

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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HEALTH CARE

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, New Brunswick is facing a health care crisis that seems only to be getting worse under this government's watch. New Brunswickers throughout the province have been worried about the difficulty they are having in accessing timely health care, and they deserve timely, accessible, and quality health care services. Unfortunately, no matter how hard this government says it is trying, New Brunswickers are still struggling. Nearly every week, we hear a new story of somebody having a hard time accessing an ER or having a hard time accessing primary care, and there is just a lack of human health care resources out there. That is not answering the bell. There have been service reductions, ER closures, and the list goes on.

Last night, again, we got the news that another person had died in a New Brunswick ER, in the city of Moncton. I mean, this cannot continue, Mr. Speaker. I would like to know how many New Brunswickers have to die before this minister will get to work on reducing wait times in ERs and making timely access to health care.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Excuse me, Mr. Speaker. Obviously, it is a sad situation when we hear of someone passing away in an emergency room or in any care facility within the province. I can say from this side of the House that it always breaks our hearts when that happens. Our condolences and sympathy go out to the family and friends of the individual who passed away on Tuesday as well as to the health care workers who did their best to try to save the individual. Those are the ones who wear it the most.

When the member across the way points at the government and says that it is our fault, we know that there are frontline workers standing up, day in and day out, every day, trying to help the people here in New Brunswick. And we are trying to get help for them with some of the recruitment efforts that we are putting forward and with some of the additional hires that we have put forward in working with the RHAs to supplement the people who are there within the...

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. No doubt, there is no time to politicize over a death in an ER. But we have been pushing this government now for a number of weeks, since we have returned in this fall session and since we came out with a plan to address the health care crisis, with access to ERs being one of the items. And one of the items that we have been pushing for is access to a multidisciplinary type of team approach that would have a mix of health care professionals working under one roof. We could get stuff that does not belong in an ER out of the ERs and get people quicker access to the primary care they need and quicker access to the care that they need in an ER.



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That is what we did. We went out and we talked to health care professionals, and this is what they all have recommended. We talked to doctors, nurses, and health professionals of different unions and different professional associations, and the consensus is to move more quickly toward this model of care. I want to know whether the minister is prepared to move more quickly to get this ball rolling in light of what we are seeing in our ERs.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is the member opposite who has politicized this situation here today with the way he framed his questions.

Mr. Speaker, as I was saying, we on this side are always concerned when we hear about people passing away. Again, we have met with the same number of people as the member opposite and, in fact, probably more. I know that the Premier, some of the other ministers, and I meet on a regular basis with the trustees and with the CEOs, again, trying to find out where and how we can help and how we can work together in making sure that the resources... When I say resources, that covers human resources—workers—and things such as facilities. That is the type of work that is being done, and steps have been made. Unfortunately, situations such as this overshadow some of the good news announcements that are moving forward. Later today, I will have a statement about some of the excellent initiatives that will increase access to surgery here in New Brunswick.

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, there is another side of the coin here. We are talking about the existing staff; yes, they are working hard. However, we know that they are not getting support from this government. We know that nurses do not feel appreciated. They risk burning out and leaving the profession, and some of them risk leaving the province.

In my opinion, this government does not seem to realize how important it is to focus on our current staff while putting more retention measures in place. There need to be better working conditions, better wages, and a better work-life balance. These are all things that our young health professionals want from this government, but they do not feel they are being heard when they come to the table to discuss these issues, Mr. Speaker.

So, when will the minister take further action, and what specific measures are in place to deal with the exodus of health professionals who are leaving the workforce and the province because they are not getting any respect from this government?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, this government respects the health care workers here in New Brunswick. I have stated that, and many of my

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colleagues have stated it as well. The member across the way is trying to politicize this, and I appreciate the work and the job that he has to do.

Again, what we on this side are doing is moving forward with initiatives. I could talk about the initiatives in the emergency rooms such as the patient monitors or how we are moving patients along the continuum as quickly as possible, as resources become available. We could also talk about having additional social workers in the ERs to triage some of the people who are feeling and facing the stresses of the day. We could talk about some of the recruitment efforts that have resulted in additional doctors, RNs, and personal health care workers.

Mr. Speaker, contrary to what is being rolled out by the members across the way today, we are doing the work, and we are getting it done.

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, we are being constructive and we have proposed solutions. That is why, today, we are going to debate a motion we introduced on this, and I hope the government will support it. These are initiatives that we proposed following consultations with health care professionals and various stakeholders. They are good potential solutions, and that is why we proposed them.

There are three important things, including health care staff retention. While the government talks about recruitment initiatives at the international level or creating seats in universities in the United States, what is it doing to retain what we already have? We know that a number of professionals are leaving the profession or the province. What is being done to reduce wait times in emergency rooms? How are we going to provide primary care? These are three things we have heard from professionals. I hope this government will support our motion in which we are proposing six initiatives. Is the government prepared to support our motion, Mr. Speaker?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, we will have that debate this afternoon. When we talk about some of the initiatives that will provide help to those presently working in the health care system... Bill 3 is going to provide help because there are people coming out of retirement in order to help in some of these clinics. We, along with the RHAs, are recruiting internationally, and there have been great results from some of the initiatives Vitalité and Horizon have taken to recruit internationally trained nurses. With the help of PETL, we moved forward with the navigators. That will help internationally trained medical individuals to navigate the system to get their credentials recognized and get positions within the RHAs so they can provide the help needed for those already there. We know it will take a number of years before the extra seats get on the

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floor. But I will tell you this right now: We are recruiting additional individuals to help the people who are there now.

NEW BRUNSWICK MUSEUM

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Mr. Speaker, the New Brunswick Museum is a very important cultural and historical entity for New Brunswickers. They expect to have a world-class facility to showcase who we are and our journey through history. They also expect an open and transparent government that cooperates with communities and shows its work on big projects such as this. Can the minister please explain why, in Bill 18, the government is ignoring the expectations of New Brunswickers and the provisions in the *Crown Construction Contracts Act*?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the question from the member opposite. In fact, the museum is exactly as she described. We need it to reflect the entire history of our province so that people can see how we formed as a province but also how rich our history is from the development of all the cultures that took part in this.

This process, as I mentioned yesterday, is no different than what we saw over here at the art gallery, what we saw with the Pays de la Sagouine, and what we saw with the Fundy Trail group. It is actually having community be involved in what this museum can really be. It is only through that exercise that the museum board is going to make the decisions on how best to have a museum that reflects the entire community of New Brunswick. That is the goal, and it will be something to behold, because we have one of the richest histories in the country and we have the oldest incorporated city in the country. Mr. Speaker, New Brunswick will once again be on the map as a place to visit.

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Mr. Speaker, talking about the board, a project like the construction of the museum is big and important and means so much to so many. The minister recently said that she is very confident that the board of directors could oversee this project. It seems as though there are actually eight vacancies on the 15-member board. So what is the minister's plan to fill those positions? Do the vacancies shake her confidence at all?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Once again, Mr. Speaker, I think that we are going for a record. I completely agree with the member opposite.

We are out right now looking for new board members, board members who are reflective of all the province, because that is the way that the board is going to get it right. There are vacancies. We want them filled, and it is important to fill them as identified in the request. We want people who have construction experience so they can look at that as well as looking at the history of our province.

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So, it is a combined board, and we need all kinds of skill sets there because this is unique, if you think of when the last time was that we built a museum in our province. I cannot remember the last time, Mr. Speaker. We have talked about it for 25 years, but now, we are going to get it done. And we are going to get it done better than any other museum in the country. We want people from all over this province to be part of it. We are building, and we are requesting that people put their names forward. We are going to have a board that will get the job done and do it within a time that we can all be proud of. I dare say it will probably be done in record time compared to what we are used to seeing in construction projects.

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Yes, get the job done, but at what price? The minister has spoken about private interests in the museum. What is the actual scope of this project, Mr. Speaker? Some \$100 million was too much in 2018, remember? Is the government seeking private donors to decrease the government partners' portion of the \$100 million? Or has the cost of this increased and now requires private investment to make it work?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Well, I guess this is where we differ.

That is right. You know, in the case of private-sector involvement in a public institution such as this one, which is going to reflect the history of our province, businesses, too, want to be part of it. We want to see that from all over the province, Mr. Speaker, because we want to ensure that every community is represented. We know that businesses across the province will want to be part of that, but that is no different than what happened over here at the art gallery.

Mr. Speaker, there is nothing wrong with having multiple participants to help build what is right, what is necessary, and what we will all be proud of. When we are all working together—private, public, provincial, and federal—we will be able not only to fund it but also to get it right because everyone will have a commitment to know where the dollars are going and whether we are building what we are going to be proud of. I am very confident that we are going to be extremely proud of the end result and how it reflects the history of the multiple cultures that have built our wonderful province. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

RENTS

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, my question is regarding rental housing and the difficulty that New Brunswickers are having day in, day out. Many questions have been asked by me and by the other party. We are still waiting for an answer from this government. It said that it would give an answer in early November. Yesterday, it was still skating around it. Now, we are hearing about some bill that might be coming out today.

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Mr. Speaker, we are getting phone calls. We are getting stopped in the streets by people who are hurting, people who need to know very soon what is going to be going on. Christmas is coming. People would like to budget for Christmas, but if they have increases of \$200, \$300, \$400, or \$500 per month in their rental property, which they have to pay each month, then that is a big hit on their budget, and it is going to make a very difficult Christmas for them. Will the government finally come out with something concrete soon? Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite. Housing is in crisis. I think everybody in this room agrees on that. As a government, we have put a Minister responsible for Housing in place. It was only five weeks ago. A huge lift has happened in the last five weeks. You are correct that there is a bill I am going to be introducing shortly that I think will have some very good protections for tenants. It will also open the discussion between both sides so that we can continue to look at supporting New Brunswickers.

We care about New Brunswickers. We care about affordability for housing. There are many, many moving pieces in the housing spectrum, and we need every person in this room to help us get it right. So I am calling on you to help as well and to help support the moves that we are going to make and the moves that we are going to make in the future. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, I just want to reiterate how important it is for the government to take action on housing. What works best—apparently—and what I must admit has worked, is the cap the government placed on rent increases for 2022; it has worked very well. This measure stabilized the market, calmed people down, and enabled people to pay their rent normally. The whole thing was rather botched, but the principle was good at least. All indications are that this measure will continue to work well.

What I am asking is for the rent cap to be maintained, because that is what works best, especially for the most vulnerable people, who need this measure the most. The minister, the Premier, and the other members here are probably homeowners, so they do not need this measure. I do not need this measure, but a lot of people in our ridings need it. Will the minister finally say whether there will be a rent cap? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, there are many moving pieces related to the housing spectrum, and we need to look at the different parts. We need to protect the renters, and we have put a number of things in place to help protect renters. We have also put measures in place to help spur development, and we talked about that this

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week on a bill that was introduced on measures to help encourage development. We are now in a place in New Brunswick that we have not been in for decades—decades. We have had to move very quickly on some measures not only to protect the renters but also to keep development happening, because our vacancy rate is so incredibly low at the moment.

I have a bill that I am introducing today, and I will answer all the questions that you need me to answer about the bill. We are also going to be debating a motion about the rent cap that the opposition has put forward, so I look forward to that discussion as well. Thank you.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think what the minister is not saying—from all the indications—is that there will not be a rent cap. Yesterday the Leader of the Green Party asked her, and she basically refused to answer. Again, after two questions, there is no answer regarding the rent cap. Will this minister admit that there will not be a rent cap? Let's rip the band-aid off. Let's bust the bubble. People need to plan, and right now, they are still in the dark. They are worried, and rightfully so.

I am reading this thing about the Residential Tenancies Tribunal and enhancing measures. Well, that is all fine and dandy, but anytime we talk with vulnerable populations about tribunals, they get intimidated. They do not know what to do. Tribunals are for people who know how to read and write properly and for those who have means. For the vulnerable with each and every one of us, tribunals are something very scary that we want to avoid, so will the minister do something more and go with a rent cap? Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will absolutely do something more. I think what you have seen from this government is that we make changes quickly when we need to. Last year, we recognized that there was a serious problem related to inflation and the cost to renters, and we put a temporary change in place for one year to help stabilize the system. Since then, including this week, we have put measures in place for tenants and landlords. In a very short period of time, I will be introducing another bill that will introduce more protections for tenants and I will answer all the questions that you have around whether that is enough or is not enough. I assure you, Mr. Speaker, that if we discover that it is not enough, we will make more changes quickly. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, the government is withholding documents justifying its decision to build a \$32-million prison that is not necessary, but we know that the Minister of Public Safety prefers anecdotes to data. So, maybe he has no case and the prison is just being built because a few people suggested it to him.

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What we need is better access to mental health and addiction services. Hundreds of New Brunswickers are suffering from trauma, psychosis, and drug and alcohol addiction. This is not the 1970s anymore. It is time to end the failed war on drugs and invest in supports to help people who have a drug addiction. Will the minister cancel the construction of the unnecessary prison and reinvest the money in harm reduction initiatives to prevent New Brunswickers from dying of drug overdoses?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Minister of Public Safety, Solicitor General, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you for the question. The reality is that our jails are at overcapacity. We are in a position where we need more spaces. I want to reiterate that in relation to jails and crime, it is a holistic approach. That is why the Department of Health is putting more money into mental health and addictions services. But we do need a jail. This is something that we are going to proceed with. We take crime seriously. Wraparound services will be provided at the jail to help people transition from that lifestyle to being productive members of society. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): If you have data, make it public. Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Public Safety seems to like taking shortcuts when it comes to addictions. He often confuses drug dealers and addicts. Addiction is not a crime; it is a public health issue. So I want to emphasize that this discussion is about addiction and not dealing drugs.

Empirical data shows that decriminalizing simple possession is an effective way to reduce the harmful effects of addiction on public health and public safety. In fact, according to the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, decriminalizing the simple possession of illicit drugs would be the best way to fight addiction and overdoses, which can sometimes be fatal. My question for the Minister of Public Safety is this: Will he commit today to negotiating an agreement with the federal government to decriminalize simple possession in New Brunswick?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Minister of Public Safety, Solicitor General, PC): Thank you for that question. We are well aware that addictions are on the rise in New Brunswick, as they are across the country and across North America. This is a very, very serious issue that this minister and this government take very seriously, which is why the government has invested \$174 million in mental health and addiction services. Just in the last year, there was an additional \$8.9 million to help support those services.

Again, there has to be a holistic approach to this issue. I am not one to be soft on crime. I think that we have to ensure that our public is safe and that crime is dealt with. On the one

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hand, it has to be a wholehearted approach between mental health and addictions, and on the other hand, it has to ensure that the people who commit crimes do the time. That is going to require facilities to ensure that these people can be housed and that the staff working at these facilities can be safe and can do their job effectively. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, do the crime, do the time does not take into account the people who are struggling with mental health and addictions problems. For four years now, we have been asking this government for a mental health court to be expanded to other areas of the province. There is one in Saint John. It has been widely supported and advocated for by experts in the field as a solution for getting people off the streets.

We are seeing the homelessness crisis in Moncton. Those people need help. It is not about doing time when they do a crime that they are not responsible for—that, in some cases, they do not have the mental capacity to be responsible for. We are not going to lock them up. We need to get them the help that they need. If the government is going to be spending oodles of money on mental health—money that is being spent under the guise of Public Safety and of giving more money to the police—I want to know where the help is to establish the mental health court. It has been on the minister's desk now, I guess, since the spring. When is this going to be established in Moncton?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I can talk about some of the investments in mental health and addictions. We know that this is a situation that is very complex and that has many moving parts.

I was at an FPT—federal-provincial-territorial—meeting in Vancouver with some of the other ministers across Canada who are responsible for mental health and addictions. This situation is not unique to New Brunswick. Actually, every jurisdiction right across Canada is dealing with the same and growing problem that we are faced with. As the Public Safety Minister said, there is a balance. Of course, in my portfolio, and for the ministers before me, mental health and addictions have been a priority. We were making the investments. We were making headway. But for all the people that you address and help, there are also more coming on.

We know that there is more work to do, and we continue to invest money. Last year, it was \$174 million, which is a significant amount of money, and we just increased the amount with some of the announcements that made here a couple of weeks ago.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, let's stop talking about what other provinces are facing. They are facing a crisis that is similar to what we are facing in New Brunswick, but other provinces are handling those crises differently. They are investing in their people, and they are helping their people to get ahead. Nova Scotia has expanded a mental health court, a drug court, to give people help so



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that they do not reoffend. They stop going back to court, and they stop using more resources. They stop being jailed and costing fortunes. That is the way that you help people to get ahead, and that is the way that you reduce budgets. This government wants to reduce budgets. Invest in prevention—that is how you reduce budgets.

Mr. Speaker, I want to know where the commitment is to expand the mental health courts throughout the province. I understand that this government has been working on it. The former Minister of Health said in the spring that there was a letter of commitment that was with the Minister of Justice. I want to know where the commitment is to make that a reality in order to improve the conditions for everyone.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the letter that was mentioned by the opposition still stands. I know that I have talked to my colleague, and a number of other people have talked to my colleague as well.

Again, when I talk about other jurisdictions... The member across the way wants to paint the picture that New Brunswick is not doing anything with respect to mental health and addictions. The fact of the matter is that we have a significant number of initiatives to help people with mental health issues and addictions. It is a growing concern.

That is why I talked about some of the other provinces and jurisdictions. The sharing of practices with other ministers and with people who are responsible for this area is an important way to move forward. They can look at us. We were actually commended for some of the work that we are doing with our youth and for child welfare with the one-step therapy. Again, that is helping people...

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, it is not just the Mental Health Court that can make a difference; the position of a mental health advocate can as well. The creation of this position was unanimously passed in the House in 2019, on November 28, 2019, if I am not mistaken. That is almost three years ago. Earlier this year, we heard an announcement that Ombud New Brunswick would take on the position and this role.

However, we have not heard anything since then. It is as though the issue has been swept under the carpet. I would like to know whether this government did in fact create this position at Ombud New Brunswick. Did it provide the necessary resources to enable this office to carry out investigations for people suffering from mental illness? Why have we not heard about an advertising campaign from this government about this new service? Thank you.



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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The member opposite said that the court will not make a difference. If it will not make a difference, why does he keep asking for it? The opposition tends to be very selective in when and how it asks for certain services. I will tell you this, Mr. Speaker, this government is...

The opposition tends to be very selective in when and how it asks for certain services. But I will tell you this, Mr. Speaker. This government is consistent in helping the people of this province, whether by helping with mental health, addictions, and health care issues or by recruiting health care workers in order to help those who are presently standing up, day in and day out, to help the people here in New Brunswick.

This opposition tends to be very selective in remembering the issues that this government is addressing day in and day out, such as improving Ridgewood by refurbishing three units down there to help people with their mental health and addictions, helping the homeless by doubling the amount of money going toward shelters in various locations, funding partners with Atlantic Wellness to help youth, moving forward with the Planet Youth project that was launched in Saint John to make sure that youth are...

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

HOMELESSNESS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, the minister is a seasoned veteran. He tried to use up the extra seconds to kill the clock, but I have time for one more question.

I want to go back to the Minister of Social Development. Yesterday, we had an exchange around the homelessness crisis in the city of Moncton. We are talking about a mental health war. We are talking about a mental health advocate. The other issue that we talked about yesterday was supportive housing, which is something that is in their Inter-Departmental Addiction and Mental Health Action Plan. The fourth point talks about the creation of various forms of supportive housing to be implemented between 2022 and 2023. Yesterday, I was talking about individuals who are high-acuity or high-acuity-plus and who need 24-7 care. Those are the people struggling the most on the streets. I know that Rising Tide in Moncton has been housing... It has connections with nonprofits that do provide services, but it wants to do more to attack these issues. What is the minister doing to address this issue, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): This is a really good question, and I really appreciate it, Mr. Speaker. So far, Rising Tide has received

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\$15.5 million, including federal and provincial contributions and contributions from the city of Moncton. The city of Moncton has been a partner in Rising Tide. I actually just got a report, and they are housing from the streets. That is really the most important thing that I wanted to see. I wanted to understand that we have opportunities for our homeless population to transition very quickly from shelter—or directly—to supportive housing. And those support systems are so important.

Since I became involved with mental health back in 2018... I cannot more strongly impress upon the Chamber the fact that we understand that wraparound services have to be there in order for people to transition into stable and affordable housing, so, Mr. Speaker, all departments are working together to try to have a long-term strategy. I would like to end homelessness.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period is over.

