

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



March 19, 2021

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[Original]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, happy birthday. I hear from the intel I have that you are still a very young man with many years of experience.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): No comment.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I said on Wednesday that there were two areas where there will need to be a lot of attention: economic recovery and mental health recovery. The budget on Tuesday announced, supposedly, \$7 million to help people with mental health challenges. We then read in the newspapers the minister saying that it is not really new money. It is existing money that has been allocated. Can the Premier clarify whether this \$7 million, which is peanuts in the big scheme of things and in terms of the importance of mental health, is new money or existing money?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for that question. I will apologize if I was not clear with the media, but it is new money.

We have made a commitment. We have made a commitment that mental health is no longer going to be a side story at the Department of Health. It is taking front and centre. We realize its urgency. We are taking steps to make sure that we are not only investing but also looking closely at programs that we now have that we can enhance or change. The outcomes are what is most important, and we need outcomes that are going to support the people of this province.

That \$7 million is new money this year, along with the \$3 million that we put toward mental health last year. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): The Canadian Mental Health Association reported that of the people who have self-reported mental health problems because of this pandemic, 50% had a disability, 60% were between 18 and 24 years old, 54% were Indigenous, 54% were LGBTQ2+, 61% were unemployed, and 45% were women. This is very serious, not only now because of this pandemic, but historically, it has been a significant challenge.

There was a health care agreement signed in 2018 that would infuse an extra \$41 million for mental health into New Brunswick. I want to know, from the Minister of Finance, how has that money been used since 2018 to help with mental health problems in the province.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I was very proud to have been asked to come to the mental health table in late 2018 by the Premier and by the



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former Minister of Health. We knew at that time that steps needed to be taken for the betterment of mental health services in this province, so I have been working diligently with staff. We have been working not only to bring mental health awareness to this province to reduce the stigma but to make it absolutely public that people need to reach out for mental health services. While we have been working toward this goal, we have been planning the five-year action plan and we have been investing in programs with our Stepped Care Model, with our mobile mental health crisis teams, and with, oh my goodness, now, walk-in clinics. We are exploring every avenue that we can to enhance these services.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we have all known people, whether they were close to us or acquaintances, who have had mental health issues. I personally had the opportunity to speak with Lexi Daken's parents. I have to tell you that this family, including parents Shawna and Chris, and Lexi's sister Piper, are very, very strong people.

The minister is responsible for the mental health file. The five-year plan announced three weeks ago will be implemented over a five-year period. Can the minister rise in the House today, not only because of what happened with Lexi, but also because so many other people have done the same thing and because others are having so many mental health problems? Could this five-year plan be expedited so that it is implemented over three years?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the first thing I am going to say is that we are not going to politicize mental health. Families in this province have suffered horrible losses—traumatic losses. Our job now is to ensure that we do everything we can to prevent any more tragedies, and that is what we are going to do.

The members opposite can call for an acceleration of the five-year action plan. Before they even mentioned it, we were on it. I have given the regional health authorities 30 days to come to me with options to provide better emergency care, crisis care, in the ER. I have made it very clear publicly that we will be bringing together a working group to look at those options and then we are going to have announcements very soon after. Mr. Speaker, we are on it.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it is not about politicizing anything here. I spoke with the parents, and they actually want us to bring more awareness to mental health. They want us, all of us here, to push harder. Forget about which political party we are representing. This is a very serious, serious matter. Things have been done over the years, but more needs to be done.

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I want to hear from the Premier. They have asked the youth commissioner to do a thorough review of the situation. You would expect that the commissioner would bring forward recommendations to improve this situation, accelerating and elevating the levels of services. When those recommendations do come in, can the Premier commit here today that, based on those recommendations, first, he will accept all of them, and, second, the incremental funding needed to implement them will be allocated?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I have said that Lexi's parents were extremely brave to talk about their daughter's death, and they were. It was a privilege to meet with them and an honour to know that their interest is in providing better service to the families that come behind them, and that is what we are going to do.

We utilize the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate to find out where the gaps are, where things have failed, and, of course, we will look at its recommendations. We will work with that office. I am looking forward to that, and my experience as Minister of Social Development has helped me in this. It has helped me in this process because we know that services to our youth and services to our mass population when it comes to mental health are necessary and need to be improved. We are not going to wait, Mr. Speaker. We are going to do it now. Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, as we know, this government's decisions are made by the Premier. Today, I do not understand why the Premier cannot rise in the House on such an important issue as mental health and why he cannot make a public commitment here, today.

The New Brunswick Child and Youth Advocate will prepare his report and release his recommendations. We can obviously assume that there will be recommendations to improve the situation and that additional investments will be necessary to comply with the recommendations of the Child and Youth Advocate. The Premier should rise today and make a commitment on behalf of his government, in principle at least, regarding mental health needs and the advocate's recommendations.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to stand here today and commend the actions of the Minister of Health in relation to their focus in this area. The determination that she has shown on the mental health file from the very beginning has been enviable across the network.

I think that the experience that we saw with the pilot project with the rapid response unit up in Campbellton was that it really worked well, and I would expect that the member

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would be well on top of that file because it took the wait-list to zero, Mr. Speaker. That is action, while the only recommendations that we would ever expect from the opposition would be, whatever comes out of this, when you put more money into the pot, it will get better.

Mr. Speaker, we are evaluating, through the actions of the minister and through the actions of professionals around this province, every service that we deliver and how we can deliver it better. We are finding that there are a whole lot of people who want to do better and want to help us achieve success. That is our goal, and we will work with each and every one of them.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I did not hear too much compassion and caring from the Premier this morning. This is not about you. This is not about the Minister of Health. This is about the people who have challenges with mental health. There are many, unfortunately, and it is not taboo anymore to talk about mental health. It is a serious issue. What I am asking the Premier, because he is the Premier today, is this. The recommendations from the youth commissioner will hopefully come sooner rather than later. Will those recommendations be fully embraced by the government, and will incremental money be allocated not only to implement the recommendations but also to accelerate the five-year mental health strategy to three years?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): The Leader of the Opposition is absolutely correct. This is an extremely sensitive issue, an extreme one that affects every community in our province. It affects many families, families that we would not even anticipate being in this situation. We all have experienced it in one fashion or another. But when you start on a process of what you are going to achieve and how you want to get better, you take a pilot project and ask: Can we move that around the province? Can we work with the professionals to deliver better results in a compassionate way, to the point of the Leader of the Opposition? Absolutely. But can we say that whatever comes along, we will just say that it is fine? We do not even know yet.

I know that the Leader of the Opposition is quite accustomed to headlines with no substance. But our headlines have substance. Our headlines have an action plan. People deserve results. They deserve to see their young people looked after, and they deserve action. That is what is happening, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I do not know why the Premier is being political on this issue—I just do not.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Yes, mental health challenges are a funny thing, Premier. Right.

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The Minister of Finance has allocated \$350 000 to hire or recruit psychologists. We know that there is a shortage of about 24 in the province. We know that there is \$41 million available from the 2018 health accord for mental health. Supposedly, there now is a new amount of \$7 million for mental health. With \$350 000 to recruit psychologists, who will absolutely help people with distress and mental health, how many are you going to hire, with that amount?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague across the way is with a party whose philosophy is always to say that money must come first without actually knowing what that money is going to be targeted at. When those members were in government, against all advice, they put a youth mental health building in Campbellton. Against all the expert advice, they made that decision. They set back the project for years.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order. Please, members. Member, member, please. Order, member.

Minister, please proceed.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, we have an opportunity—an opportunity—and I welcome—I welcome—their help in accelerating our five-year mental health plan. We are not waiting. We are acting now. I have said that crisis care and near-crisis care are urgent.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): You know, the bottom line of the budget seems to be more important than addressing this very important issue.

I want to ask this of the Premier. Last year, there was a cut in a very small program called the Link Program.

[*Translation*]

The Link Program cost \$40 000. With this money, people were paid to coordinate a service in our high schools. My question today, in the context that we know very, very well, is this: Could we get a confirmation that the Link Program has been reinstated and that the minimal amount of \$40 000, out of an \$11-billion budget, has also been reinstated?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, the mission for Social Development is to work together with our individuals, families, and community partners to improve people's lives. Of the \$1.2 billion to \$1.3 billion that Social

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Development spends, roughly \$1 million is through community partners and allocated contracts with them. In the past three years, the Auditor General, along with the Office of the Comptroller, has recommended that Social Development improve accountability with better monitoring, clear outcomes, clear expectations, and consistency within the contracts being placed in the service.

Mr. Speaker, the program that the member across the way talks about started in the local communities, in the schools. The money that he is talking about was for a centralized position. Those programs are still able to function in the schools in the areas through the integrated service...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I guess the answer is no. The program is still eliminated. I do not know what the minister was saying, actually. I was very confused because what he just said was very confusing.

There is another program that exists. It is called ACCESS Open Minds. There are four communities in New Brunswick that have this program to help our youth with quick intervention when they have mental health issues. There is one in Caraquet, there is one in Elsipogtog, there is one in Saint John, and there is one in Moncton. We are 12 days away from April 1, and those organizations still do not know whether they will have funding for April 1. Can somebody confirm that here? Can anybody on the government side confirm whether this program will be funded this year? In 12 days, if it is not funded, there are going to be many young people who will be left out. They will not have the services that they need.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, community stakeholders are extremely valuable to delivering the services that we need in our province. The Department of Social Development has embarked on a program to evaluate all the outcomes that we are having with community partners. We are doing the same thing at Health. I would suggest that any groups that have lost their funding work with the departments to understand why it has happened, what programs they were offering, and whether those programs were giving the outcomes that government is looking for.

Mr. Speaker, there is no easy answer here, but the fact of the matter is that there must be accountability, not just with government, but also with the stakeholders that we use in communities. As we do these evaluations, we are willing to work with our partners and we are willing to work with members of other parties. However, Mr. Speaker, first and foremost, this must be about the end users: our people. They must be getting the benefits that they need.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

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[Translation]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): On February 18, an order in council set the parameters for the Working Group on the Revision of the *Official Languages Act*. It is surprising to see that the group consists exclusively of civil servants and that MLAs are excluded from it. I want to point out that, when the revision was carried out by the Alward government, MLAs were involved in the process.

[Original]

I just want to reiterate that when the *Official Languages Act* was reviewed under the Alward government while this Premier was Minister of Finance, MLAs were much involved in this process through a committee of which they were members. As the minister responsible for official languages, will the Premier create an additional special committee where MLAs will be included? We have seen this precedent before. Will the Premier assure us that he will follow the normal procedure for this important review?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I feel that at this point in time, it is very clear what process we are on and where we are going with this in two components. We have two very qualified commissioners that are going to lead this. There are two components to meet the requirements of the *Official Languages Act*. Anyone can participate in putting their suggestions forward. There are no restrictions on MLAs being part of that process, contributing, and having their suggestions forwarded or presented to the commissioners exactly as they wish.

The interesting part of it this time is also about how we catch up and fix the underlying issue of why we cannot all be participating and enjoying the benefits of having two languages that we are proud of, how we can all be bilingual, and how our education system can meet those challenges and opportunities that exist today. I am very proud of the people that have put their names forward to make this happen and face the new reality of how we work together in the best way possible. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

CARBON TAX

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): The government's budget includes \$9 million from the carbon tax for climate and economic development initiatives with First Nations. I was surprised that this program was only mentioned in passing in the Finance Minister's budget speech. We found out yesterday that this is because the government did not meaningfully consult with Wolastoqiyik Nation Chiefs before announcing the program. It appears that Mi'kmaq chiefs were not consulted either.

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Madawaska Chief Patricia Bernard stated in an article in the *Telegraph-Journal* that the program “appears to us to be a poorly thought-out proposal that fails to consider the unique characteristics and interests of each of the 15 First Nations in New Brunswick”. Can the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs table a specific list of chiefs that she met with on this topic this year and when she met with them?

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you, member opposite, for the question. Mr. Speaker, I would say this: We value the relationship that we have with First Nations in New Brunswick. We do continue a dialogue. We are hoping to improve on that dialogue. I actually have met with a number of First Nations Chiefs. I will leave it to their discretion on whether or not they want to publicly acknowledge those meetings. Some of my colleagues who are here today actually joined me at those meetings.

With respect to the carbon tax, I would say this: Ongoing discussions are occurring with respect to First Nations. Those discussions have been occurring for a while, and they will continue to occur. Thank you.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): From the chiefs that I have spoken with, they say that they have not met with the minister, and they do not know other chiefs that have. I guess that we still do not know.

Mr. Speaker, in question period on Wednesday, in response to a question from the member for Fredericton South regarding allocation of the carbon tax, the Premier said that we have a climate action committee that is working on that and identifying certain targets. However, last week when I tabled a motion in the committee asking to undertake this type of study, it was rejected by all members of government and the official opposition. I was even asked to resign my position on the committee by one of the members of the Premier’s Cabinet in response to my writing a tweet about this public committee. I want to ask the Premier whether he can clarify this comment and whether he thinks that the climate change committee should work on establishing updated targets for the Climate Change Action Plan this year.

Hon. Mr. Crossman (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the question. Regarding the committee last week, we had great committee meetings last week. We had two full days, and everything went very well. The plan, as we know, is coming due on December 31, if not March 2022. It is a good plan. There are 118 initiatives, as you know, member, and 25 initiatives have been checked off, 87 are being worked on, and the rest will be by the end of December. Thank you.

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CORONAVIRUS

Mrs. Conroy (Miramichi, PA): We know that rotational workers have been struggling for months in isolation with a lot of frustration and anxiety. The restrictions here were far more severe than anywhere else in the country, without their even being able to go outside or go for a drive. Yesterday's announcement was a step in the right direction, for sure, but many are still very concerned and still have a lot of questions and are wondering why the restrictions, testing, and vaccinations are so different from all the other provinces for the same travellers.

One of the concerns that I received from many messages after the announcement yesterday was about workers calling the pharmacies for appointments. They were told that they could get appointments only after their 14-day isolation. Many of them are here for only 12 to 13 days. My question for the minister is this: What is being done in terms of arrangements so that they can get their appointments for the vaccines? How can they get their vaccines if they are only here for less time than the isolation period?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the question. A lot of information is exchanged at the press conferences, so it is very easy for confusion to happen.

What I did say yesterday is that we will have more details very soon about when rotational workers as well as truck drivers and cross-border commuters will be eligible to be vaccinated in New Brunswick. Those details are coming very shortly, Mr. Speaker, within days. Calling the pharmacies now is not recommended. That would just swamp the pharmacies with more calls than they really need at this time when they are now booking those aged 80 and over for their vaccinations.

We moved rotational workers up on the priority list, recognizing that this is going to offer them an opportunity for more freedom in their daily lives. Mr. Speaker, I have spoken with the pharmacies and with Public Health and understand that there will be a way for rotational workers to receive their shots when they have not isolated for 14 days. Some pharmacists may choose to go to the vehicle and vaccinate people, and they may have specific times. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

[*Translation*]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, we just learned that the Premier will not be creating a select committee including MLAs, and I find that just shameful.

First of all, I find it shameful simply because that is the way things were done in the past. The review is obviously important. The Premier says that it is important, but, in terms of action, that is obviously not the case. I am curious to know whether the Premier asked MLAs from his party about this. Did he ask them if it was acceptable not to have a select committee of the Legislature?

Furthermore, I would like to know specifically whether the member for Moncton East agrees with this approach. I am curious to know whether he agrees with the Premier in saying: That is fine; it is great. I would like to hear his comments, in his own words, on whether he agrees with this way of doing things, which is not to involve MLAs in this process.

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I can assure you that the process is changing. As the Minister of Health said, for you, everything is about money. We are here for New Brunswickers.

I can tell you, honourable member, that, yes, the process developed by the Premier is a change from what was done before. However, change is good. We have two commissioners with fine reputations, and they will certainly do a good job for us.

This is what surprises me the most: Less than 72 hours after the budget was tabled, we are not even talking about it; we are already talking about other files. There is a 5% increase in the Department of Health budget, a 6% increase in the Department of Social Development budget, and a 4% increase in education. It is a very progressive budget, and that is what the opposition members should be talking about on behalf of New Brunswickers.

[*Original*]

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, New Brunswick is several weeks behind most provinces in its vaccination campaign. New Brunswick is no different from other provinces and has received as many doses per capita as other provinces. This week again, I was contacted by retired health professionals who have the

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capacity to vaccinate and who still have their professional accreditations and want to offer their services. They therefore contacted their professional associations, but no one could tell them where and whom to contact. They contacted the health authorities, and no one can tell them where and who to contact.

When will the government have a real plan and a real system where those who want to work on this vaccination campaign can participate? I am questioning, Mr. Speaker, if the Minister of Health should do as her colleague the Minister of Education did and provide her cell phone number to be sure that the population of New Brunswick will be able to have a vaccine sooner rather than later.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question. Thank you. I regret that earlier on we were updating our vaccine dashboard once a week. That caused some confusion, with people thinking that we were not vaccinating as many people as possible, but I can confirm to you today that is certainly not the case.

We are getting our vaccinations out as quickly as we can. Utilizing 218 pharmacies in this province is now part of that plan, and they are very efficient in getting vaccines into arms. Mr. Speaker, there will be other health professionals as well, but right now, we are using pharmacists, we are using the RHAs, and we are using extra-mural. As we progress with more vaccine supply and with different vaccines, because, of course, the opposition would know that Pfizer and Moderna have very specific containment protocols... So, Mr. Speaker, we are on it.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you. The time for question period has lapsed.