THE 2021/2022 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE NEBRASKA COMMISSION ON PUBLIC ADVOCACY





Jeffery A. Pickens, Chief Counsel

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Commission History

In 1995, the Nebraska Legislature enacted the "County Revenue Assistance Act." Neb. Rev. Stat. §§ 29-3919, et seq. (Reissue 2016). Among other things, the Legislature found: "Property tax relief in the form of state assistance to the counties of Nebraska in providing for indigent defense services will ... lessen the impact on county property tax payers of the cost of a high profile first-degree murder case which can significantly affect the finances of the counties[.]" Neb. Rev. Stat. § 29-3920 (5) (Reissue 2016). To achieve the goal of county property tax relief, the Legislature created the Commission on Public Advocacy (Commission) "to provide legal services and resources to assist counties in fulfilling their obligation to provide for effective assistance of counsel for indigent persons." Neb. Rev. Stat. § 29-3923 (Reissue 2016).

The Legislature established the following five divisions within the Commission: the first-degree murder litigation division; the appellate division; the violent crime and drug defense division; the DNA testing division (established in 2001); and the major case resource center. Neb. Rev. Stat. § 29-3930 (Reissue 2016). Over the years, the Legislature has required the Commission to provide other services which will be addressed in this report.

The Commission is governed by nine Commission members who are appointed by the Governor. A member is appointed from each of the six state Supreme Court judicial districts, and three members are appointed at large. The Governor designates one member to be the chair. Information concerning the Commission members who served during fiscal year 2021-2022 is appended to this report. Commission members

must have substantial experience in criminal defense work and in civil matters that commonly affect low-income people. Prosecutors, law enforcement officials, and judges are not eligible to serve as members. Commission members serve six year terms. Neb. Rev. Stat. § 29-3924 (Reissue 2016). Commission members are responsible for appointing a chief counsel. Neb. Rev. Stat. § 29-3928 (Reissue 2016). The chief counsel's responsibilities include providing direct legal services to indigent defendants and overall supervision of the Commission. Neb. Rev. Stat. § 29-3929 (Reissue 2016).

In February of 1996, the Commission members appointed James Mowbray to be the Commission's chief counsel. By August of 1996, the Commission was fully staffed and providing indigent defense services throughout the state. Information regarding Commission employees during fiscal year 2021-2022 is appended to this report. Initially, the Commission received general funds and some grant money. The Commission was also required to bill the counties which received its services for one-third of the Commission's actual costs of the defense.

The DNA testing division was created in 2001, pursuant to the DNA Testing Act.

Neb. Rev. Stat. §§ 29-4116 (Reissue 2016). The Commission is required to accept appointment of cases pursuant to the DNA Testing Act unless it has a conflict of interest or the appointment would exceed caseload standards. If the Commission does not accept the appointment, the court is required to appoint other qualified counsel. The court will order the Commission to pay the fees and expenses of the appointed counsel. Irrespective of whether the Commission accepts appointment in a DNA case, the Commission is required to pay the cost of any DNA testing ordered by the court.

In 2003, the Commission became cash-funded. The Commission on Public Advocacy Operations Cash Fund was created and the Legislature expressed its intent that the Commission would be funded solely from its operations cash fund. Neb. Rev. Stat. § 29-3921 (Reissue 2016). Thus, the Commission was no longer required or allowed to bill the counties for its services. Instead, an "indigent defense fee" was created. The fee is taxed as court costs in all cases, except small claims cases, filed in Nebraska's courts. The State Treasurer transfers the fee to the Commission's Operations Cash Fund. In 2003, the fee was \$2.75. In 2005, it was increased to \$3. Neb. Rev. Stat. § 33-156 (Reissue 2016). In January of 2020, LB 1082 was introduced by Sen. Morfeld to increase the Indigent Defense Fee by two dollars. In August of 2020. the bill was indefinitely postponed. In January of 2021, LB 150 was introduced by Sen. Morfeld to increase the Indigent Defense Fee. In April of 2022, the bill was indefinitely postponed. Despite the failures of these bills, the Legislature the legislature recognized the Commission required additional funding and transferred \$520,000 into the Commission's operations cash fund during fiscal year 2021-2022, and will transfer another \$520,000 in fiscal year 2022-2023.

During fiscal year 2021-2022, the Commission was funded from its operations cash fund and the \$520,000 transfer of supplemental funds. The Commission provides indigent criminal defense services at no cost to the counties, thereby providing counties property tax relief.

James Mowbray retired on August 31, 2015. The Commission members appointed Jeff Pickens to replace Mowbray as chief counsel. Section 29-3929 requires the chief counsel to present an annual report to the Commission. This is the report for

Fiscal Year 2021-2022 Review

In 2021, the Commission began its twenty-fifth year of operation. In fiscal year 2021-2022, case filings continued to decline from their highpoint in fiscal year 2008-2009. Consequently, the Commission's revenue continued to decline. Revenue from the Indigent Defense Fee was down \$540,000 compared to fiscal year 2008-2009. The Commission's revenue issues are more fully addressed later in this report.

Notwithstanding the revenue issues, the Commission effectively represented indigent defendants charged with first degree murder and other serious felony crimes at trial, on direct appeal, and in postconviction proceedings, while providing at least hundreds of thousands of dollars in property tax relief to the counties that used its services. The Commission performed all of its other statutory functions as well.

Case Guidelines

Subject to the caseload standards established by the chief counsel, the Commission can accept appointments in the types of cases identified in the following paragraphs.

Trial Level

At the trial level, the Commission can accept appointments in the following cases:

- In any case in which a violent felony offense constituting a Class IIA felony or greater is charged;
- 2. In any case in which a charge of use of a weapon to commit a felony

- accompanies a charge of a violent felony irrespective of the class of felony; and
- In any case in which a drug offense alleging distribution or possession
 with intent to distribute is charged and the offense constitutes a Class IIA
 felony or greater.

Direct Appeal

On direct appeal, the Commission can accept appointments in the following cases:

- 1. In any case in which the Commission represented the defendant at trial;
- In any case in which the defendant was convicted after a trial of a charge that the Commission could have accepted at the trial level. The Commission will not accept appointment of a case on direct appeal if the only issue is excessive sentencing; and
- In any case in which the defendant was sentenced to death or life imprisonment.

Postconviction and State Habeas Corpus

The Commission can accept appointments of cases on postconviction or in state habeas corpus if the defendant was convicted of first degree murder or second degree murder, or if the defendant received a sentence of life imprisonment. The chief counsel has discretion to accept appointments in other cases after considering the crime of conviction, the sentence imposed, the issue(s), and the availability of counsel.

DNA Cases

Pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. § 29-4122 (Reissue 2016), "Upon a showing by the person that DNA testing may be relevant to the person's claim of wrongful conviction, the court shall appoint counsel for an indigent person" This section requires the court to first contact the chief counsel for the Commission to inquire if the Commission

is able to accept appointment. The Commission will accept the appointment unless it has a conflict of interest or the appointment would exceed the Commission's caseload.

Civil Rights Actions

The Commission can accept appointments in a civil rights action to represent inmates on death row who are challenging the protocol, procedure, or drug(s) to be used in their execution.

Juvenile Court

The Commission can accept appointments in juvenile court if the petition charges the juvenile with offenses that are the type of offenses the Commission accepts at the trial level as set forth above, but only if the juvenile was originally charged in adult court and the case was transferred to juvenile court. If the Commission accepts an appointment in juvenile court, it will represent the juvenile only through disposition and appeal.

Probation Revocation

The Commission will not accept appointments on motions to revoke probation unless the case for which revocation is sought qualifies as a companion case.

Companion Cases

If the Commission has accepted an appointment to represent a defendant and the defendant is charged in a separate case with a crime that does not meet the Commission's guidelines for acceptance, the chief counsel has discretion to accept an appointment in the other case.

Counties with Public Defender Offices

If a public defender requests assistance in defending a case that meets the Commission's guidelines, the Commission can accept appointment as co-counsel with the public defender. If the Commission is appointed as co-counsel, it will pay for expenses, such as depositions, investigators, and expert witnesses.

Cases Open in Fiscal Year 2021-2022

In fiscal year 2021-2022, the Commission's six lawyers provided services in the five divisions established by the Legislature; to wit: the first-degree murder litigation division; the appellate division; the violent crime and drug defense division; the DNA testing division; and the major case resource center.

First Degree Murder Litigation Division

The First Degree Murder Litigation Division handles first degree murder cases at the district court level. In fiscal year 2021-2022, this division handled 23 first degree murder cases.

Appellate Division

In fiscal year 2021-2022, the Appellate Division handled 13 cases at the appellate level.

Violent Crime and Drug Defense Division

In fiscal year 2021-2022, the violent crime and drug defense division handled 22

cases. The cases included charges of second degree murder, manslaughter, attempted first degree murder, child abuse, child abuse resulting in death and serious bodily injury, sexual assault, sexual assault of children, first and second degree assault, terroristic threats, weapons offenses, and drug offenses.

The counties that use the Commission's services always save money when the Commission is appointed. In some cases, the counties would experience a true financial hardship if the Commission had not been able to accept the appointment. Frequently there are no available, experienced criminal defense lawyers in the county to accept an appointment. Oftentimes the Commission also saves the counties the cost of a jury trial because its experienced lawyers are able to convince prosecutors to dismiss or reduce charges. Sometimes charges are dismissed or reduced after alleged victims or witnesses are deposed and problems with their testimony are exposed.

DNA Testing Division

In fiscal year 2021-2022, the DNA testing division handled two cases.

The DNA Testing Division is able to minimize expenses because of its experience. District Courts often authorize testing of all items of evidence which may contain DNA. However, the DNA Testing Division will only submit items for testing that are most likely to result in relief, thereby reducing expenses.

Major Case Resource Center

All of the Commission's lawyers regularly take calls for assistance from public defenders, court-appointed lawyers, and pro se defendants. Such assistance ranges from providing citations to pertinent law, providing advice regarding legal issues,

providing sample motions and briefs, and conducting research and preparing memoranda regarding such research. Additionally, Commission lawyers give presentations and write articles for publication.

Commission Operations Cash Fund

On July 1, 2021, the Commission's operations cash fund had a balance of only \$15,296.05. On June 30, 2022, the cash fund balance was only \$64,279.45. During fiscal year 2021-2022, the Commission received \$747,800.75 from indigent defense fees and \$4,669.36 from investments. Total revenue was \$752,470.11.

The number of case filings in Nebraska's courts has steadily decreased every year since fiscal year 2008-2009, and so has the Commission's revenue. In fiscal year 2008-2009, revenue from the indigent defense fee was \$1,286,957 and total revenue was \$1,362,145. The Commission's total revenue for fiscal year 2021-2022 was down \$609,675.13 when compared to fiscal year 2008-2009. There is no reason to believe case filings will increase in the foreseeable future.

The Commission's expenditures in fiscal year 2021-2022 totaled \$1,223,518.08. The money-saving efforts the Commission introduced in March of 2016, which included taking depositions and using expert witnesses only when absolutely necessary, using rental cars instead of driving personal vehicles and claiming mileage reimbursement, and eliminating out-of-state seminars are still in effect. Employee wages and benefits and the Commission's contributions to FICA are the Commission's greatest expenditures. A reduction in those expenses would require terminating one or more of the Commission's eight employees. In May of 2022, the Commission lost one of its lawyers, and expenses were thereby reduced for the remainder of the fiscal year.

Because the Commission had fewer lawyers beginning in May of 2022, it was required to accept fewer court appointments. The Commission's caseload was at maximum capacity in fiscal year 2021-2022, and with some exceptions, the Commission only accepted appointments in homicide cases.

In fiscal year 2021-2022, expenditures were \$471,047.97 greater than revenue, which required the Commission to draw from its operations' cash fund. The Commission has needed to draw from its cash fund every fiscal year since 2014-2015. Without the transfer of \$520,000 in supplemental funds during fiscal year 2021-2022, the Commission would not have been able to cover all expenses for its continued operation.

Legal Aid and Services Fund

In 1997, the Legislature created the Legal Aid and Services Fund (LASF). Neb. Rev. Stat. § 25-3002 (Reissue 2016). For fiscal year 2021-2022, a legal services fee of \$6.25 was taxed as costs in all cases filed in Nebraska state courts, except for cases filed in small claims court. The fees were remitted to the State Treasurer, who credited them to the LASF. Neb. Rev. Stat. § 33-107.01 (Reissue 2016). The Commission administers the LASF.

On December 4, 2021, nominal awards totaling \$1,835,000 were made to 15 qualifying entities at a meeting of the Commission's members. Of the 15 awards, 12 were accepted reducing the award amount to \$1,827,500. The awards were considered nominal because of the unlikelihood that credits to the LASF would be sufficient to pay out the full amount of the awards due to decreased case filings. As fees were credited to the LASF, monthly *pro rata* disbursements were made to the entities during the 2022

calendar year. During the 2021-2022 fiscal year, filing fees were credited to the LASF in the amount of \$1,651,888.35. The LASF earned \$808.03 in interest during the fiscal year.

In fiscal year 2021-2022, \$1,653,385 was disbursed to entities as follows:

Catholic Charities	\$29,355.00
Center for Legal Assistance	\$49,696.00
Central Mediation Center (Kearney)	\$2,872.00
Concord Mediation Center (Omaha)	\$1,779.00
Heartland Family Services	\$34,621.00
Immigration Legal Ctr (Justice For Our Neighbors)	\$65,755.00
Legal Aid of Nebraska	\$1,107,637.00
Lutheran Family Services	\$42,394.00
The Mediation Center (Lincoln	\$1,779.00
Mediation West (Scottsbluff)	\$2,872.00
Ne Appleseed Center	\$103,698.00
Nebraska Mediation Center (Fremont)	\$2,872.00
NSBA Volunteer Lawyers Project	\$165,943.00
The Resolution Center (Beatrice)	\$1,779.00
Women's Center for Advancement	\$40,333.00

Civil Legal Services Fund

In 2006, the Legislature created the Civil Legal Services Fund (CLSF). In 2009, the Legislature transferred operation of the fund to the Commission. Neb. Rev. Stat. §§

25-3007, et seq. (Reissue 2016) (Laws 2009, LB35). The sole purpose of the CLSF is to "expand the capacity to provide civil legal services to eligible low-income persons equally throughout the state." Neb. Rev. Stat. § 25-3005 (Reissue 2016). To be eligible for a grant under the CLSF, a civil legal services provider must be a recipient of financial assistance pursuant to the federal Legal Services Corporation Act, 42 U.S.C. 2996, et seq. Neb. Rev. Stat. § 25-3008 (Reissue 2016). A fee of \$1 is taxed as costs in each criminal proceeding, including traffic infractions and misdemeanors, filed in Nebraska's state courts. The fee is remitted to the State Treasurer and then credited to the CLSF. Neb. Rev. Stat. § 25-3010 (Reissue 2016).

On December 4, 2021, the Commission members awarded all disbursements from the CLSF in calendar year 2022 to Legal Aid of Nebraska because it is the only eligible civil legal services provider. In fiscal year 2021-2022, \$141,868.21 was credited to the CLSF. The fund earned \$69.01 in interest. The Commission disbursed \$141,936 to Legal Aid in fiscal year 2021-2022.

Legal Education for Public Service and Rural Practice Loan Repayment Assistance Fund

The Legal Education for Public Service Loan Repayment Assistance Fund was created in 2008, but it was not funded. In 2014, the Legislature amended the fund and created the Legal Education for Public Service and Rural Practice Loan Repayment Assistance Fund. Neb. Rev. Stat. §§ 7-201, et seq. (Cum. Supp. 2016). The Commission, Commission members, and the chief counsel have various statutory duties with respect to this fund. On July 11, 2014, the Legislature transferred \$500,000

to the loan repayment assistance fund, and appropriated \$150,000 for awards in fiscal year 2014-2015 and \$150,000 for awards in fiscal year 2015-2016. Awards were made in fiscal years 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017.

The legislature did not initially appropriate any money for the loan repayment assistance program for fiscal year 2017-2018. On July 3, 2017, the loan repayment assistance fund's balance of \$114,795.87 was transferred to the general fund. On April 6, 2018, \$125,000.00 was transferred back to the loan repayment assistance fund and appropriated for disbursement for fiscal year 2017-2018. However, there was not sufficient time to operate the program before the end of the fiscal year. Awards were made in fiscal year 2018-2019, and 2019-2020.

For fiscal year 2021-2022, the legislature appropriated \$150,000 for the program. This was disbursed to 34 recipients. One recipient returned their award because they had their loans forgiven. One recipient moved out of state and is in the process of paying back their award. For the recipients who remained in the program, reporting requirements showing continuous qualifying employment and loan status documentation were received from recipients. The fund's balance on June 30, 2021 was \$16,558.17.

Cost-effectiveness of the Commission

When the Legislature created the Commission in 1995, its goal was to provide property tax relief to counties that are required to provide effective representation to indigent criminal defendants. Initially, the counties that used the Commission's services were required to pay one-third of the Commission's actual expenses. In 2003, the Commission became cash funded and the Legislature provided that the Commission

would be funded entirely by an indigent defense fee paid by those who use Nebraska's courts. Since 2003, the counties that used the Commission's services paid nothing for our services. The Commission is still funded by the Indigent Defense Fee and income from investment of the indigent defense fee. The Legislature has not increased the indigent defense fee since 2005. Because of decreased revenue due to declining court case filings and increased expenditures, the Commission was again required to draw on its cash fund in fiscal year 2021-2022. Because of the transfer of \$520,000 of supplemental funds into the Commission's operation cash fund in fiscal year 2021-2022, the Commission was able to carry out its mission without having to further reduce its staff.

Notwithstanding reduced revenue in fiscal year 2021-2022, the Commission effectively represented indigent criminal defendants throughout the state. The Commission continued to provide property tax relief to the counties that used its services. Therefore, the Commission met the goal set by the Legislature. The Commission carried a maximum caseload in fiscal year 2021-2022 and had to decline some requests for case appointments.

Recommendation for Improvements

Court case filings continue to decline, and so does the Commission's revenue. Efforts to increase the Indigent Defense Fee failed during fiscal year 2021-2022. The Commission needs to continue to seek a long-term, sustainable source of revenue through increases to the Indigent Defense Fee or General Funds or a combination of the two. When legislative efforts to increase revenue are successful, the Commission should also seek sufficient revenue to add a seventh lawyer to meet the demand for its

services.

Jeffery A. Pickens, Chief Counsel July 31, 2023

Appendix A

Commission Members during Fiscal Year 2021-2022

- Linsey A. Camplin, Lincoln, District 1
 - Appointed on May 31, 2018
- Michael Ziskey, Nebraska City, District 2
 - Reappointed on November 4, 2019
- Douglas J. Stratton, Norfolk, District 3
 - Reappointed on November 4, 2015
- Thomas P. Strigenz, Papillion, District 4
 - Reappointed on November 4, 2015
- Julie E. Bear, Plattsmouth, District 5
 - Reappointed on November 4, 2019
 - Appointed as Chair on June 18, 2019
- Nancy S. Freburg, Kearney, District 6
 - Reappointed on November 4, 2017
- Jonathan M. Braaten, Lincoln, At Large
 - Reappointed on November 4, 2019
- Robert P. Lindemeier, North Platte, At Large
 - Reappointed on November 4, 2015
 - Chair from 1996 to 2019
- Charles D. Brewster, Kearney, At Large
 - Appointed on May 31, 2018

Appendix B

Staff during Fiscal Year 2021-2022

Jeffery A. Pickens

Chief Counsel from September 2015 to present

Agency Legal Counsel from October 2012 to August 2015

Staff Attorney from May 1996 to October 2012

Graduate of University of Nebraska College of Law, 1991

Todd W. Lancaster

Agency Legal Counsel from September 2015 to present

Staff Attorney from May 2007 to August 2015

Graduate of University of Nebraska College of Law, 1998

Robert W. Kortus

Staff Attorney from July 1996 to present

Graduate of University of Nebraska College of Law, 1989

Kelly S. Breen

Staff Attorney from August 1996 to present

Graduate of Creighton School of Law, 1984

Sarah P. Newell

Staff Attorney from January 2013 to May 2022

Graduate of University of Nebraska College of Law, 2005

Matthew J. McDonald

Staff Attorney from September 2015 to present

Graduate of Washington University School of Law, 1997

Rita J. Wesely

Administrative Assistant/Fiscal Officer from July 1996 to April 2021 Graduate of Bellevue University, B.S., 2001

Shara M. Aden

Paralegal from December 2002 to present

Southeast Community College, Criminal Justice, A.D., 2013

Kendra K. Werth

Administrative Assistant/Fiscal Officer from April 2021 to present Bellevue University

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			APPENDIX C		
CASH IN -	OUT SINCE 05-06	WITH INVESTMENT INCOME	NT INCOME		
	FII ING FFFS	INVEST INC	TOTAL REVENUE	EXPENDITURES	REV-EXP
FY 05-06	\$1.150,704.52	\$36,293.17	\$1,186,997.69	\$936,877.84	\$250,119.85
FY 06-07	\$1,191,200.77	\$53,832.97	\$1,245,033.74	\$922,424.18	\$322,609.56
FY 07-08	\$1,241,119.23	\$72,317.67	\$1,313,436.90	\$942,040.55	\$371,396.35
FY 08-09	\$1,286,956.81	\$75,188.43	\$1,362,145.24	\$1,028,144.04	\$334,001.20
FY 09-10	\$1,234,168.41	\$58,780.95	\$1,292,949.36	\$1,072,731.87	\$220,217.49
FY 10-11	\$1,190,192.55	\$60,450.84	\$1,250,643.39	\$1,064,478.19	\$186,165.20
FY 11-12		\$41,290.67	\$1,214,814.37	\$1,081,394.36	\$133,420.01
FY 12-13	\$1,092,517.18	\$31,877.98	\$1,124,395.16	\$1,074,421.97	\$49,973.19
FY 13-14	\$1,043,201.40	\$26,946.57	\$1,070,147.97	\$1,068,949.19	\$1,198.78
FY 14-15	\$1,010,728.39	\$26,965.38	\$1,037,693.77	\$1,111,534.46	-\$73,840.69
FY 15-16	\$1,009,425.81	\$28,567.11	\$1,037,992.92	\$1,152,109.13	-\$114,116.21
FY 16-17	\$997,411.54	\$24,345.77	\$1,021,757.31	\$1,118,044.24	-\$96,286.93
FY 17-18	\$991,969.54	\$23,164.49	\$1,015,134.03	\$1,128,968.71	-\$113,834.68
FY 18-19	\$938,073.21	\$21,992.19	\$960,065.40	\$1,157,901.53	-\$197,836.13
FY 19-20	\$839,313.22	\$15,414.93	\$854,728.15	\$1,182,595.87	-\$327,867.72
FY 20-21	\$795,926.75	\$4,684.13	\$800,610.88	\$1,198,584.06	-\$397,973.18
FY 21-22	\$747,800.75	\$4,669.36	\$752,470.11	\$1,223,518.08	-\$471,047.97
				and the second s	170
FY 14-15	Experts	\$63,283			
FY 15-16	Experts	\$57,789			
-	* Mowbray leave	\$41,335			
FY 16-17	Experts	\$45,488			
FY 17-18	Garcia case	\$55,595			
FY 20-21	Experts	\$50,723			
	Wesely Leave	\$20,838			
FY 21-22	TRANSFER IN	\$520,000			

			4	APPENDIX D
BALA	NCE FISCA	CASH FUND BALANCE FISCAL YEAR END		
TRAI	TRANSFERS	TRANSFERS		
	OUT	2	BALANCE	
			\$969,931.44	
			\$1,292,542.63	
8	\$250,000.00		\$1,414,013.16	
			\$1,750,175.75	
\$2	\$258,374.00		\$1,712,295.53	
\$2	\$288,247.00		\$1,610,321.73	
\$2	\$200,000.00		\$1,541,794.72	
\$2	\$260,000.00		\$1,333,088.86	
			\$1,334,807.24	
			\$1,261,458.55	
			\$1,147,791.34	
			\$1,051,626.13	The state of the s
***************************************			\$938,080.45	
			\$744,156.44	
			\$413,269.23	
			\$15,296.05	
		\$520,000	\$64,279.45	
Study ji	avenile lega	al defense with UN	Study juvenile legal defense with UN-L Public Policy Ctr	
Transfe	Transfer to General Fund	al Fund		
Transfe	Transfer to General Fund	al Fund		

Supreme Court Education Fund diversion programming to reduce absenteeism and unnecessary involvement with juvenile justice system

Court Appointed Special Advocate Fund FY 11-12

Fund - Ne State Patrol Cash Fund - sex offender study Transfer in of \$520,000 FY 12-13 FY 21-22