



ISSN 1180-4327

Legislative Assembly
of Ontario
Second Session, 39th Parliament

Assemblée législative
de l'Ontario
Deuxième session, 39^e législature

Official Report of Debates (Hansard)

Wednesday 23 March 2011

Journal des débats (Hansard)

Mercredi 23 mars 2011

**Standing Committee on
Public Accounts**

2010 Annual Report,
Auditor General:
Ministry of Community
and Social Services

**Comité permanent des
comptes publics**

Rapport annuel 2010,
Vérificateur général :
Ministère des Services
sociaux et communautaires

Chair: Norman W. Sterling
Clerk: Trevor Day

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Room 500, West Wing, Legislative Building
111 Wellesley Street West, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Telephone 416-325-7400; fax 416-325-7430
Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Service du Journal des débats et d'interprétation
Salle 500, aile ouest, Édifice du Parlement
111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400; télécopieur, 416-325-7430
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES COMPTES PUBLICS

Wednesday 23 March 2011

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The committee met at 1232 in committee room 1.

2010 ANNUAL REPORT,
AUDITOR GENERAL
MINISTRY OF COMMUNITY
AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Consideration of section 3.03, Family Responsibility Office.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Shurman): Good afternoon, everyone. This is a public hearing of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. We're here this afternoon to consider section 3.03 of the Auditor General's report of 2010, the Family Responsibility Office.

For purposes of Hansard, Deputy Minister, please introduce your team and go ahead with your presentation. We'll follow that with a round table discussion, all parties getting an equal chance.

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: Good afternoon, and thank you so much, Mr. Chair. I am Marg Rappolt and I am the Deputy Minister of Community and Social Services. To my immediate right is Bohodar Rubashewsky. Bohodar is our relatively new assistant deputy minister of the Family Responsibility Office. To his right is our director of legal services for the Family Responsibility Office, Donna Holmes. As you know and as the Chair has introduced, we're here to provide you information about our response to section 3.03 of the 2010 Auditor General's report.

I want to start by acknowledging and thanking very much the auditor and all of his staff for his work. The ministry welcomes his findings and recommendations to strengthen the delivery, oversight and overall effectiveness of the Family Responsibility Office. In response, FRO has developed an action plan to address the auditor's recommendations with assigned deliverables, responsibilities and milestones. I'm happy to report that a number of action items are in progress and some are already complete.

Before I talk about the actions and our progress, I will provide you with a little bit of context about FRO and the work it does. Having said that, I know that committee members are generally quite familiar with this program.

Every year, the program handles approximately 180,000 cases and represents 400,000 people, and we have, of course, the highest caseload in the country. Last year, we collected \$647 million in support payments, and

that's about \$50 million to \$60 million transferred to families and children each month.

FRO's work isn't limited to Ontario, as you know. It also has the authority to collect support on behalf of 103 reciprocating jurisdictions, all Canadian provinces and territories, 50 US states and quite a few international jurisdictions, including Australia and Norway.

Achieving these results takes a lot of back office work, the scope of which isn't readily apparent to our customers. For example, each year FRO's lawyers appear in court over 17,000 times. Each month, FRO processes between 30,000 and 35,000 pieces of inbound mail and close to 9,000 faxes, and each business day FRO handles 2,000 client calls through our call centre, while our 24-hour automated information line receives about 7,000 calls every day.

FRO is a challenging program. It's a complex program and it is a challenging program. Every day, staff communicate with support payers and recipients who are going through incredibly difficult and often very emotionally charged times in their lives. There's often acrimony and conflict in the calls we receive, not only in terms of their personal circumstances but also with regard to their opinion of our organization. Many payers feel FRO is too aggressive; many recipients feel the opposite. It's a dichotomy we struggle to balance, of course.

We know that many of our clients go to their MPPs when they have questions, which we appreciate, or concerns about our program. We all have an interest in having FRO succeed. While we know that we have work to do to improve FRO's performance, we are making progress and we strongly believe we're heading in the right direction.

Over the past several years, FRO has taken many steps to improve client service and stem our arrears. Since the last Auditor General's report, we've established the Good Parents Pay website, which has helped locate 31 defaulting payers and collect almost \$150,000.

We've increased jail time for defaulting payers and created a special trace-and-locate unit to find payers in arrears. We've collected \$1.5 million in garnished lottery winnings and almost \$770 million by suspending drivers' licences, and we've introduced a 24-hour automated information line for clients to securely access their case information that helps 200,000 callers each month.

We are engaged in a multi-year modernization project that will transform FRO from an issues-driven reactive

business into a program with a proactive case management business model. When fully implemented in 2012, we feel this new approach will address many of the auditor's concerns.

In the past year alone, FRO has made significant improvements to its business processes, its efficiency and its infrastructure. We have, for instance, implemented a new telephone system that has led to better management of our call centre. Over the last several months, blocked-call rates, a concern raised by the auditor, have gone down by 20%.

We've increased accountability for staff and management and we've established performance measures to improve customer service. We've partnered with Ontario Shared Services in our Ministry of Government Services to print and mail our three highest-volume standard letters to clients, which has accelerated nearly 20% of FRO's total mailings.

The result of these and other initiatives is improved service for clients and more support payments reaching families. In fact, over the past 10 years FRO has collected more than \$6 billion in support payments owed to families, and the collection of support payments is up 19% each month.

Modernization, as you can imagine, is an ongoing process, but it's one that FRO and I and my executive team are completely committed to.

We've been making progress on our comprehensive action plan to address all the recommendations in the Auditor General's report. First, I'd like to begin by speaking about our customer-facing operations.

Our high-volume call centre is staffed by rotating shifts of enforcement officers who handle the 2,000 calls a day. Currently, clients who contact FRO wait, on average, seven to eight minutes to speak with someone. This wait time is about five minutes less than it was during the last audit, but it's not ideal. Because callers can speak to a different staff member each time they call, they often have to re-explain their situation, resulting in a longer call and a longer wait time for other callers.

To reduce the volume of calls we receive and the amount of time clients wait for service, we've taken a number of steps. We've issued personal identification numbers to clients so they can access our secure 24-hour automated phone lines for case updates.

We've begun to engage external expertise to review our call centre operations and identify opportunities for increased efficiency and yet more customer service. As I've noted, we've implemented, proudly, a new telephone system that provides managers with just-in-time information to better schedule staff during busy call periods. This new system will enable us to implement a case management business model by, for example, routing calls based on case numbers.

As you can imagine, many of our client calls require follow-up that results in what we call our bring-forward notes. These notes are created daily. They're part of the way FRO does business. The auditor noted identified weaknesses in this system, which we're acting to address.

In the last several months, we conducted a blitz to review all these bring-forward notes, resulting in a reduction of more than 30%, and we're introducing new training and performance measures so that bring-forward notes are followed up on in a timely fashion and closed appropriately.

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While the actions I've mentioned will help in the short term, what are truly needed at FRO are an updated sustainable business model, a renewed approach to customer service and new technology infrastructure to enable our modernization of the program.

This new approach has already begun to take shape in the way that we reach out to and communicate with our clients. In the fall, we began posting quarterly online bulletins for payers and recipients to give them insight into FRO and to set the record straight on some of the understandable commonly held misconceptions about our program. They're getting noticed. The first issue had approximately 1,400 views in two months, while the second had the same number in just one month. We're also producing a series of online behind-the-scenes-at-FRO videos to help people understand the workings of our organization and fit the pieces together. Since we posted the first one in December, these videos have been viewed more than 2,000 times.

Internally, one of the centrepieces of our modernization plan is moving FRO to a proactive case management model that is more responsive to client needs. This model will give clients direct access to a dedicated case contact, someone who is consistently familiar with and aware of their case.

We have piloted this case-ownership-based model and found that it makes caseloads easier to manage. Each call takes less time, because the enforcement officer already understands the client's situation, and as a result, the officer can spend more time on enforcement activities.

Before we can roll out our new case management model, FRO needs to implement a modern computer system. You know that our current system is over 25 years old. It's slow, it has limited capabilities and it is restricting us from making the customer service and business model improvements we know we need to make.

We are on track to deliver a case management technology solution by spring 2012. The project working on this solution, as noted in the auditor's report, is the FRO case management system, or FCMS. It is the foundation of our case management model. This new technology, for example, will allow FRO to establish a secure web portal where clients will be able to access their case information online, and in future, update their own information online.

As the auditor reported, in 2004 we contracted with a company to replace FRO's old computer system with what was called at that time the integrated service delivery model, the ISDM project. As you know, this project was cancelled when the vendor was unable to successfully deliver a system that could handle the

transfer of historical data from FRO's legacy systems. The decision to cancel this ISDM project, given the urgent business need and the previous investment, was not easy. It was a very difficult decision, but it was necessary.

After the ministry engaged the ministry's chief information officer and our corporate information lead, it was concluded that continued investment in the project held unacceptable risk. It goes without saying that this was not a good result for FRO. It wasn't a good result for our government, for you, for Ontario families, and no one wants this to happen again.

Let me assure you that both FRO and the OPS as a whole have learned from the challenges of that project. Before the current FCMS project was launched in 2007, the ministry hired an independent third party to conduct a full review of that project and to provide recommendations to ensure that our new project would be more effective. That review recommended many things. It recommended that we strengthen our project governance approach, which we've done. For example, I, as the deputy of the ministry, personally chair the project steering committee, and my corporate chief information officer in the Ministry of Government Services is my vice-chair. We have a special procurement advisory sub-committee. We have a full-time audit specialist—my director of audit, who also reports to the Ministry of Finance—engaged in this committee.

The review recommended that we adhere to new government-wide information and technology standards for major I&IT infrastructure projects, including a review process where projects must pass multiple checkpoints from concept through to implementation in order to proceed. It recommended that we increase FRO's business role on the technology project team so that developing the case management system would reflect a clear, deep understanding of the day-to-day operational needs of the business. It recommended a commercial, off-the-shelf solution instead of a custom-built solution—this is a foundational learning across our whole Ontario public service. Finally, it suggested that we follow a multi-stage procurement process, with off-ramps to reduce risks that impact the project.

The recommendations from this review of our ISDM project align very well with the recommendations of the Desautels special task force on the management of large-scale information and information technology projects. This review was commissioned by our Chair of Management Board at that time. The recommendations of the Desautels special task force were submitted to the government in late 2005, and were all adopted and implemented in 2006. In his 2010 report, the Auditor General confirmed that our current FCMS project team is specifically addressing every recommendation of the previous review.

We're moving forward on this project with the utmost care, caution and diligence. I can't overemphasize how important this project is to us all. We all need this to succeed, and we all want it done right.

I'd now like to touch on a few points relating to FRO's core purpose, which is collecting and distributing support. In his report, the auditor noted that FRO is generally successful in processing and getting most support payments to intended recipients on a timely basis. About two thirds of our cases are in full or partial compliance. "Partial compliance"—I'm aware that you are likely quite aware of this—means individuals paying at least 85% of their monthly obligation.

We encourage payers to pay by electronic banking, and recipients to enrol in direct deposit. As a result, we are generally able to process payments for the recipient within 48 hours. We're getting money to the families who need it.

Sometimes, payments require manual intervention, such as when a case number does not match a name or when the payer's name varies from the legal name on the court order. In these situations, payments are placed in a suspense account until we can be sure that funds are going to the correct recipient. To address the auditor's concerns regarding these accounts, FRO has assigned dedicated resources to clear funds from suspense accounts, and we are revising financial policies to process payments as quickly as possible. The unfortunate reality is that for one third of our cases, despite our best efforts, some clients simply refuse to support their children or spouse and others can't afford to meet their court-ordered obligations at that time. As a result, arrears grow.

Payer arrears currently total \$1.7 billion. When FRO was formally established in 1997, arrears were already at \$1 billion—this is a cumulative problem. We all find the very long standing arrears in support payments frustrating. That's why we're continuing to learn more about them and doing a more comprehensive analysis of the data. Although this work is still under way, we've learned already that our top 10% of arrears cases, or approximately 13,000 cases, account for over \$900 million or over 50% of the current arrears. We expect that as we learn more, we will be better prepared to develop a strategy for managing arrears differently and improving collections.

While our first step is always to work co-operatively with payers to help them meet their support obligations, we can and do take enforcement action, as you know, when necessary. There are many things FRO can do to enforce orders: garnish bank accounts; report a payer to a credit bureau; suspend drivers' licences, Canadian passports and federal licences; have a lien or writ placed on the payer's home; seize lottery winnings; and start a default hearing that could result in jail time.

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Another part of the challenge in collecting arrears is locating payers who do not willingly provide us with up-to-date or accurate contact information, so we are actively seeking to expand the trace-and-locate tools available to our staff. As per the auditor's recommendations, work is under way with the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care to expand FRO's access to the database that contains the addresses of health card holders, a secure and very comprehensive data holding. We expect

that all these efforts will result in the collection of yet more outstanding payments for families.

Finally, I'd like to address the interaction between FRO and the justice system. The justice system is one of our most important partners. However, it can also contribute to some of the delays FRO encounters when it comes to registering a case within our target time frame or initiating enforcement action. For example, if a support order is not clearly written or lacks important information such as the dollar amount or frequency of support payments, we must seek clarification, ultimately causing potential delays in enforcement action. If the court does not issue a writ quickly, a support payer in arrears could sell property, and FRO would then lose an opportunity to collect owed support.

FRO's success relies on a strong, collaborative relationship and the effective processing of court-based documents. As such, FRO is committed to strengthening its relationship with our justice partners for the benefit of our mutual clients. While we develop a long-term and more permanent strategy for engagement with the legal community, we've already launched a number of proactive, targeted initiatives.

As a pilot, we gave a high-volume court access to FRO's support payment database. This gives judges access to the current financial picture for a support case being heard, reducing the need to adjourn until the parties bring in their information.

Last fall, we issued our first quarterly bulletin specifically for the legal community to give members of the judiciary and the bar a clear understanding of what we do and how their actions impact our work. We've also piloted a dedicated court clerk in our FRO office, with access to the court database. This person can process documents in substantially less time, as it reduces the travel time between FRO and four high-volume courts. This clerk has already eliminated a six-month backlog. Because of the success of this initiative, we are extending participation to other courts and adding another 12 months to this pilot.

Earlier this year, we also reached out to court staff with FRO in Action, providing educational tours of our offices and opening up a dialogue on how we can improve related processes and interactions.

Through these introductory comments I've attempted to highlight some of the immediate work we're undertaking to address the Auditor General's concerns, as well as our strategic initiatives to support longer-term business transformation. We did welcome the auditor's observations and we've used them; we've seized the opportunity to strengthen the management of our Family Responsibility Office and continue on our path to becoming a truly modern and responsive organization.

I'm very enthusiastic about the great potential of this organization. I'm eager to see the results from what I believe will be a dramatic shift in the way FRO serves its clients and in the way the organization is perceived.

We'd now be pleased to provide members of the committee with any additional information you may need and respond to your questions. Thank you very much.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Shurman): Thank you very much, Deputy Minister. We'll now proceed to questions. We'll work our way around the table in 15-minute periods, beginning with the Progressive Conservative Party. Mr. Ouellette.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: Thank you very much. A number of questions.

I recall in Oshawa, predominantly with shift workers and the difficulty they experience when they get laid off and/or shutdowns take place, these individuals in the past used to immediately be put on arrears simply because they don't have the pay structure, and they would have to go back into the system to try to adjust that. What's taken place to account for those individuals?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: Thank you very much for your question. I am going to either refer to Bohodar or Donna to let you know if we've been able to make it easier and more straightforward to respond to that kind of worker.

Ms. Donna Holmes: Just from a legal perspective, right now the program itself hasn't had the flexibility to really respond to those kinds of situations.

Last year or the year before, if you recall, we also had an Inco strike out in Sudbury, and at that time a number of support payers were involved in difficulties in keeping up with their ongoing support arrangements.

There have been very early discussions with the Ministry of the Attorney General, and we have talked about whether or not the program itself can start to explore ways where we can be more strategic about our enforcement. It doesn't make sense, quite frankly, to proceed with aggressive litigation in a case where someone is on the strike line and it looks like there's an impending strike and there's no opportunity for that individual at that time.

As FRO modernizes and gets more sophisticated, as we learn more about the geographical issues we face in our support payer community, I think we should explore the opportunities to be more strategic about our enforcement, to do outreach to support payers and to explore early intervention, when perhaps at that time we can negotiate voluntary arrangements to offset some of the accumulating arrears. That makes sense, based on the temporary situation that those payers are facing.

That is an excellent point and it's the kind of work that I think a modern organization would have to explore.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: I just see that the volume of calls you receive on a monthly basis is so high that you would expect peaks to take place during particular shutdowns and layoffs. It doesn't matter if it's Inco or if it's taking place in the steel plants in Hamilton, the car plants throughout Ontario or the forestry sector; it will be affecting a lot.

I hear a lot about how we're going to address the volume of calls that are coming in, but I think that if we eliminate a lot of these base problems such as this, it'll eliminate a lot of those calls, so you can focus on the real ones that are of real concern.

Will you be able to forward us some information as to how you intend to deal with this issue so that this

committee can review it, and some of the proposals that would make it more effective, or legislative changes that you foresee would be needed in order to address that issue regarding the layoffs and shutdowns?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: What I may suggest—there may be other issues such as this, but Donna has talked about our consideration. I think we would be prepared, when we are in a position to be able to document some measures we might take or some progress, to absolutely make that available to the committee.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: Thank you. Some of the other questions pertain to the—I think it was on page 14 of your presentation. You spoke about how “Sometimes, payments require manual intervention, such as when a case number does not match a name, or when a payer’s name varies from the legal name on the court order.”

We’ve had situations whereby liens have been placed on houses of individuals who aren’t involved in FRO. So what happens in cases and situations like that, where a lien has been put on a house, but they’re not involved in any court situations because it’s an error of the individuals? How do you deal with those issues, and is there compensation paid back to those individuals who have been displaced by having improper liens put on their houses?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: I think your question is quite clear, and I think I will call on Donna to talk about our responses in those circumstances.

Ms. Donna Holmes: Mr. Ouellette, I am not personally aware of any of those cases. What I am aware of is that, from time to time, writs are registered against a name, the name of a support payer.

We do get calls often from lawyers from the outside who, during the course of a real estate transaction, represent an individual with a similar name. What that requires FRO to do is then confirm that the individual we have a writ against is not in fact the individual who is the subject of a real estate transaction. That is an ongoing part of our business. We have a process in place to confirm identity.

I’m sorry, I can’t comment on a fact situation that you have discussed; I’m just not aware of a case. I know that FRO has a process to confirm the identity of support payers. We do registration searches and writs are registered against their name for the purpose of attaching personal property. In the case of a specific lien against a piece of property that is owned by the support payer, we would have conducted name searches in the registrar to ensure the accuracy of that document.

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Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: We’ve had a number of cases as such in my own riding.

You mentioned the amount of arrears and the outstanding amounts that are out there. I’m wondering if you prioritize the arrears or the individuals in those arrears. What we’re having are a lot of cases within our constituency whereby the individuals—and this relates to page 15, the paragraph, “Although this work is still in its early stages, we have learned that our top 10% of arrears

cases, approximately 13,000 cases, account for over \$900 million.” It has taken a year for individuals with \$56,000 in arrears to get a warrant of committal. Is there some way you’re prioritizing the levels by which the arrears are outstanding so that those individuals who are in arrears in substantial amounts can be targeted?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: If I may, I’ll start, and I know my colleague Bohodar will be able to say quite a bit more. It is noteworthy to everyone: It’s frustrating to have as much money as we do, \$1.7 billion, in arrears. As we noted, it’s an inherited situation; these are cumulative arrears. The auditor, we recognize, offered some observations about knowing more, stratifying, learning about how to get the greatest yield on our investment, right? That is our objective. That’s our focus. We have some early findings, and I think Bohodar can say more about the findings and how we might be able to proceed.

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: Thank you, Deputy. We have, over the course of the last several months, worked with experts within our own ministry, experts who are very equipped to look at our entire arrears database, which is housed in, as we’ve mentioned—and the auditor mentioned—a 26-year-old information technology system which holds information well but does not provide that information back to us easily in useful form.

But we’ve begun looking at the profile of the arrears that we have. We know, for instance, over and above the statistics that the deputy provided in her opening remarks, that the bulk of our arrears are quite old. Over 40% of them are over five years old. Some of them, over 10%, are 18 years and older. We have a better sense of the size—call it the cohorts—of the arrears. In FRO we have tended, because of limitations in technology, to deal with arrears on a relatively reactive basis.

This information that we’re getting through this research that’s under way will allow us, first of all, to get that profile—what sort of arrears; how are the arrears organized on the basis of size, age; what is the profile of the payers themselves who are in arrears—then use that to look at the effectiveness of our enforcement measures. For instance, we want to look at taking different approaches, including partnering with other organizations that are involved in the collection of arrears, to look at strategies for dealing with old arrears and high dollar arrears so that we can focus more of our day-to-day efforts on those arrears, as you say, that are in a relatively low range, perhaps are not that old, and would benefit from certain types of enforcement measures more than others.

That is what we’re going to be doing over the course of the next several months: looking at that combination of who are the payers, how long have they been in arrears, what is the size of the arrears, what are the most effective strategies that have been employed against those different profiles, and then really looking at the best approaches for different types of arrears.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: A couple more questions also on page 15. I take it from the last one, you mentioned that there’s no prioritization for larger ones. It’s just basically on the age—how old they are and how active.

On page 15, it says, “start a default hearing that could result in up to 180 days of jail time for the payer.” In situations like that, are you finding that’s assisting the payers? Because they’re no longer able to raise funds in order to pay the outstanding amounts. Is that being used very actively, or how is that functioning as a deterrent and/or is it being effective, seeing as you’re removing somebody for 180 days from their ability to raise funds to pay the arrears that they owe?

Ms. Donna Holmes: You’re right. We do have the authority to incarcerate up to 180 days. That’s not always what the nature of the final order is, as made by the judge. I guess it’s important to put it in the context that it really is a tool of last resort in our litigation process.

I think last year only about 3.7% of all our cases involved an ultimate incarceration. So you can see that the real goal through the default hearing process, which is what we call it, is to encourage the support payer at that time to enter into an order to pay back his arrears, and is ongoing. It’s a rare tool that we use.

As far as your question about the effectiveness, what I can say is that, anecdotally, it is obviously a very compelling tool, and there is no doubt that many support payers, upon their arrival in a correctional institution, find the financial means to pay off their arrears. There are also cases, however, depending on the amount of incarceration—and sometimes they can be as short as a day—where they will serve time. The important thing is, when they come out, they still owe the arrears and we will continue to pursue them, but it is a very sobering remedy that we use, and we use it sparingly and only in the most egregious cases.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: I would have thought that arrangements for weekends or that sort of aspect would have been taken into consideration. That allows the individuals to work for the five days and then spend time on the weekends.

Ms. Donna Holmes: That’s quite right. The orders are usually sliced any number of ways based on the judge’s decision about how to encourage payment.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: One last question is the inter-jurisdictional aspect. You talk about the other jurisdictions in Canada. I know we’ve received complaints in that we’ve had individuals ask us to help because they’re out of province.

This particular case was in Manitoba, where the individual tried to pay their responsibilities and became into arrears. However, the relationship between the Manitoba government and the office here was non-existent, to the point where they actually called our office to ask if we could assist them in making those payments, but then the Manitoba government finally said, “Look, we have tried.” They sent us a letter listing the number of tries that they’ve made to pay off these arrears and the arrangements they tried to make, and they said that as far as they were concerned, there appears to be no attempt with the Ontario government to move forward on this and, as such, they are closing this file and no longer requiring you in any shape or form to move forward with further payments.

How can situations like that take place if the relationship should be good in tracking down individuals and that sort of aspect? I realize the volume is there and with smaller arrears it may be difficult, but these individuals are trying to do the best they can and it’s not happening.

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: I am surprised to hear about problems with any relationships with provincial jurisdictions, so I’d be quite interested in hearing more details about it as a relatively new assistant deputy minister.

We generally have very strong relationships, in particular, with Canadian jurisdictions, and American jurisdictions as well. In the United States, when there is an interjurisdictional support order applicable to a state, oftentimes it’s a little bit more complicated than in Canada simply because the administration of child support in many American jurisdictions is at the local county level. We also have challenges in the interjurisdictional support orders that relate to international jurisdictions, but we do have, overall, including US jurisdictions, Canada and other countries, 103 reciprocal agreements, and we do actively engage with our counterparts, both enforcing on behalf of recipients who are in other jurisdictions but also working and providing information to the other jurisdictions to enforce support on our behalf.

1310

Oftentimes there are differences in requirements for information that we have to overcome, and the nature of the court systems in some jurisdictions obviously varies with ours. But we do very much take as active an approach as we can to understand what information they require in order to pursue enforcement and provide that information on behalf of our recipients.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Shurman): Thank you very much. Let’s move on to the NDP.

Mr. Michael Prue: I have a number of questions about people who call in, and I have to tell you that I find this disappointing. Whenever I phone any government office, not just yours, but with FRO, my office says they wait on the phone a long time, and they used to wait longer.

You’ve said that overall, in the last several months, blocked call rates have gone down by 20%. Well, that could mean a lot of things to a lot of people. If blocked call rates were 60% and they’re now down to 40%, that says one thing; if they were 30% and down to 10%, that says something else. What is the blocked call rate?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: I’ll perhaps start on this very important question, and then I know my colleague Bohodar will be able to follow up. We need to be in the client service business; we are. We want to have quicker response times, lower call wait times and overall better-quality service. On a number of occasions when we’ve come forward at this committee or other committees, people have asked, “Do you have measurements? Do you have targets?” and I just want to assure the table that we are working hard on that, and we work with other jurisdictions to assess what is best practice.

I would say to you that we’re not in this alone in terms of using call centres to serve clients better. You all know

we have a new model of serving Ontarians through our ServiceOntario kiosks. They're in the business of offering more what I would call transactional services. They have standards. They're monitoring what goes on nationally and internationally.

I would just assure you that we are very alive for our need to do better and better. At times, it is all about demand and supply. We have a new telephone system which far exceeds our capacity to know what's going on—that's the most important thing, what's going on—in terms of call volumes and the deployment of our team to respond to our customers as best we can. I'm feeling very good about that this past year. That does not solve all of our client service demand issues.

You asked, 20% better than what? When Mr. McCarter and his team audited the program, it was the case at that moment in time—these things vary—that we had about an 80% blocked call rate. That's a bad rate. We now know, even though it's highly variable—I can't guarantee it if you went out there and measured today, but we've been monitoring this very closely—that our new telephone system allows us to do a lot better on this. Fairly consistently, we are 20% down. We've had way better months than that, but 20% down from that. That's just one measure of who gets through and how quickly. There's the broader issue of once you're through, how long you wait and how long your call is. We're in the business of improving this whole part of our customer service.

I'll just invite Bohodar, if he has anything further he wants to say on the call centre operation.

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: As the deputy noted, our telephony system, the one that was implemented in the summer, does provide us with much more information than we had in the past, and among the pieces of information that it does provide us—although we have to do more work in terms of being able to pull this information out on a regular basis—is that we now have a better sense of how many unique callers actually try to get through to the call centre because we're able to track—not keep, but track—on the basis of call IDs.

We've undertaken a few snapshots over the course of the last several months, in particular on high-volume days when the call-block rate was quite high—again, in the 80% range—and we found that about 50% of the individuals who tried to contact us were able to get through on their first attempt, and another 10% to 15% were able to get through on their second attempt. For others, of course, it took much longer; they made multiple attempts to call us, and some didn't get through at all.

The call blockage rate is a significant issue for us because, obviously, as people get frustrated as they try to call in, they redial on a multiple basis, and it backs the entire queue up.

What we have been doing over the last several months is taking a much more rigorous approach to, first of all, the way that we schedule our staff to the extent that we're able to, now that we have a better sense of the ups and

downs of the day, have staff on hand and they are actually answering the phones when they're supposed to. Schedule adherence is an important focus for us and will be an important focus for us.

Certainly, the time that a caller who does get through and is in the queue—the shorter that time frame, the lower the call blockage rate because there isn't such a backup. We are trying to keep those call wait times down so that more people can get through.

Mr. Michael Prue: A couple of things happen as a result of this. First of all, people, when they finally do get through, usually are much more angry than they would be if they weren't, which is then taken out on staff in longer calls.

The second thing, and I'm sure most of the MPPs here will agree, is that some of these people give up in frustration and end up in our office, and then our staff phones you, which takes our time as well, and people have to travel some considerable distance to come to the MPP's office and sign forms so that we can ask questions. This is, as a matter of fact, a terrible system.

Can you comment on that? Because you're actually making work for all of us.

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: Yes. I'm pleased to start this answer, and Bohodar may have more things to say.

I guess I'd suggest that I'm very aware. I've worked in a number of program areas in the Ontario public service, and a couple of those are the areas that push through the most-volume calls for the offices of our members of the provincial Legislature, so I understand what this must mean for you.

Here are the things that I've observed that I think are helping us move in the right direction. I think that we, in the program, working absolutely transparently and with the support of my minister and her office, want to be transparent and offer assistance to all MPPs' offices so that we all can do together what we should be doing, which is helping recipients or payers resolve issues and get money through to families.

I just want to say that I think that we've progressed in our understanding, transparency and commitment to be responsive to help you. I know that the team in our minister's office, who assist with us, are very dedicated and very much want to listen to more advice on how we can improve the work you do on behalf of your constituents. I know that there has been some special outreach that has gone on. I'd just say that we're open to this. We very much believe, the FRO, that it is our job to be responsive to your needs, because we're all serving the same clients.

Bohodar, I don't know whether you've anything else.

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: Yes. Thank you, Deputy.

As we referenced in the response to the Provincial Auditor's report, we're also quite actively engaged in going to experts in the field beyond the Family Responsibility Office to look at best practices for managing our call centre operations, organizing staff in the most effective fashion and also utilizing in the most effective fashion the new telephony technology we have.

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For instance, we've been actively consulting with ServiceOntario, which operates call centres around the province. The nature of the calls and the issues those call centres deal with, I would say, are materially different from those to the Family Responsibility Office. The time that a ServiceOntario representative interacts with a client or caller, for instance, is significantly shorter than an FRO enforcement services officer or representative does, because they're generally inquiry calls as opposed to, effectively, case management resolution calls. That being said, they've acquired a significant amount of expertise, and we are actively engaging them.

We have also brought in external expertise. They're now undertaking their analysis of our operations. We expect to have some results from that review soon—in the next month or two. We've asked them to look at customer service and at the way we route calls: Is it the most effective way to do it? What sort of reporting and metrics, beyond what we have put in place in the last several months as a result of the introduction of the telephony technology? Workforce management and performance: What should we do based on best practices in similar types of environments, either in the public or the private sector? What can we learn from others? What can we do better? That work is under way.

I'm hopeful that that expertise, both internally within the government and externally, will provide us with some solutions to the current challenges we have that you've referenced.

Mr. Michael Prue: It seems to me that (a) in all likelihood you're understaffed, (b) in all likelihood the telephone system isn't adequate to the number of people you have and (c) you could have a problem with people getting sick as a result of a very stressful job—I understand it's around 20 days a year, which is pretty high.

What is it that you need? Do you need an extra hundred bodies to answer the phone? Is that what this is all about? Being pretty blunt here, what is it about? You go and do all these studies, but in the end, if you don't have anyone to answer the phone, what is going to be the result?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: I'll offer a few observations on this. Building a stronger organization at FRO, you're absolutely right, is about many things together.

Sometimes I think, over this last while, for perhaps obvious reasons, we internally and then people looking in at us tend to think it may be predominantly or exclusively about getting the technology right.

What I want to say is that I know, and I think members know, that we can't get an excellent service performance system without improving our technology. On the other hand, getting the technology right on its own isn't going to address the issues you've raised, Mr. Prue. It is a complex and interconnected set of improvements that we need.

We need to become smarter and more efficient in our business practices and study what's going on in these kinds of—and we're doing that very actively. We do

need to monitor what I would call our inputs: our staff levels.

I'm very pleased that if you looked at our estimates books and so on, you would see, particularly this past year, that our government responded to our business case and our need for graduated increases to this program.

Might we need more staff to successfully deliver a full case management model? I think others at this table have said to you that we may well. Having said that, Bohodar's focus, which I appreciate so much, isn't just about putting more resources around our current business models. That's not how all of our businesses are run today. It's about evolving the business in modern ways to find more efficient and smarter ways to offer the service.

You talked about, do we need more staff? We need to keep deploying our very fine staff as efficiently as we can. In the end, we may need yet more than we have. We're not in an environment—no government's in an environment—where additional public service resources is going to be an easy solution. We're very aware of that.

You talked about the telephone system and then you talked about our organizational health and the fact that—and the auditor noted in his review—it is the case in this organization that sick time is higher than on average in the Ontario public service. I would say to you that this is stressful work.

Mr. Michael Prue: Of course.

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: I know many of you—I go up and I monitor or benefit from sitting with and learning from the work that our colleagues do. So, if we monitored across other jurisdictions, it is likely the norm that for this kind of business, absenteeism may be slightly higher than the average of the organization. Are we where we want to be on that front? We aren't.

Bohodar, I wonder if you just want to say a bit more about some of the organizational improvements that we have under way.

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: Certainly. Thank you, Deputy. Two important aspects to reducing that sort of call volume and spin are communication and as diversion. For instance, about 57% of calls that are made into the call centre are payment inquiries, recipients calling, "What happened to this payment? I was expecting it." We have relatively limited information available on our interactive voice response system. It has a limited amount of information about most recent payments and status of arrears and enforcement actions taken on a case.

Certainly as part of the introduction of the new FRO case management technology system, we will be introducing an electronic portal, a web-based portal to provide, as the deputy indicated, more information on the cases themselves. Certainly a lot of what clients need to get from FRO has to be done via contact by telephone, and the more that we can divert to other channels, channels that other jurisdictions have introduced, the less stress there will be on the call centre itself.

The second is communication, providing recipients and payers with more information about FRO, about the procedures that we have in place so that they don't have

to look for that information by actually having to interact with our enforcement service representatives and enforcement service officers.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Shurman): Thank you very much. We'll move on in a moment, but I'd like to take the Chair's prerogative and ask a question of my own. By the way, I might make the observation—I don't know what we're doing on this side and you on that side because you'd do well in the October 6 election.

Having said that, I see this as you've described, Deputy, as a multi-faceted problem, and I don't envy you your job. Having said that, the intake seems to be the obvious first line of defence and your defence is not to be able to handle the calls. Because even if you had 80% unanswered or abandoned calls and you improved by 20%, depending on whether you take that as 20% of 80% or just 20%, you're somewhere in the 60%-plus range of calls that don't even get answered before you get into a wait queue.

Have you—any of you can answer—ever considered outsourcing the call centre piece?

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Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: I'll start. The most honest thing for me to say is, I really can't commit that what anyone in this job or Bohodar's job has ever done—but I would say responding to calls from recipients and payers in an integrated case management framework, recognizing our job really is to ensure the transfer of money, getting payments into the hands of families: Those represent pretty core elements of our business.

There are other elements of our business—how we transfer paper—where we are experimenting successfully in having others who are more expert than we are do it for us. So we're in the business of looking smartly, I hope, at the elements of our business that lend themselves to other expertise. The back office stuff generally comes front of mind and we're hard at work on that.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Shurman): I understand the back office part of it, and I wouldn't—

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: But for the call centre, in answer to your question, there's no active consideration on our part of that. As Bohodar said, we're very carefully monitoring what other jurisdictions do. Predominantly both the call response—response to any channel, but certainly call—and the receipt and payment of support are core elements of this program dominantly done by governments.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Shurman): I'd look at the top end of it—and I'm not asking for a response on this—only for one reason, because absent your call centre's ability to take the volume that you've got, there are a bunch of people around this table with MPP after their names who are taking that overflow.

Over to the Liberals and Ms. Sandals.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: Mr. Balkissoon will lead off this round. You can give me the next one.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Shurman): That's fine. Mr. Balkissoon.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I have a couple of questions, but based on my colleague across the way's question regarding resources, I'll start with this one.

I'm hearing from the others around the table that this particular office, FRO, had been established in 1997, according to your notes—and reading somewhere else, the issue of improving the operations of FRO has always been an issue in front of this committee. Can you take the committee through what has happened since 1997 to today in terms of investments in this office, resources to this office, so that we could improve the operation, or what has happened, so that at least I could get a little bit of a picture of where we've gone and why we're in this state?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: Depending on how satisfactory you feel my answer is, I may commit to offer more information after the fact. But what I'll suggest is, you're right. The program in its current configuration came about and, as we all know, was organized in a range of different ways. At one point, it was a regional office with regional oversight, and then moved to a more centralized footprint. At about the same time, the accountability was held in the Ministry of the Attorney General in the very late 1990s and early 2000s, and came to the Ministry of Community and Social Services in early 2000s; that's by way of saying, as programs do in the Ontario public service, there's a bit of shift and move around.

The most complete data I have in front of me right now is more from, I would say, the time of our auditor's last report, which is 2003. So that's what I'm able to offer to you, and if you feel you need more, I'm happy to follow up.

At that time, FRO was about a \$31-million program. In terms of FTEs—I stand to be corrected—I think we were around the 400 mark in about the 2003-04 time period, at the time of the previous Auditor General's review.

Mr. Jim McCarter: There was about 400 in 2003, when we did the last audit.

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: Yes. Thank you so much. So 400; that was at that moment in time. Now, I'm very pleased to note that the FRO program is a \$50-million program. That's about a 55% increase from the time of the last audit.

If you toured, as I need to occasionally, what happened year in and year out in the estimates and so on, I think what you would see is some ups and downs in the budget. That's not unusual for a program such as this. I'll just comment on a couple of those.

On one hand, you would have seen some investments in the early 2000s, just after Mr. McCarter's earlier audit, reflecting the resources to do the previous technology project. So you would see a little lift. Then, later on—and I'm recalling that Chair Sterling sometimes asks these questions, so I had them in mind when I came into the room. If you looked at estimates in fiscal year 2009-10, you would have seen a drop—and I'll tell you about that drop; this, again, happens sometimes—from 2008-09 to

2009-10. Ten million dollars was seen to be lifted out of the FRO program. That had to do with accounting. That was the year we shifted to the new accounting mechanism. So the operating dollars associated with running our information system, the big legacy—that \$10 million shifted out of the FRO budget but presented in my ministry's budget in a capital line.

I hope I'm answering your question. If you surveyed this, you would see some ebbs and flows, but I think over about the last decade, certainly from the last report of Mr. McCarter, you would see a budget going from about \$31 million to \$50 million, an increase of 55%.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: How many FTEs did you go to?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: From about a 400 threshold, we are now at 450 FTEs.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: In your presentation you sort of covered the FRO computer system a little bit, and basically told us that you were on the road to a particular system that you abandoned. Can you tell us what went wrong with that system? What led you to the decision to get rid of it, and what assurances can you provide us that this new system, which you're now going to implement in the spring of 2012, will give us all the tools that you're looking for? And if you could sort of give me what your goals are to see where the office will be, say, in a year's time or two years' time, in terms of some of the issues we've heard around the table.

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: I'll do my best. Lessons learned of what went wrong: There are many, and I did review some of them in my address.

What I wanted to note was, in addition to us looking long and hard at our own project in 2004-06, at the same time, the Chair of Management Board for our government recognized that learning to do business transformation and technology projects to enable business transformation well was something that was certainly bigger than our FRO project or my ministry. It was something across government that we needed to learn more about.

I would say that the work that was done by Mr. Denis Desautels through his broader review of large information technology projects—and that reported in 2005—really is the guidepost for how we in the Ontario public service govern, manage and deliver on business transformation through technology.

That expert panel had a range of eminent experts, including our current Governor General, David Johnston, from the University of Waterloo, who was brought in to look. So I would just say that it was likely in response to an urgent need. It identified key themes and areas of improvement, and those areas mirrored our own experience.

I would say that the people who sat here talking to this committee in 2004, with the information they had, felt they were exercising best practice. I'm just reminding us that these are moments in time in what we know and what we don't know.

In terms of the key themes we were left with, one was on governance and oversight. Mr. Desautels and our own review said, "You don't have it right. You're too narrow."

Don't leave oversight of these technology change projects and relationships with vendors. Don't leave it up to a ministry alone because we just don't have enough knowledge. Up the game, raise the accountability to the centre of government within your Ministry of Government Services, build the expertise there and ensure that they work with line ministries in building the right controllership and oversight for these projects.

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I would say to you, I'm living that right now, and that's a good thing. I'm accountable for this project, but I sit here with the chief corporate information officer for the government and we're in this together. So that's a good thing.

The management of the projects—what was learned through the Desautels task force and our own was that we didn't understand best practice in how to approve and design the work that needs to be done. In our situation, we need new software, we need someone who's excellent in understanding how to build a case management model and then we need a system built and tested.

We received all kinds of recommendations and we're administering them regarding the gating that we use, the careful risk assessment about how we design and implement one part of the project before and as we move to another part of the project.

We are following all those practices. There is a regular controllership reporting on a quarterly basis through to our treasury board and Management Board on the status of this project and all major application projects.

The last thing I'd say is, there were points in time when we also felt that it was all about technology transformation, and if we just had the technology transformation right, we'd be on good footing. One of the hardest things—I think my colleagues at government services and I would agree with this—is embracing the fact that it is about business transformation. This gives Bohodar long weeks and his team long weeks, but it's really our obligation to be able to, in a very disciplined way, define our business needs. That's what these changes come down to. We're the ones who have to do that. We need to work with our vendor partners and our technology experts, saying, "Okay, how does that translate into building a case management system?" But I think the thing that is the most profound learning in our organization and many organizations is that definition of the design of the business.

The tendency is to want the world and say, "No, no, no; we need lots of bells and whistles. We need all of the capacity to do it seven different ways." What we know is—and our government has accepted this—that often spells trouble, and the more we can design our business needs to fit into standardized products, the more successful we're going to be in delivering on these projects.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Can you tell us, in terms of your new system, do you see it improving the call centre in any way?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: I'm going to start on that and Bohodar's going to come in quick.

First of all, part of our project is the upgrade of the telephone system. It is a huge start. I'm very pleased with that. We intend to have a portal, and we will be delivering by spring on a web portal that allows access and information in a way we don't have now. It will move into an interactive portal. That will be very, very helpful where in a secure, reliable environment payers and recipients are going to be able to populate information themselves, so the opportunity for error and delay is completely eliminated. We absolutely can't wait to see those results.

Bohodar, did you want to add something?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: Yes. A few other aspects of FCMS that will be of great assistance are, first of all, an ability to actually manage the case from the first point of registration. At this point, because of the limitations of our technology, the registration process, the initial gathering of information, occurs somewhat separately from the transfer of that information to the enforcement function, because we have to await the arrival of a court order and the interpretation of that court order before any kind of enforcement action can occur, or even the initial establishment of verification of income sources and the like. The new technology will allow us to begin work on the case even before the court order is received, to have that preparatory work under way.

Second of all, the technology is being built not to do enforcement, because it is just a tool. Enforcement needs to occur based on the judgment that enforcement officers bring to a case because each case has its own unique characteristics and can't simply be based on rigid rules. But the FCMS will proactively flag certain circumstances to an enforcement officer in a much more effective fashion than currently occurs.

Oftentimes now, because of the way that the information resides, the first enforcement action against arrears that's taken is when a recipient informs the Family Responsibility Office that the case is months in arrears. We'll have the ability through FCMS to have certain circumstances, certain business rules established so that recommended enforcement action is flagged to the enforcement officer on a case.

For instance, we consider proceeding with a driver's licence suspension when a case is three months in arrears or \$3,000 in arrears. Obviously circumstances really dictate whether that is the appropriate action to take, but that information, the status of a case, will be brought forward to the enforcement officer in an active fashion so that the enforcement officer can make that decision as opposed to waiting for it to occur somewhat reactively.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Shurman): Thank you very much. Just for planning purposes for everyone, what we're going to do now is go back once around the table for up to 20 minutes per party. If you don't need it, that's fine. Then we'll go into closed session for about 10 minutes to give some instructions to our legislative research person. So, for your planning purposes, you'll be out of here in an hour at the most.

To the Progressive Conservative Party. Mr. Ouellette.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: The deputy mentioned about this interactive portal and how it's going to alleviate a lot of the problems, or you expect it to. Has it been tried in other jurisdictions? How's the success rate been in other jurisdictions that it's been tried in?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: Thank you for your question. I know web portals are available in a number of jurisdictions, but the place we want to get to, as I said, is that interactive portal, and I believe a jurisdiction or two are live with it. If we don't have all the information, we will get it to you, but I think it could be the province of Alberta. But I'll defer to Bohodar.

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: Actually, within Canada, British Columbia is the leading example. In that jurisdiction, clients have an ability to review payment information, to access enforcement records—a range of things. In other jurisdictions, they're able to actually electronically receive updates on their case, access forms and letters and actually have a self-service aspect to it.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: That's the intent for this portal—

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: Over the longer term, it is. Over the short term, as we introduce the FRO case management system, we will focus on providing more case information kind of on a static fashion to clients, more than is the case now. Over the course of time, as we develop the system—because it is going to continue to be a work-in-progress, and the advantage of utilizing an off-the-shelf application is that it is much more efficient and much less risky to actually continue developing the application, a much more cost-effective approach than having a customized product that requires a lot of one-time development work.

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As the system is introduced, and as we develop it further, we hope to be able to introduce self-service features; for instance, so that if either a payer or recipient needs to change the address that they have on record with FRO, they can do so electronically. Currently, they have to call the call centre to provide that information or provide it by mail.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: So when you looked at this proposal that came forward, the interactive portal, what sort of percentage reduction in call volume or volumes were you dealing with in BC? What would you expect here once it's at the two different stages that you're talking about?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: I'm not aware of—I don't have any statistics from British Columbia or other jurisdictions that would indicate that. We have undertaken an interjurisdictional survey of 21 Canadian, US and international jurisdictions. That information may or may not be available in that survey. We've just received the results, and we're analyzing it.

In terms of productivity or the degree to which calls could be diverted, it's really difficult to say. All I can say is that because payment inquiries, as I said previously, constitute almost 60% of the calls that we receive, if payment information is provided on the portal in a more

rigorous fashion, a more complete fashion, in a manner that's more accessible than the IVR that we have now—with any IVR system, it's not as easy and as accessible to use as a web portal. We would hope that at least a significant portion of those inquiries would be diverted from the call centre.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: If 60% of the calls are dealing with payments, and this portal system is coming forward, I would have thought you would have tried to bring forward a system that would target that specifically in order to reduce the maximum number of inquiries that you're receiving, to give the individuals that are currently working in the system the ability to deal with the other issues. You're saying that this won't alleviate the problem with the 60% of inquiries regarding payments?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: No. As we have more accessible information on payments through a web portal, as I said, we're hopeful that inquiries that otherwise have to come through to the call centre will be diverted. Some of the information that we're looking to provide on the web portal is a full statement of arrears on a case. Currently, with the IVR there's relatively limited information that's available on most recent payments or most recent arrears. Having that full picture of the case from its registration and the full record of payment will make it just easier for people to understand what is happening with their cases on both the recipient side and the payer side.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: In regard to other jurisdictions, I would imagine that they would have similar inquiries or percentage of volume of inquiries regarding payments. What do other jurisdictions do to alleviate those payment inquiries in order to reduce their number of inquiries?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: They do have these web-based portals. Of the 21 jurisdictions that we surveyed, Ontario is the only one that does not have an electronic channel of information other than a static website. The challenge that we've had to this point in establishing that kind of capability is, again, tying a web service into a mainframe computer system which is a very old one and, therefore, very difficult to manipulate to add additional types of applications or additional types of channels. That has been the real challenge for us. With the implementation of FCMS, we do have that modern scalable, connectable technology that we haven't had in place in the past.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: Just before I turn it over to my colleague, I just want to say that I have some concern that what I'm hearing is that we're coming forward with systems to deal with the volumes of calls to address the system as opposed to the reason for the calls. I think if the reasons were more targeted and specific, it would reduce the volume, as opposed to just trying to accommodate the volume of calls that come in.

I know my colleague has a number of questions.

Ms. Sylvia Jones: Thank you. What are the hours of the call centre?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: The hours are 8 to 5, Monday to Friday.

Ms. Sylvia Jones: Has there been any change in the absenteeism rate since the Auditor General's report?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: The absenteeism rate currently is about at the same level that it was at the time of the provincial auditor's report.

Ms. Sylvia Jones: And that's 20 days a year?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: It's about 20 days.

Ms. Sylvia Jones: Has there been any action on trying to improve that?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: There are several that we have under way. There are really two branches of work that we need to do and that we're actively engaged in. First of all, as the deputy indicated, it is a very stressful environment to work in. It is an environment where clients, because of the business model that we have, do call us. By the time they get to us, they are quite frustrated—

Ms. Sylvia Jones: Well, they're even more frustrated when they call us.

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: I'm sure they are.

We are looking at different approaches to increasing not just morale within the organization, but having them more involved in the design of the program itself. That's an important area of work that we have under way. On an ongoing basis, we are engaged in streamlining the policies and procedures that we have in place in FRO to make them simpler, less onerous, not just for clients but for our own staff. We are actively engaging the front-line staff in that work so that they have a role to play and they're able to provide value-added in the actual work that they do.

We are looking at how we can organize the work—the shift schedules and the like—to, on the one hand, ensure that we have the appropriate resources in place at the appropriate times during the time of day or the day of the week to deal with calls from clients, but on the other hand, provide some degree of flexibility and ability for staff to trade time to have flexibility to deal with family issues without affecting the operations of the call centre.

Thirdly, we are going to be taking a much more rigorous approach to attendance management and attendance support. The absence rate that we have in FRO is quite variable. We have a large group who are within the threshold that has been established within the Ontario government. Others have a much longer period of absence at any given point in time. Really, focusing on why people are absent, requiring more rigorous provision of medical information if they are absent, interacting with them, dealing with them on why they're absent and what the organization can do to—

Ms. Sylvia Jones: And that has not been implemented yet? Is that right?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: We're actively engaged in it now. Certainly, the organization, over the course of time, did quite a bit of work on attendance management, but I am putting it in as a very, very specific performance requirement of the managers, the supervisors, in the Family Responsibility Office. We're going to be educating our own employees much more rigorously on their

obligations under the attendance management guidelines that we have in place within the Ontario government. I don't want to say that that work was not under way in FRO and has not been under way for many years, but we have to pay much more attention to these sorts of things.

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We now have greater management oversight in the organization as well than we did in the past, and that is going to assist us as well. FRO, in the past, was a very flat organization. The supervisory level was quite flat, and we've added managerial capability to take a more consistent approach, both to the way that employees do their work but also the management of our staff, both taking positive approaches to managing the workplace but also ensuring that the requirements that we have as managers in managing staff are fulfilled.

Ms. Sylvia Jones: On page 1, you made reference to your 103 reciprocating jurisdictions where you have agreements. What was the most recent addition to that? Are you, on an ongoing basis, continuing to expand that?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: We are. I can't actually speak to the most recent jurisdiction that was added—

Ms. Sylvia Jones: I'm not so interested in which jurisdiction, but when was the last time there was an addition?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: That I don't have information on. We can certainly provide that to you.

Ms. Sylvia Jones: Okay. On page 8, you make reference to a blitz of all your bring-forward notes, which I know, again, was something that was highlighted in the Auditor General's report. While the blitz seems to have resulted in some reduction, how are you ensuring that that is not continuing on an ongoing basis, because you can't just do a blitz every six months.

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: We are taking two approaches: first of all, revising the policies and procedures that we have in place for the utilization of those bring-forward notes. We found, as we undertook the blitz that was referenced in the deputy's comments, that the notes themselves were not being utilized in the way that they should. There were a number of notes that were information notes that remained open even though there was no action required—

Ms. Sylvia Jones: Is that because there weren't specific case managers assigned to a specific series of recipient?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: No. The notes themselves were being used almost as Post-it Notes for the case managers themselves. They would remain open on the system—they would appear to be open and therefore not be actioned but in fact would have no action required as a result of them. We're clarifying the fact that the notes—that the BF system is to be used generally to generate actions and follow-ups.

There were a number of duplicate notes that were on the system that we've closed off, and the policies and procedures, as I've said, that we're establishing for those notes are going to be much more specific about when

they should be closed and what they should be utilized for.

Ms. Sylvia Jones: On page 10 when you talk about the new technology—what are you calling it?—FCMS, is there a component in there that will deal with accessibility in terms of deaf-blind and individuals who can't use the more traditional methods?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: Thank you very much for the question.

There is. As you know, our ministry is very attentive and very proud of the progress we're making on accessibility broadly through our legislation and the introduction of standards, so as one would hope and expect, I and my team are paying close attention to this. Actually, the technology folks who serve this ministry are the community of practice for accessibility across the whole government. I'm very fortunate to have embedded within our organization expertise and accountability for accessibility for this program and others.

What I would say is—

Interjection.

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: That's it, the portal. Bohodar is reminding me. I was going to say that the channels we've just introduced—the new telephone system but also the portal: There will be compliance measures with our new legislation there. Others will be able to speak to this in a more detailed way than I can, but there is access right now through our telephony system for those who need assistance with communicating. So, we are on to it and we have special measures to make sure we will be in compliance.

Ms. Sylvia Jones: Okay. Mr. Balkissoon made reference to the previous vendor that was ultimately cancelled, but I have never heard—or maybe I missed it. How much did that cancellation process cost?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: In the Auditor General's report on technology and on the previous project, he offered a detailed chart—I know it very well; figure 4—on the cost of the project and the various elements.

In our work with our vendor, which we stopped because we came to realize that, unfortunately, we were not going to get to where we needed to go, we paid, and it's demonstrated in Mr. McCarter's metrics, \$1.2 million to that vendor.

I would go on to say, and as he reports as well in the audit findings, that the ministry did pursue, as is necessary at times, legal action with the vendor, and there was a settlement with that vendor that was mutually satisfactory to the parties. I'm not at liberty to say more about it than that.

Ms. Sylvia Jones: On page 13, you talk about “two thirds of the cases are in full or partial compliance.” Is there any action on partial compliance or are those considered files that don't need follow-up?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: I'm going to let Donna or Bohodar go at that in more detail. I'd just say this: Full or partial compliance, our two thirds with that result—that is fairly consistent with support programs across Canada and interjurisdictionally.

Ms. Sylvia Jones: Right. I understand that.

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: But I hear your question, which is: Do we leave the partial-compliant files—is that good enough? I think the answer is, “not,” but I’m going to let someone offer you more detail.

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: We do, in all cases, whether they’re partially compliant or non-compliant, continue enforcement action. Our objective is to have not just the monthly support paid but the arrears paid down, whether it’s through the pursuit of voluntary arrangements or through the other enforcement actions that we have, regardless of whether an individual is not making any support payments at all or making partial payments towards their monthly obligation. If arrears exist, then we continue enforcement action.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Shurman): Thank you very much. Time is up.

Ms. Sylvia Jones: Oh. But I’ve just begun.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Shurman): I can’t help it; it’s 20 minutes. Over to the NDP. Mr. Prue.

Mr. Michael Prue: I just want to go back to this whole thing related to the FRO’s computer system integrated service delivery model, ISDM, project. I think anybody watching on the outside would be shocked and perhaps appalled that seven years have gone by and really not much progress has been made at all. Why does it take so long?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: I really understand the question. As I said, this is complex. This journey has not been an easy one.

Seven years ago, in 2004, my colleagues were here talking with enthusiasm and hope about the beginning of the previous project. As was noted, we came to a realization throughout the life of that project—it wasn’t complete yet—that regrettably it wasn’t going to deliver what we needed from a business point of view. That determination was made at the end of 2006. I would say that as early as the next fiscal year, 2007-08, we did turn our minds to: How do we move forward?

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I would say, on the organization—I’m reminded of this—in any organization, there is some momentum that is just understandably sapped when you’ve put your heart and invested in a project and it hasn’t gone the way you thought. That’s just by way of saying, for the organization ministry, there were learnings we needed. There was a little bit of pause time, I think, to recalibrate and make sure, as we went forward with our new business case—to convince our treasury board and Management Board colleagues that we could do this again. That took a little bit of time, but I would say that as early as fiscal year 2007-08 and 2008-09, we were on it and we had already secured some of the approvals we needed.

You have to be relentless at this. You have to be a bit brave and learn from what went wrong, go forward, build your new case and move forward. We had the great advantage of a lot of good advice and exploring that had been done government-wide regarding how to make improvements.

Mr. Prue, these are not short-term ventures, and I acknowledge that. We have to be cautious and diligent. We have to follow all the right procedures, but the good news is, we are feeling confident that we’re going to be able to make this business improvement by the spring of 2012.

Mr. Michael Prue: You anticipated my next question, because you said that you were ready, according to what you said today. In the 2010 report, the Auditor General confirmed that the FCMS project team is specifically addressing every recommendation of the ISDM review. Now you’re looking at the spring of 2012.

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: Yes, and that has been our plan.

Mr. Michael Prue: And will that be operational or start-up—starting to get it together?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: No. Right now, our project monitoring shows—it might be a bit of a phased implementation—that we will be in the implementation zone in spring 2012.

Mr. Michael Prue: I would hope—because this leads into my next question—that whatever system you have will be able to calculate interest. I do note that in one other government department, when the welfare rates went up 3%, the computer couldn’t calculate that. I found that absolutely shocking, because anything you can buy in the dollar store can calculate that. Will your computer have all those bells and whistles?

This is a list of questions that had been prepared by staff. I think it’s a good question. I’ll read you the whole question. It’s a long one:

“The office correctly responds to the auditor that it does not have the legislative authority to calculate interest. In 2005, the legislation was amended by the addition of section 7.1, which allows for the calculation, collection and remittance of interest on payments under a support order which is more than 30 days in arrears. The provision has not been proclaimed in force. Does the office have any insight into why it has not been proclaimed and when it might be brought into force?”

Then I add the caveat: Will you have a computer that can allow you to do that?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: Thank you very much. A very clear question. I’m going to have our colleague Donna answer the first part on interest. What I would say is, I know enough to know it’s tricky, so I’m delighted that Donna’s going to offer that. Then we’ll deal with the computer.

Ms. Donna Holmes: Mr. Prue, I don’t know if I can add much more to your excellent notes. You’re quite right that the ability to calculate interest is contained in legislation that is unproclaimed at this point. Most court orders could prescribe an interest rate, as you know, and the trick will be, what would be the interest rate? We can anticipate that the interest rate would be variable.

Every judge has an option to go through the Courts of Justice Act and establish a fixed rate of interest or create variable rates of interest, all of which I think requires FRO to have the technology that can be nimble enough

and accurate enough to calculate the interest properly on 186,000 support orders.

I think that's a place where the provincial auditor recommended that FRO calculate interest on behalf of our clients. I think the legislation is in place, and I think that FCMS, the new technology system, contemplates and anticipates that it will provide us with the ability to do that in an accurate way for our clients.

Mr. Michael Prue: Again, is this something that you're planning to have in your computer in 2012, so that this could at long last be implemented?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: We will have the technical capacity to do it. There may be some business processes we need to work out, but we will have that capacity.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): We'll now move to the government. Ms. Sandals.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: I'd like to drill down on the details of your responses to some of the auditor's recommendations and findings.

This is really a mammoth operation. If you look at the number of cases, you've got 190,000, and I figure you've got a payer and a payee on each end. It's something like having all of London engaged in having to work with FRO.

There are a few things that have come up, either in your conversation or in the auditor's report, that it would be helpful to have a little bit more information on. For example, you mentioned having a court clerk actually working at FRO. Then you mentioned in your remarks that it's just one really high-volume court that that worker is connected to. I'm thinking, from what you're saying, then, that there is some reason that that worker can just work with the one high-volume court. Is this person somehow actively connected, via a web link or software or something, to what's going on at that particular court?

Ms. Marguerite Rappolt: Mr. Rubashewsky, I'm going to ask you to comment.

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: The court clerk initiative was one that we initiated. Initially, it was possible through federal Justice Canada funding. As the deputy indicated, it has been quite successful and we're going to continue it.

The court clerk that we have in FRO has access to the court system too. I think it's called the Frank system. There were actually four court districts that were part of the pilot: Brampton; Oshawa; and two Toronto court districts, 47 Sheppard and 311 Jarvis. They were largely selected because they were, first of all, high-volume courts, but also there were backlogs in court documents and court orders going back and forth.

In other court districts in Ontario, the flow of paper goes back and forth quite physically, as opposed to a clerk in FRO being able to—we rely upon clerks in those court districts to take the information that we have and to input the appropriate information into the court system or pull it out. The court clerk is able to do that directly.

In one court district—I believe it was Brampton, but it may have been a different one—we had a six-month

backlog. Midway through the project—it was a six-month pilot—within month three, we had cleared that backlog.

So we have a very great interest in continuing it.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: Does the court now submit the order electronically? Or are they still submitting the physical paper, and then if there's something wrong with what's on the physical legal document, the court worker can get into the court records to clean up the mismatch? It's not clear to me whether the whole thing is taking place electronically, or holes and errors are being fixed electronically, or both.

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Ms. Donna Holmes: Perhaps just to take it back a bit and discuss it in the most basic context, what FRO does is generate court documents. Specifically, there are three categories of court documents: writs of seizure and sale; notices of defaults, which initiate a court proceeding; and garnishments.

Currently, the process would require a court staff to generate that document and print it overnight, and once a week we batch hundreds of these documents and ship them to the various courts across Ontario. They land on a court clerk's desk somewhere in Timiskaming or downtown Toronto, and with all of the other court documents that they are required to sign and seal, they then get to our work.

The purpose of this pilot was to focus resources. We were able to obtain a court clerk from Oshawa—a very, very busy family court—and we focused her on just managing court documents generated by FRO as what we call an institutional litigant.

Just to give you an idea of some of the numbers: Every month, we generate about 700 writs; every month, we generate about 400 notices of default; every month, we generate another 200 garnishments—so, ballpark, about 1,300 documents a month that we require court clerks to manage for us.

What was really intriguing about this pilot was that this court clerk was able to receive the documents directly from FRO, because she was situated in our offices; access her Frank database system, which is the court documents system; and sign, seal and issue court documents within 48 hours. What that did was eliminate the time that is required, and it is sometimes as long as six months, for us to send mail out and for court clerks to actually physically generate and mail back our court documents.

What's really exciting for FRO, I think, is that what that does, by completely eliminating months' worth of paperwork and time delay, is expedite enforcement. So we're in a very interesting situation now where, by a court clerk assigned with dual functions, with access to two different systems, she can create and issue court orders in real time, and it makes a big difference to the families of Ontario.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: Okay, and thank you very much, because I thought that was addressing the registration piece. In fact, this is addressing the enforcement piece.

You're able to speed up the enforcement, because once you make the decision within the FRO system to do some sort of enforcement via the court, you can now shave months off the paperwork that's involved with going to court and expedite that. Amazing.

You're doing this for high volume, and now you're looking at expanding that same capacity to a whole lot more courts. Can you describe where else you're going or what percentage of the volume of these orders you would be covering as you expand the jurisdictions?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: We really have to evaluate the results of the initial pilot, because it ends at the end of this month, but we are actually hopeful—although I can't say for certain, with the resource that we have—that we may be able to expand it to all court districts in Ontario. If that's not possible—and again, it depends on the volume of work and the like—we will focus on the larger court districts, which generate the most court order work, so to speak.

The Ministry of the Attorney General is as supportive of this as we are. This is a partnership; it is their employee. We are going to be funding it over the course of the next year. This is something that they see as a great benefit to them, not just to us.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: Obviously, that is a case where you're expediting a whole lot of things just by changing the way in which you use one worker.

There have been a number of references to the telephony system. I understand that you had a need to make the way the phone is answered more effective. Again, it's not totally clear to me. Does the telephony system also involve better access to online data about the case at the workstation of the person who's answering the phone once they get the person there?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: When the FRO case management system is implemented, the case management system and the telephony system will be linked so that when a client calls the call centre and enters their case number and PIN, when the enforcement services officer answers the call, the case information will come up to them immediately.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: So instead of taking notes and putting down a request, "Haul this up out of the bowels of the old mainframe system," you're just going to be able to pull it up, look at the situation and maybe address the issue.

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: Yes. Currently, our officers have to spend some time on each call confirming the identity of the individual who's calling, asking questions beyond case number: address, date of birth. With the personal information number and the ability for the caller to enter that, there's a confirmation of identity that comes with that, so we'll be able to save some time in that regard as well.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: So it will expedite the conversation, so the conversation is happening more quickly.

The auditor has talked about the whole issue of arrears. Earlier, you were beginning to speak about the ability to categorize those. I understand that, again, this is

one of these things that's tied to getting a system where you can actually look at something, rather than the legacy system. But it would seem to me, given that a lot of those arrears have been there forever, that they're just going to sit there until you get a death certificate or something and can cancel it. Is that the only way you get out of the arrears queue?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: That is the case, because we don't legislatively have the ability to write off arrears. At the end of the day, they are arrears that are owing to a recipient.

We do identify cases that are unenforceable. It could be because we have not been able, through all of our trace-and-locate activities, to find a recipient or payer. The payer may be in jail and therefore the enforcement of the case is suspended.

There is no ability at this point to write off arrears. At any given point in time, new case information could become available.

That being said, as we do the analysis of our arrears, we hope to have a better sense of which cohort of cases more precisely are unenforceable on a permanent basis.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: And I would hope that you would also have the facility, then, to identify those which are worthwhile attempting to enforce, because that's part of the question that's important.

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: Yes.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: If I may, I'm just going to share the end of my time with Ms. Carroll. She has a question.

Hon. Aileen Carroll, P.C.: Thank you. Did we cut you off?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: No, I'm fine, thank you.

Hon. Aileen Carroll, P.C.: I think the deputy minister, yourself and your colleague have given a very honest, open appraisal of the situation, and I'm very grateful. I saw no guile in any of the answers. I think you're sharing with us the challenges that face you and also the success you've had to date, but recognizing what still lies ahead.

I'm very much impressed that you see that this isn't just about the transformation of the technology with which you work, but that in fact, to use your words, you need to design the business needs. I think you're hitting it head-on.

Liz has mentioned the dedicated court clerk. I think that's a great initiative. I'm hoping, if the funding is predicated on Justice Canada, that it doesn't disappear on you, but rather that we can get it sustained here, because I think you're addressing exactly the kind of logjam that you need to address. It reminds me a bit of the Unified Family Court initiative, which worked, but we didn't keep it up. Much of what the clients to that court faced, they're facing in this relationship with FRO. This initiative on your part, I think, goes a great deal to remedy it.

What I want to recommend, or just throw into the mix—please know that there's no tongue-in-cheek whatsoever in what I'm about to say. You've mentioned

the relationship with our constituency offices, and we've had conversations here among ourselves. There are over—I forget the number; I'll get in trouble if there's a test. There are over a hundred—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: One hundred and seven.

Hon. Aileen Carroll, P.C.: —107 constituency offices.
Interjection.

Hon. Aileen Carroll, P.C.: I beg your pardon?

Ms. Sylvia Jones: There are more than that, because some of us have two.

Hon. Aileen Carroll, P.C.: I think it's 111, yes. In any case, there are a lot of constituency offices in Ontario. If I could just speak quickly to mine, I do so only to say that the women who work in my office have been with me for a long time. I've only been here provincially for one, but I was in the federal world for three mandates. I get the impression many times from people who call from ministers' offices that they love dealing with my office. I think that's very much a compliment to the women and people who work there. I don't think that's particular only to my office.

Why am I saying that? Here's why. Frequently, when I come back, working Friday, and I give the team a new report that has just come out, which has been the government response to a dilemma or problems with a particular program or a particular department, they read

through it with these Cheshire smiles on their faces, which say, and does get articulated after: "You know, if they'd only asked us, we could have told them a lot about this." And they say that without any arrogance whatsoever. It's because they are on the ground, and it's because they are working with your clientele and experiencing a lot of the frustration and stress to which you alluded earlier in our discussions. These are not happy people.

I would honestly ask you—I don't know if this has ever been done—to ask the people in the constituency offices about your work. Ask them what remedies they might put forward. You can't lose from the exercise, and you might be surprised at how greatly you would benefit. They want the same outcomes you do; they want to get to the same place. But I think they're at that level, somewhere between Queen's Park and the streets of all our many cities, that they really might be able to give you some wonderful information. So I would just add that to our discussions this morning.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): That concludes our hearing for today.

We very much appreciate you coming forward, and we will inform you of anything that the committee declares, after we go through our closed session. Thanks again for joining us.

The committee continued in closed session at 1434.

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