized that her perspective is not that restorative justice needs to be integrated into any specific process or legal system, but that people who have experienced hate should have access to a variety of options.

The Committee asked about the Commissioner's recommendations to reform the Crown policy directive to prioritize the prosecution of hate crimes when in the public interest and change the policing standard to centralize the definition of hate crimes and data collection. The Commissioner indicated that neither of these changes require legislative change.

OFFICE OF THE INFORMATION AND PRIVACY COMMISSIONER AND REGISTRAR OF LOBBYISTS

On April 28, 2023, the Information and Privacy Commissioner and Registrar of Lobbyists, Michael McEvoy, appeared before the Committee to provide the office's spring update, accompanied by Deputy Commissioner and Deputy Registrar oline Twiss, Deputy Commissioner Jeannette Van Den Bulk, and Executive Director of Corporate Shared Services, Dave Van Swieten.

Summary of Presentation

The Commissioner began by outlining the role of his office related to access to information and protection of privacy, which includes conducting reviews and investigations, commenting on relevant issues, educating the public, and promoting research. As the Registrar for Lobbyists, his office also maintains the Lobbyists Registry, investigates compliance with lobbying rules, and educates the public about those rules.

The Commissioner noted that the office continues to receive a high volume of complaints and requests for reviews. While approximately 90 percent of these inquiries are resolved between the parties, the Commissioner previously expressed concern to the Committee about a growing backlog of cases that required adjudication. The Committee approved additional resources beginning in 2022-23, and the Commissioner reported the backlog is now fewer than 200 cases, although recruiting additional adjudicators continues to be challenging.

On February 1, 2023, amendments to the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* were brought into force, requiring public bodies to develop privacy management programs and to notify the Commissioner of privacy breaches. The Commissioner reported that additional staff have been hired to account for these new responsibilities and the office

has received triple the number of privacy breach reports as the same period last year.

The Commissioner highlighted two recent reports aimed at protecting the privacy of British Columbians: a December 2022 report that investigated security gaps in a legacy public health database, and an April 2023 report on the privacy implications of facial recognition technology that was used at four Canadian Tire locations. The Commissioner also noted that he has joined his counterparts in Quebec, Alberta, and Ottawa to investigate whether the short-form video and streaming application TikTok complies with privacy legislation and whether its users are providing meaningful consent for the use of their personal information. He is also conferring closely with the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada on its investigation of OpenAI, the company that developed ChatGPT, to determine whether provincial privacy officers can support this work. The Commissioner also expressed to the Committee that there is a need for strengthened privacy provisions in the *Personal Information Protection Act*, which applies to the private sector, such as mandatory privacy breach reporting and the ability for his office to impose financial penalties.

The Commissioner indicated that his office continues to provide information and education to the public. An education campaign is being planned for the fall to inform public bodies about the new privacy-related responsibilities under the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*. The office also continues to educate lobbyists and the public on the *Lobbyists Transparency Act* and the Lobbyists Registry, including by updating guidance documents.

The Commissioner noted several other initiatives underway to improve service for British Columbians. In response to a previous request by the Committee, the office is improving translation services on its websites and documentation,

and has initiated a pilot project to allow for interpretation services by request. The office has also recently added new functionality to the Lobbyists Registry to improve the user experience. With regard to accessibility, the office has a diversity and inclusion group that is improving physical accessibility and ensuring services are inclusive for Indigenous peoples, and has initiated a digital accessibility audit of external communications. The Commissioner noted the office is also beginning work on a new case tracking system that will improve efficiency.

The Commissioner submitted a supplementary funding request of \$270,000 for additional operating expenses for 2023-24 to address the impact of wage inflation that was unknown at the time of the fall budget submission process. This request includes wage increases for excluded management staff, in line with those provided to BC public service employees who fall under the management compensation and classification framework (MCCF) announced in December 2022. The Committee considered this request and agreed to recommend that the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner and Registrar of Lobbyists be provided access to the proposed supplementary funding.

In addition, on February 27, 2023, the Commissioner submitted a supplementary funding request of \$890,000 for additional operating expenses and \$16,000 for additional capital costs for 2023-24 to hire 7.5 full-time equivalent staff to meet the expected increased demand for services resulting from the amendments to the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* described above. The Committee considered this request and agreed to recommend that the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner and Registrar of Lobbyists be provided access to the proposed supplementary funding.

Committee Inquiry

Committee Members inquired about the privacy implications of artificial intelligence and new technologies such as ChatGPT. The Commissioner noted that one area of concern

is the vast amount of information, including personal information, that is required for these technologies. He also conveyed the importance of users knowing when artificial intelligence is being used and for what purposes, as well as the need for transparency around how such systems work. Committee Members also expressed concern about the increasing complexity of the office's work resulting from these new technologies.

Committee Members asked about staff vacancies and recruitment efforts. The Commissioner noted that the office has approximately 60 FTEs and about 10 percent of these positions are currently vacant. Efforts are continuing to hire the additional adjudication positions in particular, but this has been challenging due to the tight labour market.

Regarding improvements to the office's accessibility, Committee Members were grateful for the ongoing work on providing services and resources in additional languages. They also asked about the framework that is guiding the office's accessibility work. Deputy Commissioner oline Twiss explained that the office is working on a draft accessibility plan as will be required by the *Accessible British Columbia Act*, which will be made available to the public to provide feedback.

OFFICE OF THE MERIT COMMISSIONER

The Office of the Merit Commissioner presented its financial and operational update on April 28, 2023. In attendance were David McCoy, Merit Commissioner; and David Van Swieten, Executive Director, Corporate Services.

Summary of Presentation

In his first appearance before the Committee since his appointment in March, the Commissioner shared some of the principles of merit as they relate to staffing processes. These include open and transparent hiring processes, assessment that is relevant to the job, reasonable decisions, and fair and equitable treatment. The Commissioner stressed that merit-based hiring is important because it ensures a qualified and professional public service and promotes public trust.

The Commissioner also provided an overview of the office's three areas of responsibility which include: conducting random audits of appointments to and within the BC public service; acting as the final level of review for appointment decisions at the request of unsuccessful employee applicants; and reviewing processes related to eligible just cause dismissals of BC public service employees.

The Commissioner noted that in 2021-22 his office conducted 269 audits of randomly selected appointments from 30 organizations who hire under the *Public Service Act*. These audits found that while hiring had increased by 36 percent in 2020-21, merit-based hiring activity had decreased by four percent. Turning to the office's second area of responsibility, the Commissioner shared that in 2022-23, the office received 19 requests for staffing decision reviews. The Commissioner stated that this was an increase from 11 reviews in 2020-21. He explained that the grounds most often cited were related to interviews and testing. With respect to the just cause dismissal review process, in 2022-23, the Commissioner shared that while all 17 reviews met acceptable practices,

policies, and standards, two were identified as having some potential for improvement.

In 2023, the office produced a study on lessened qualifications, which occur when posted mandatory job requirements are changed to a lesser standard during the hiring panel's assessment, in merit-based hiring. The Commissioner stated that the purpose of this study was to identify position or competition factors relating to the use of lessened qualifications. The study found that most audited appointments do not use a lessened qualification approach; however, lessened qualifications continue to be observed through public service competitions, with errors having been reported in 13.8 percent of audited appointments.

The Commissioner concluded his presentation by looking ahead, anticipating a review of the just cause dismissal process by a special committee of the Legislative Assembly. The office will also begin a review of dismissal processes that resulted from the COVID-19 vaccination policy.

The Commissioner requested a supplementary budget increase for the 2023-24 fiscal year. The first request was for \$36,000 in operational funding to address the impact of wage inflation that was unknown in the fall when the 2023-24 budget was prepared. This request includes wage increases for excluded management staff, in line with those provided to BC public service employees who fall under the management compensation and classification framework (MCCF) and announced in December 2022. The second request was for \$69,000 in capital funding for the case tracker system. He explained that minor delays with the implementation of the new software system meant the office underspent capital funds allocated for the project in the 2022-23 fiscal year, and those funds would be required in 2023-24, when the work was complete. The Commissioner stated that he is confident the system will be implemented in the summer of

2023. The Committee considered these requests and agreed to recommend that the office be provided access to the proposed supplementary funding.

Committee Inquiry

Regarding the supplementary funding request for salaries, the Committee asked about the number of staff and vacancies in the office. The Commissioner indicated that the office has 6.5 full time employees. He also noted that there were two current vacancies; however, one new employee was starting imminently, and they were anticipating providing a job offer for another position very soon.

Committee Members also asked for details about the staffing review process. The Commissioner explained that unsuccessful applicants have five days from the time they receive their regret to request feedback from the hiring manager. If they remain unsatisfied, they have another five days to request an internal inquiry. Once completed, should the unsuccessful applicant still be unsatisfied with the result, they have five days from the date of receiving that information from the deputy minister to bring it to the Commissioner's office for review request. The office has a self-imposed 30-day deadline from the time they receive the request until they either uphold the decision or send it back for reconsideration.

In response to a question from the Committee regarding equity-based hiring complaints, the Commissioner indicated that this area falls outside of the mandate of his office.

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSPERSON

On April 27, 2023, the Ombudsperson, Jay Chalke, K.C., appeared before the Committee. He was accompanied by Zoe Jackson, Director, Public Reporting, Policy and Knowledge Management; Carly Chunick, Director, Public Interest Disclosure; and Dave Van Swieten, Executive Director, Corporate Shared Services.

Summary of Presentation

The Ombudsperson provided an overview of the office's mandate and recent work. With respect to investigating complaints from members of the public, the Ombudsperson noted that the office receives 7,000 to 8,000 complaints and inquiries related to this mandate each year. Relating to the office's other mandate under the *Public Interest Disclosure Act* (PIDA), which includes the responsibility to investigate disclosures of wrongdoing from current and former employees of specific public bodies, the office received 78 inquiries and reports in 2021-22; 30 of those were disclosures. The Director, Public Interest Disclosure, shared that the office is currently preparing for the implementation of phase four of PIDA on June 1 which includes health authorities and their current and former employees. In preparation, the office has been working with the health authorities, health professional organizations and the unions in the health sector to ensure they are well-informed about the Act and the office's role.

With respect to reports and investigations, the office recently released *Making Amends: The importance of exercising discretion fairly*, which covers its investigation into the refusal of the Vital Statistics Agency to amend a senior citizen's birth registration to correct a spelling mistake of their given name. Additionally, the Ombudsperson noted that the office released its final monitoring report following up on the provincial government's implementation of its recommendations made in its 2017 report *Misfire: The 2012 Ministry of Health*

Employment Terminations and Related Matters. Later this year, the office will be releasing a report on its investigation into the administration of the emergency financial support programs that took place during and following the extreme weather events in 2021. The office also released a special report, *Fairness by Design: An Administrative Fairness Self-Assessment Guide*, a national report from the provincial and territorial ombudspersons across Canada. The report is meant to provide public bodies with a free tool to comprehensively review their own administration rather than either having to retain consultants or wait for an investigation.

In relation to performance metrics, the Director, Public Reporting, Policy and Knowledge highlighted that the office developed a performance measurement framework that includes conducting three different surveys. The office has completed the survey of the public in 2021-22 and the survey of the public bodies under its jurisdiction was done in 2022-23. The results of the public bodies survey will be in the office's next annual report. The final survey, which will be of complainants, will take place this fiscal year. The office is also developing a peer-review program which involves bringing in experienced ombudsperson practitioners to provide advice and observations to help identify ways to better serve the public.

Regarding the Indigenous community services plan, the Ombudsperson noted that the pathfinders, contracted engagement specialists who work to raise awareness of the Ombudsperson's services in Indigenous communities across BC, have had an active first year. The office's complaints from Indigenous people across BC have increased steadily, with over 100 complaints received by the office since the program started. The office will be sharing a report of the program evaluation with the Committee in the fall.

The Ombudsperson submitted two supplementary funding proposals for additional operating expenses for the 2023-24 fiscal year. Earlier this year, the office requested \$130,000 in operational funding for building occupancy costs related to a collaborative space plan developed by the Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner, the Representative for Children and Youth, and his office. This request was considered and approved by the Committee on February 27. The second request was for \$463,000 in operational funding to address the impact of wage inflation that was unknown when the 2023-24 fall budget was prepared. This request reflects wage increases for excluded management staff, in line with those provided to BC public service employees who fall under the management compensation and classification framework (MCCF) and announced in December 2022. On April 28, the Committee considered this request, and agreed to recommend that the Office of the Ombudsperson be provided access to the proposed supplementary funding.

Committee Inquiry

The Committee inquired about the decrease in the budget for staffing in 2024-25 and 2025-26 in comparison with fiscal 2022-23. The Executive Director, Corporate Shared Services explained that this is due to the number of FTEs decreasing as a short-term project and some temporary positions are ending. Regarding the impact of inflation on the office's budget requests, the Ombudsperson stated that the office does not project inflation costs as the inflation rate is unknown at the time of the budget request.

The Ombudsperson provided more information on staffing in the office. Currently, the office has 103 FTEs, most of whom are classified as management, as well as a few Schedule A employees. In response to questions about how the office determines wage increases, the Ombudsperson noted that Schedule A positions mirror BCGEU positions with wage increases in alignment with the collective agreement. In relation to management employees who fall under the MCCF, the Ombudsperson shared that performance-based wage adjustments are announced each year by the Public

Service Agency. He added that the office conducts annual performance reviews of all staff.

The Committee inquired about the office's retention efforts and compensation framework. The Ombudsperson explained that the office accounts for wage increases as employees gain experience which is a retention tool. He elaborated that the office invests in its employees to ensure they have the necessary knowledge and experience for a role in an ombudsperson office. One challenge the office is experiencing with respect to retention is employees taking temporary assignments in government ministries which is particularly difficult as a government oversight body.

Committee Members asked about the impact of PIDA on workload. The Ombudsperson shared that the office is putting together its annual report for the fiscal year 2022-23 which will include details in this area.

OFFICE OF THE POLICE COMPLAINT COMMISSIONER

On April 28, 2023, the Police Complaint Commissioner, Clayton Pecknold, appeared before the Committee to provide the office's spring update, accompanied by Deputy Commissioner Andrea Spindler and Executive Director of Corporate Shared Services Dave Van Swieten.

Summary of Presentation

The Commissioner began by outlining some of the principles of his office's work. He highlighted that confidentiality and impartiality are of the utmost importance, since police complaints can have very serious impacts for the officers and complainants involved. He also underscored that his office oversees and monitors investigations into police complaints but does not make decisions on whether a police officer has committed misconduct. Instead, these decisions are made by senior officers from the department or by a retired judge.

The Commissioner clarified the different police accountability mechanisms in British Columbia. He outlined that possible criminal proceedings against a police officer will typically occur prior to considerations of misconduct, however his office will sometimes refer a case for criminal investigation or for consideration of criminal charges if new evidence emerges during its work. The Commissioner added that police boards, municipal councils, and the provincial government also have important accountability roles for municipal police agencies, and that his office may make recommendations to these bodies. Regarding concerns about workplace culture, including sexual misconduct, the Commissioner noted that his office has few mechanisms to address the individual conduct of an officer, but can make recommendations to police boards or government related to these issues.

The Commissioner highlighted the recommendation of the Special Committee to Review the Police Complaint Process to amend the *Police Act* to enable his office to conduct systemic

reviews and report on findings. He conveyed that this would enhance police accountability in British Columbia by allowing the Commissioner to look beyond specific incidents to identify broader trends, which could prevent future cases of misconduct.

In his accompanying written submission to the Committee, the Commissioner noted that his office opened 1,516 files in 2022-23. He also identified several priority areas for the office, including: adequate resourcing to respond to the Surrey Police Service; improving accessibility and outreach efforts, including through an Indigenous Accessibility Strategy and easier to understand communications materials available in multiple languages; improving the office's capacity for alternative dispute resolution; working with government on legislative reforms to the police complaint process; and moving to a larger office space in Victoria to accommodate a growing workforce.

The Commissioner submitted a supplementary funding request of \$184,000 for additional operating expenses for 2023-24 to address the impact of wage inflation that was unknown at the time of the fall budget submission process. This request includes wage increases for excluded management staff, in line with those provided to BC public service employees who fall under the management compensation and classification framework (MCCF) announced in December 2022. The Committee considered this request and agreed to recommend that the Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner be provided access to the proposed supplementary funding.

Committee Inquiry

Committee Members asked the Commissioner if he must wait until an investigation has concluded before issuing recommendations. The Commissioner responded that

while this has traditionally been the practice, he has been considering making recommendations to police boards, municipal councils or the provincial government earlier in the process if issues emerge during an investigation.

The Committee also inquired about measures to assist marginalized individuals in accessing the police complaint process. The Deputy Commissioner noted that the office has created an accessibility and outreach position, with the intent to build relationships with community-based organizations that can help complainants navigate the process. She also highlighted the office's work on an Indigenous Accessibility Strategy, which includes building culturally safe pathways for filing a complaint as well as culturally relevant resolutions, and she noted changes to the office's websites and other communications products, such as using clearer language and translating them into multiple languages.

Committee Members asked what prevents complainants or police officers from pursuing alternative dispute resolution. The Deputy Commissioner said that complainants often perceive that there will be less accountability for the officer involved; however, the office is building capacity to educate complainants on the options for resolution that are available under such a process. Regarding police officers, the Deputy Commissioner noted they will sometimes refuse to admit to wrongdoing; however, the office continues to work with police departments and unions to convey that alternative dispute resolution can repair relationships and restore trust in policing.

In response to an inquiry about the resource impact should a decision be made to transition fully to the Surrey Police Service, the Commissioner told the Committee that there should not be a need for additional resources in the current fiscal year. He further noted that by fall 2023 he would have a better sense of the impact on his office for the coming years.

OFFICE OF THE REPRESENTATIVE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The Representative for Children and Youth, Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth, met with the Committee on April 28, 2023, accompanied by Deputy Representatives Pippa Rowcliffe and Samantha Cocker; and Chief Financial Officer Dianne Buljat.

Summary of Presentation

The Representative began her presentation by sharing that her office is a rights-based organization guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. She stated that her mandate includes oversight of the child- and youth-serving system, specifically individual and systemic advocacy related to specific services as well as reviews and investigations of critical injuries and deaths of children. The Representative emphasized that her office takes a two-eyed-seeing approach, in which staff integrate Indigenous and western approaches to their work.

Regarding individual advocacy, the Representative shared that people can now reach the office through text or chat, rather than only by phone. She also noted that advocacy requests from children, rather than the adults in their lives, have increased. In the 2022-23 fiscal year, the office had a slight decline in requests for advocacy, down to 1,594 from 1,725 in 2021-22. The Representative indicated that this is due in part to decreased community engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Representative shared that the complexity of advocacy cases is still increasing, due in part to overlapping services and staffing challenges in the child- and youth-serving sector.

In the past five years, critical injury and death reports to the Representative's office have increased by 191 percent, including a 31 percent increase last year; however, the Representative noted that not all of the reported events fall

within her mandate. She also indicated the rate of increase is declining slightly, to a more sustainable level of 17 to 20 percent each year. The Representative shared that the three most common types of reported injuries are emotional harm, suicide attempts and ideation, and physical harm. The Representative noted that, in addition to high-level reviews of reported circumstances, the reviews and investigations team also conducts in-depth investigations.

The Representative explained that the systemic advocacy team identifies themes in the circumstances reported to the office, conducts research, and monitors progress made on past recommendations. She highlighted that her office recently released a report, *Advocating for Change: Five Years in Review*, on the status of recommendations issued in the past five years. She also noted that this team focuses on Indigenous methodologies and issues.

The Representative emphasized the significance of the *Indigenous Self-Government in Child and Family Services Amendment Act*, passed in fall 2022, which allows Indigenous governing bodies to resume jurisdiction over child welfare. She indicated that 11 First Nations in BC are currently working towards resuming jurisdiction, and noted that once this occurs, she will no longer have a mandate over child welfare services in those communities. The Representative also noted that the Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth recently released its report, *Review of the Representative for Children and Youth Act*. She added that implementation of the Committee's recommendations would expand her mandate but that she does not foresee any related budget implications in the current fiscal year. The Representative indicated that her office's top priorities are mental health, the toxic drug crisis, children and youth with support needs, and labour and skills shortages within the child- and youth-serving sector.

To conclude her presentation, the Representative provided an update on her office's budget. The office received an operating budget of \$12.191 million for the 2023-24 fiscal year, an increase of approximately 11 percent over the previously approved budget for that year. The Representative noted the increase was primarily to provide inflationary increases and hire two new FTEs. She indicated that one of the FTE positions, an intake coordinator based in Prince George, has been filled, and the other is a policy analyst on the systemic advocacy team for which the hiring plan is being implemented. To promote cost savings, the Representative's office has sublet one of the floors in its Victoria office to the Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner. The Representative's office has taken a smaller space on the first floor that is more accessible and better for gathering, and has used some of the resulting savings to address staffing shortages in corporate services.

Committee Inquiry

The Committee noted the stressful nature of the office's work and inquired whether staff working virtually are provided with mental health supports. The Representative shared that, even prior to the pandemic, staff have had access to specialized counsellors, including Indigenous counsellors. The office also has a relationship with Tsow-Tun Le Lum treatment centre society in Nanaimo, which occasionally leads virtual gatherings to support staff. The Representative also indicated that the office has included in its budget two in-person gatherings per year to allow all staff to come together.

Committee Members asked if the Representative could provide data on advocacy requests received through text and chat. The Representative indicated that, anecdotally, there has been significant uptake on the service and noted that while most advocacy cases require a call or in-person meeting, some children and youth are more comfortable using text or chat.

In response to a question from the Committee regarding how the office was able to return 3.6 percent of its 2022-23 budget (\$398,000), the Representative shared that this was

possible due to continued lower levels of travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic and delays in hiring.

Committee Members expressed interest in the progress of Indigenous governing bodies working to resume jurisdiction over child welfare. The Representative shared that these processes are in early stages. Deputy Representative Cocker noted that Indigenous governing bodies have taken different approaches moving forward, including some communities that want greater responsiveness from social workers but not necessarily to take over service provision themselves. The Committee inquired about the impact of changes to jurisdiction on the Representative's workload. The Representative indicated that once an Indigenous governing body resumes jurisdiction, she will no longer have a mandate regarding those services. However, some Indigenous communities are reaching out to request support from the Representative's office. She added that she is seeking a legal opinion on how best to provide this support while abiding by the *Representative for Children and Youth Act*. The Representative added that she does not expect changes to jurisdiction will affect the office's workload within the next three to five years.

The Committee expressed interest in the impacts of the toxic drug supply and overdose crisis. In response to a question on whether she has seen any impacts from the decriminalization of small amounts of certain illicit drugs, the Representative clarified that she has not seen any increase in injuries due to decriminalization, but rather has seen increased injuries due to the increased toxicity of drugs. The Representative added that sometimes children are left out of harm reduction strategies and emphasized the importance of including them. In response to a question about data on toxic drug deaths among children and youth, the Representative noted that 18 deaths were reported to her office as being related to substance use. She noted that the number is higher for young adults which may be due to increased independence in young adulthood and a greater likelihood of using drugs alone. The Representative also noted that the office has seen an increase in injuries associated with drug use, such as brain injuries,

and advised that toxic drug deaths of close family members contribute to emotional harm injuries among children.

The Committee inquired about strategies taken by the office to support the efforts to decrease the number of children in care. The Representative commended the work by the Ministry of Children and Family Development to support options other than placing children in care, but noted that the complexity of needs for children still in care has increased. She also highlighted the office's work to change the child- and youth-serving system, including promoting a sense of belonging for children. Deputy Representative Cocker highlighted the role of the office's advocacy work in ensuring children's voices are centred and supporting them to remain in the home.

