

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



May 11, 2021

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NURSES

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is such a pleasure to come back to the Legislative Assembly to try and keep holding this government accountable, which—we will admit—is extremely complicated.

Mr. Speaker, this is National Nursing Week.

[*Original*]

It is National Nursing Week. Every year, we praise them and we thank them and we recognize their contributions. But, Mr. Speaker, two weeks ago, I had a conversation with the President of the Nurses' Union. She explained to me the crisis situation that we have in our health care system, in particular, the shortage of nurses. That half-hour discussion made me really realize how severe the situation is, so today I am asking the Premier this: Has the Premier reached out to the president to ask her what the situation is?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We received a letter from Paula Doucet on Saturday at 1 p.m. Today, in the late morning or early afternoon, we sent a positive response that, yes, of course, we would meet with her to get her impression on not only the situation but also the contingency plans that she specifically referenced. I am very interested to hear what she has to say, and we will certainly have the CEOs of the regional health authorities with us because it is their job to ensure that they have those contingency plans in place.

I was very concerned about the situation in Moncton this past weekend. I met with the CEO of Vitalité yesterday morning, and we had a good, healthy conversation about the future and how we need to mitigate these risks going forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I would just ask the minister to pick up the phone and call her. Just pick up the phone and call her. I do know that the minister values what nurses do in this province, as we all do.

We do realize that it is a challenge to recruit and to retain some of our highly professional nurses in our system. But the members opposite have been in office for two and a half years, and we have seen zero concrete examples of actions that this government has taken to either retain or recruit. It is to the point where there are not even any meaningful discussions in terms of a collective agreement and trying to find ways to improve the working conditions.

I know that if the Premier puts his mind around an issue, with his position, he can make it happen. Premier, will you talk to the President of the Nurses' Union?

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Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member opposite is quite correct. I certainly do value the work ethic, the professionalism, and the work of our registered nurses and nurse practitioners in this province—those represented by the President of the NBNU.

I think it is extremely important to know that, yes, we absolutely will have a meeting with this organization again to talk about the issues that it has raised. I am very anxious to have those conversations. We have had meetings since I became Minister of Health, a couple of meetings. I know that the president also attended our engagement session in Bathurst.

We know that they understand the plight of our nurses in this province. We know that we have taken measures to begin not only recruiting nurses but also keeping our universities to account for the nursing seats that they have available.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister knows the value of these professional nurses. But those nurses know and everybody around this province knows what the minister knows, which is that it is the Premier who calls the shots in this government.

I would certainly hope that with this being National Nursing Week, with the crisis that we have in nursing in this province, and with the lack of recruitment and retention of nurses, the Premier would get up and speak on this subject matter because it is so critical. What he says means something at times, but what he does is even more meaningful. Nurses are asking for help. About 41% will be retiring over the next five years. We need action now. There have been two and a half years of inaction. Now we have a crisis. The Premier will not even get up and speak on the matter.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I do not think that there is any dispute here about the value of nurses and the situation we have in our province, which is not unlike the situation that exists across the entire country. All my colleagues on our national calls are concerned about the shortage of health care workers in general. Nurses, obviously, are at the head of that list.

What it means is that we collectively have to put our heads together and figure out how we can do things differently to provide the quality of health care and the services that the citizens of this province demand. Exemplary service has been shown throughout this entire pandemic, so how do we build on that to create a whole different model of better health care in our province?

I agree completely with the Leader of the Opposition. We cannot invent this. We need leaders in the nursing association. We need leaders in other health care professions within the province to help step up and to help put forward a different model of how we can together manage the challenges we are facing. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.



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Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I am glad that the Premier got up on his feet and actually said a few words on this situation. However, do not blame others. Do not look at other situations. Look at New Brunswick right now. This is where your responsibilities are, Mr. Speaker.

To the Premier, we all know that these nurses are stressed, are burning out, and are retiring. Some are actually retiring earlier than expected. Yes, the pandemic has certainly contributed significantly to that, but the situation did not happen overnight. You have been in office for two and a half years, actually, and we have not seen any concrete evidence of action that this government has taken to try to retain nurses and to improve working conditions and then to recruit nurses to come to New Brunswick. Actually, it has cut and slashed the dollars that were available, to be modified, to universities to train nurses.

Premier, will you talk to the President of the...

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

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, I do not know how many more times I have to stand here in this Legislature and watch this same Liberal movie over and over again. A crisis does not happen overnight. It was the years of inaction by a previous government that, in many ways, led to this. Two years ago, when we said that it was unacceptable that \$8.7 million was being shoveled out the door each and every year to provide additional seats for nursing, the previous government said to keep shoveling the money out the door.

Well, Mr. Speaker, in that time we have done a number of things. The universities in this province have ramped up their base seats before those additional seats. We did not think that it was appropriate to start shoveling money out the door for additional seats that were never filled. I can tell you that the leadership in our universities, because of that conversation we started, has now stepped up to the plate. The base seats are being filled. Now, we will move on to how we build on that. On top of that, we put a bridging program in place that will get us nurses within two years, not...

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister was at it again—blaming others, passing the responsibility to others, and making others feel as though there has been no action. However, because of the minister's decisions and this Premier's decisions, there is a crisis right now. There is a crisis right now. Vitalité needs 200 nurses immediately. Horizon needs 320 right now just to sustain what is needed. That is the reality. Nurses are burning out. You talk to nurses, and they start crying because they feel the pain. They want to care for their patients, but they are burning out. We need to help them. We need to improve their working conditions. Stop blaming others. You are in

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government. You make decisions. Pass on the action, and please, Premier, tell us what you are going to do about it.

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Mr. Speaker, let's talk about what we have done. We put a navigator in place for internationally trained nurses so that they can navigate through the system and get the bridging that they need. We put a bridging program in place for those students, Mr. Speaker. We also put an LPN-to-RN bridging program in place on three different university campuses in this province, and they are producing nurses within two years instead of four. On top of that, we have the universities moving in the right direction to fill their base seats, and we will look at things to do on top of that and in addition to that, Mr. Speaker.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order. Order.

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): So a lot has been done in the last couple of years. What we did not do is shovel money out the door each and every year like the previous administration did, Mr. Speaker. We are actually getting results. This crisis had formed over about a decade. It did not happen in the last three years, but in the last three years, there has been plenty of action.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, if the minister of this government has so much to brag about, why do the members opposite not sit down with the union and explain what they have supposedly done? They will not even pick up the phone and call them. They have to send a letter saying, Yes, we will meet—we will meet sometime—and this is what we will discuss. However, the crisis is now. It has been ongoing for the last two and a half years, for sure.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker, given the government's inaction in terms of recruitment and retention and its approach to the shortage of nurses, there is a crisis at Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont University Hospital Centre. There is a crisis right now. The emergency room is only standing on one leg, and sometimes it is very difficult. The hospital is struggling to get resources and has to redirect ambulances to other hospitals. What will the minister or the Premier actually do to resolve the situation at Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont Hospital? Vitalité Health Network has to make some tough decisions, some decisions that it probably does not want to make, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

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

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Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the passion of the Leader of the Opposition. But the fact is that during their four years, the members opposite did not do anything to increase the number of nursing students put out by our own universities, and therefore, we have a crisis today that has been built. While I understand that we cannot go back and change that, I certainly know that we have taken action every single day that we have been in office to try to address the situation. With a shortage of 130 nurses per year, we have already bridged the gap to 82.

So, Mr. Speaker, we are working toward this, and we will certainly work with the Nurses Association to help get through this very difficult time. This is about action. This is absolutely about actions that they did not take and that we are taking, and we are willing to support the nurses throughout this time. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, to the Premier, if I do have passion on this matter, it is because I really believe in what nurses do in our health care system. I will give you half of my passion if you will use it to fix the problem.

You know, the more we assess the situation of the past couple of years, the clearer and clearer it becomes. The inaction of this Premier and government on this issue and other issues around health care has been to squeeze the system as much as possible and not to focus on recruitment and retention of resources so that they can justify their health care reforms and cut services. That is the excuse they will use. That is exactly the excuse they will use, Mr. Speaker. There is a challenge, but you have to use that narrative to cut the services. Premier, can you please reassure us that this is not what you will do?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, we had a 5.9% increase in our health budget this year. You know, some of it is COVID-19-related. But we have not ignored the fact that health care is a major priority in this province and does, in fact, take a good-sized portion of the provincial budget.

Mr. Speaker, I am happy to report that the meeting with the Nurses' Union has been set for tomorrow at noon.

You know, because we take action quickly, because we do not grandstand... I understand the Leader of the Opposition's excitement to try to drive us to his own agenda. We have taken action all through our tenancy in government, and we will continue to do that. With the collaboration of the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, our Premier, and me and my whole government, we are working toward sustaining a health care system that New Brunswickers, including registered nurses, can be proud of.

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

STUDENT SERVICES

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The College of Psychologists and the Learning Disabilities Association of New Brunswick, among many other groups, are sounding the alarm about provisions in Bill 35 that will allow teachers to undertake psychological assessments of students to develop personalized learning plans. Mr. Speaker, these assessments are presently being carried out by psychologists because they are professionally trained to do so. Why is the minister refusing to recognize the inherent dangers of having teachers who are not professionally trained in psychological assessments undertake these assessments? That is certainly what all the other groups are worried about. Why is the minister seemingly not worried about this issue?

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thanks to the member opposite for the question. It is an interesting question. What we are talking about here is exactly what the member was talking about—properly trained teachers. These are teachers with master's degrees, teachers who will receive 1 000 additional hours on performing psychoeducational assessments, and teachers who will then work alongside school psychologists and other members of the school team to make sure that students who are having trouble or educational difficulties get the support they need.

Where are we right now? Those students receive nothing year after year because of a shortage of psychologists for a range of reasons. We have seen students abandoned and their life opportunities curtailed because governments have failed to take action. This government is taking action, this government will fix the problem, and this government will not leave those children behind. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): It is no secret anymore that we have a shortage of psychologists in our schools, which is partly what the minister said. But part of the problem is that the province is not providing adequate compensation and proper work conditions for these school psychologists, so we have a recruitment issue. It is not what the minister said just previously. It is about working with the psychologists who are there and those whom we can recruit.

Think about, for example, having a shortage of cardiac surgeons. What are we saying? Are we saying that we can train orthopedic surgeons to become good at performing open-heart surgeries? That is what the minister is alluding to here.
(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): It does not make any sense.

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I would like to know how the minister thinks that training the teachers will replace having psychologists. That is where I just cannot make the link. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, I am happy to answer his question. How we are going to do it will be by taking master's-level teachers and giving them 1 000 additional hours. Do you know what we are going to do? We are going to base this on—do you know what?—the same sorts of training programs that most other provinces use and offer, exactly the same. There are only three provinces where only psychologists perform these assessments.

New Brunswick is fixing a problem that has been left unaddressed for too long, and contrary to what the member said, this is not a shortage of psychologists. Even if we are able to fill every single spot that we currently have open for psychologists in our schools, this problem would still be there. We would still have thousands of students waiting to get psychoeducational assessments. So this is not an issue of psychologists, despite the efforts of the college and some members opposite to make it this way. This is an issue of children not getting the educational supports that they need, and this government will not stand for it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister did not consult the College of Psychologists of New Brunswick and did not consult many other associations, including the Learning Disabilities Association of New Brunswick. Why does the minister insist on making decisions that could cause irreparable damage without consulting experts in the field and listening to them?

Let us be very, very clear, Mr. Speaker: the experts in this field are not the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, myself, or teachers. The psychologists are the experts. They are the experts when it comes to evaluating students' needs in terms of learning disabilities.

So, why does the minister insist on putting all that aside and trying to see if he cannot find other people to do this work even though the experts are available? The experts are the ones who must do the work. Steps must be taken to attract more of these experts to our province. As we know, these experts are paid less here than they are in our neighbouring provinces, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. So, we are losing these people to these other provinces. Therefore, I invite the minister to think twice about this and to improve psychologists' working conditions.

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, member.

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[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, it seems a bit strange to me that the member does not understand how the government works. He was minister a few years ago. Yes, we absolutely do have work to do to address the issue of the working conditions of school psychologists. It is absolutely true, but, as you know, this is tied to negotiations that have not been concluded by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

On the other hand, again, I want to reiterate that I am here to be Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. I am here for the young people of our province. I am not here for the professional groups who work in the system. I am here for the children. Let me be clear, when I hear people say that, despite their exceptional training, teachers will not be able to do their work, I find that a little appalling. It is, especially at a time when teachers are working extremely hard to protect not only our children but also the future of our province. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

RENTS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, the Clerk of the Executive Council's *Review of the Rental Landscape* confirms what the Greens have been saying in this House for some years. I quote: "Our housing market is not working for everyone." It concluded that the province needs to act to address the vulnerabilities being experienced right now, with 20% of New Brunswickers living on low or fixed incomes. Tenants living cheque to cheque urgently—urgently—need the security and the stability that only legal protections can provide.

My question, Mr. Speaker, is this: Will the Premier table a bill to amend the *Residential Tenancies Act* this spring—not in the fall, not next year—in order to prevent unreasonable rent increases and limit them to once per year, as recommended by the Clerk of the Executive Council?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I was very pleased that the Premier asked me to lead this file because it involves eight different departments across government. It was during the state of the province address that the Premier said that we have heard the concerns from across the province when it comes to affordable housing and rent increases in recent months.

You know, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the group of civil servants who came together, and I also want to thank the 5 500 people who responded to the request for information to pull this report together. The various themes that they came up with categorized the 12 different recommendations. Those issues include strengthening existing service, increasing



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the supply of rental units, reviewing and revising the New Brunswick *Residential Tenancies Act*, and increasing future benefits.

So, Mr. Speaker, that is one of the items that this government is going to be considering, as we just received the report within the last week. We are going to review it and then come back to the public and this House and tell exactly the action we are going to take.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, minister.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the same report, a tenant was quoted as saying, “Rent is way too overpriced for one person to afford. I make \$16.75 an hour”—which, by the way, Mr. Speaker, is 35% higher than minimum wage—“44 hours per week and still struggle to pay my bills, plus rent, and often have no food.”

Since the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, which was originally created to ensure that there was a social bottom line for people’s housing, has not been funded by successive Liberal and Conservative governments to pursue its legislatively prescribed objects and purposes for the last 20 years—that is, to provide a social bottom line for housing and make sure that it is there for people—will the Premier establish a New Brunswick affordable housing commission this spring to address the crisis as recommended by the NB Coalition for Tenants Rights, the Human Development Council, the John Howard Society, the Société de l’Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick, the New Brunswick Non-Profit Housing Association, and Christ Church Cathedral?

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, member.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to say that, even though I have said we are going to review this report and come back to tell the public what we are going to do, action has already started. Action has already started to help the people who need the help the most.

Mr. Speaker, you can look at the record of what we have done already, regardless of this report. We have started to put money into Rising Tide in the Greater Moncton area. We are putting money into the old City Motel in Fredericton. We have actually signed on with the Canada Housing Benefit that is going to help 6 600 people in the next three years to afford rents that they can deal with. We have already taken applications for that, and I am pleased to say that people are already receiving the benefit of that right now, right today. And I am pleased to say that the housing budget for Social Development here in the province of New Brunswick, thanks to the support of my colleagues and the Premier, has moved now to \$114 million that will be spent on housing in this budget year.



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NURSES

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, as we are all aware, there is, indeed, a continued nursing shortage at both Vitalité and Horizon. Both of the health authorities struggle to keep up with demand as their human resources dwindle. Now I know that the Minister of Health has worked with the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour to help alleviate the lack of skilled expertise in the province. However, I am also hearing from nurses who claim that they cannot get full-time employment at Horizon, and the ones who are currently employed are leaving the profession due to burnout and exhaustion.

Can the minister tell us how many open positions there are at Horizon and why some of these nurses are being turned away from permanent, full-time work?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I appreciate that question from the member opposite. Unfortunately, I do not have the number of positions that are open, but I will endeavour to get that information for you today.

Mr. Speaker, we know that we need our nurses. We know that we have a nursing strategy to address this. If full-time positions are a problem, we have given clear direction to the RHAs that they need to be amicable and open to hiring nurses—RNs—and flexible with the opportunities that are available.

I will endeavour to get a clear answer for the member opposite to better explain that situation, to see where the RHAs are with regard to full-time positions, and to see where they are. I, too, have heard during my engagement sessions that there is a bit of a communication problem. Sometimes, it goes to the collective agreements and internal postings, and there is a bit of confusion there. Sometimes, that may not be the issue. I will certainly endeavour to get that info.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, minister, for that answer. I am also hearing from nurses about resignations. Of course, as we talk about 41% of nurses going into retirement throughout the next several years, we know that is staggering, to say the least. Even now we have nurses that are facing exhaustion and burnout working 14- and 16-hour days in a very high-stress environment.

Can the minister, then, tell us how many nurses have left the profession in the last few months? What is the department doing, not just to recruit... Recruitment is one part of the strategy, but you have to retain what you have. If you are losing nurses as fast as you are recruiting them, you are no further ahead. Can the minister tell us how many nurses from Horizon and Vitalité have left the profession in the past three months?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am going to have to take that question under advisement. I know that we had lengthy discussions



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during the estimates process about the nursing numbers and other medical profession numbers in recent months and years. We have very detailed information. I do not have that with me today, and I do not want to guess. I would rather ensure that I have the correct information.

What I will say is this, Mr. Speaker. We want to have every opportunity not only to keep our nurses but also to hire more. Actually, our government has certainly implemented the nursing strategy. We recognized that we would lose approximately 130 RNs per year, and we are now on a path where we have accumulated at least 82 nurses per year that we will be graduating and/or bridging, from the LPN-to-RN program.

We have not sat around, Mr. Speaker. We have been very direct in addressing this situation. We will work with our partners at NBNU in order to further those outcomes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

STUMPAGE FEES

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Natural Resources continues to extol the stability of the current stumpage rate system, but “stable” does not mean frozen. Stability does not mean comatose. Stability means that in times of extremely high prices, we should expect reasonable returns for our fibre. In exchange, in times of extreme lows, the industry can expect not to fall into a crisis.

This government has kept the budget line flat for stumpage revenue. We are at the very beginning of a new fiscal year. How can it expect no increase in the face of this market? I would ask the Minister of Finance, but he does not understand stumpage, so I will ask the Minister of Natural Resources.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, this question is unbelievable. I do not even know what the member is talking about with regard to stumpage fees.

[*Original*]

We spent over an hour talking about it last week. We talked extensively about the work that the province of New Brunswick has done to provide stability to an industry where chasing a commodity is a dangerous, dangerous effort. Everyone talks about Alberta as a gold standard. Well, it raised its stumpage quite recently. It also added as low as \$4 per cubic metre. That would put us in direct competition with private woodlot owners, and I do not think that anybody in this House would advocate for something that would be that irresponsible.

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In 2015, the softwood lumber tariff hit industry with a 20% smash on its bottom line. We held firm on our stumpage prices. In 2018, there were record low prices for retail products. We held firm on our stumpage prices. We are committed to making sure that we get the best value, we do not leave money on the table, and we certainly do not play politics with something as important as \$75 million worth of provincial revenue.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, minister. Time. The time for question period has expired.

