

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As was said, the province has over and above 800 000 people, but the increase in population comes with real problems, and I do not think the government is addressing the issues.

One of the issues that I want to address is this government's investment in mental health. It has its Inter-Departmental Addiction and Mental Health Action Plan, 2021-25. We had successfully passed a motion to accelerate it over three years, so for all intents and purposes, we should be in the final year. But when we look at the budget, there are still glaring holes that are not being addressed and issues and items in the report that are not being addressed. One of the items deals with supportive housing. In its report for 2022-23, the government had called to increase supportive housing for clients of addiction and mental health services, to provide them services so they could get ahead. But, Mr. Speaker, we do not see any of those investments in this budget. We know that Rising Tide in Moncton wants to get a clinic on the ground. Where are those investments, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, there is a considerable amount of investment being made in this budget to help the vulnerable and to help the people who are moving to New Brunswick and choosing it to be their place of residence.

But it is interesting. When I look down the list in terms of mental health and addictions and the things that have been moved forward under this government, this is what I see: an announcement of funding for Ridgewood detox centre, funding for support of mental health care for youth in the Moncton area, a contribution to Atlantic Wellness, an expansion of the mobile crisis unit in Miramichi, a Planet Youth pilot project to reduce youth substance abuse in Saint John and three other locations, a project presented by Vitalité for a fetal alcohol spectrum disorder service delivery model, Vitalité Health Network joining forces with UNB for a mental health project, and the list goes on and on and on.

I know that when it comes to the estimates, my colleagues will be talking about housing as we move forward significantly in recreating the housing spectrum and looking at various aspects of it.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, he can give us his list of talking points, but the list he is not addressing is the one that is in the government's Inter-Departmental Addiction and Mental Health Action Plan. About 12 items are listed there, and most of them are not being addressed, one being supportive housing for people with complex cases who are living on the street and needing help to get ahead. They are not able to be housed in our current environment. They need help. They need

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extra help. We cannot just give them a subsidy under NB Housing. They will not survive. But there are no investments from this government to give those people help.

Another area in the government's plan—it has 12 items in that plan, and none of them happen to be on the list of talking points that the Minister of Health is giving—is a psychiatry resource strategy for recruitment, retention, distribution, and access. So where is that strategy? We have not heard a peep about the psychiatry resource strategy in this budget. We know that there are shortages of psychiatrists across the province. People are waiting years to get a referral. Where is the strategy?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting that the member opposite reads his question word for word and then says that we are looking at scripted notes.

Let's not get down into the minutiae of things. On this side, we have a plan for mental health and addictions. That plan is taking concrete form. Mr. Speaker, I can point across the river to the 12 Neighbours project that is creating affordable housing for individuals with mental health and addictions issues. I do not need any notes to point to the Greater Moncton area and the work that Rising Tide has done to create affordable housing for people with mental health and addictions issues. And I do not need any notes to talk about the other supportive projects that we have on the horizon. In the speech from the throne, the Premier talked about a 50-bed facility to help people with mental health and addictions issues. Mr. Speaker, that is action, that is doing the job, and that is with no notes.

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the government talked in the budget speech about 50 beds. In fact, it stated that it would be actively exploring the addition of 50 inpatient residential beds serving those with mental health and addiction needs. What kind of commitment are we talking about here? You are talking about actively exploring the possibility of moving forward. It is just a way to make headlines. The government does not have a plan to add 50 beds.

We have been talking about the Centre of Excellence for Youth for 18 years, and this government has delayed its opening by at least a decade.

We are waiting, Mr. Speaker. Can we expect a concrete commitment to expedite the implementation of this program? We need beds for addiction treatment. People in need cannot wait on waiting lists if they are prepared to reach out for help and say that they need help. Is this government prepared to make a concrete commitment to add addiction treatment beds?

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, it was a privilege for me to go up to Campbellton and visit the addiction and youth centre. With the redesign of the facility up there, there are going to be beds for individuals with mental health and addictions issues. And it was a privilege for me to stand with my colleagues on Salisbury Road and say that it is the site for additional beds for treating mental health and addictions. Mr. Speaker, we are not waiting for those beds. We already have those treatment programs happening with respect to individuals who are looking for help.

We have the step-up continuum program to help people with respect to mental health and addictions, depending on where their needs are. Mr. Speaker, we have made significant investments in that area, whether they are for housing, counselors, or psychologists or for within the RHAs. The list of things that we are doing goes on and on. I know that members opposite are trying to nitpick and find out some other things, but we are continuing to move forward. We continue to help the people in need.

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, this government does not keep its promises when it comes to mental health. It promised to expedite the implementation of its plan by changing the timeframe from five years to three years; however, we see in the report that there are delays everywhere.

In 2019, the government also committed to creating the position of mental health advocate. This is what it has been telling us for years: It is coming; it is coming. In the end, the Minister of Health said: No, there will not be a mental health advocate.

The government told us: We are working to make the Mental Health Court that we have in Saint John available everywhere in the province. However, we see nothing for it in the budget. There is nothing in the budget to burden the Seniors' Advocate or the Child and Youth Advocate with the responsibility for mental health. There is nothing in the budget to give the Ombud these new duties. There is nothing in the budget to expand the Mental Health Court.

My question is this: Is the government really working toward expanding the Mental Health Court to give everyone access to justice, Mr. Speaker?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, the member opposite talked about a number of different files. I can say that those different files have various degrees of funding and energy put toward them. The Child and Youth Advocate is doing the job of advocating for various vulnerable sectors here in New Brunswick and has written

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many reports that have gone to the various departments that are also involved with children and youth.

When it comes to making sure that people have the available resources and funding, I am pleased to say that I will be attending Atlantic Wellness's capital or operational fundraiser. This government is contributing another \$150 000 to Atlantic Wellness to help the youth in New Brunswick. That is getting at the grassroots of some of the problems that lead people down the road to unfortunate situations, but we are treating the symptoms as well.

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I will close by saying that it is no secret that, since I was elected, I have advocated for expanding the Mental Health Court to the entire province so that everyone has the same access to it as people in Saint John. As we know, this court has a very high success rate, since 85% of people who go through it do not commit a second crime.

My question is this: Can the Minister of Health tell us if the Mental Health Court will indeed be available in other regions of the province?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, I can say to the member that work continues to help the most vulnerable. It comes in a variety of different forms, whether it is housing, mental health courts, or, again, mental health and addictions—a various number of ways.

I want to get to a point. I find myself keeping opposition members true to their word. Yesterday the Health Critic made a comment about the number of doctors having fallen in recent years. I checked with the department, and the provincial physician ranks have actually increased. In March 2020, there were 1 743; in March 2021, 1 772; in March 2022, 1 794; and in March 2023, 1 857. So the fact of the matter is that the number has actually been going up, Mr. Speaker. I find myself again holding opposition members accountable for what they say here in New Brunswick.

HOUSING

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, yesterday and in the past week, the Minister of Finance was pretty adamant that his revenue projections are accurate. Even though there is quite a large decrease in tax revenue, yesterday he said that it was the income tax reductions, and last week he said that it was current events. We also know that the Minister of Finance has made his case that his methodology is to not go back to a deficit position. This means that, essentially, he has a margin of about \$40 million in surplus to play with.

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What we do not have in this budget are very many new initiatives for housing, so I am wondering... The Minister responsible for Housing will unveil her long-awaited strategy in a couple of months. Without any funding in this budget to support it—no contingency—does the Minister of Finance feel that he has essentially boxed his colleague into presenting a strategy that will have no teeth, at least for this fiscal year?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government does not write blank cheques. We do not. We are working on a housing strategy. We are meeting with stakeholders. We are putting plans in place. We are understanding the landscape that we have in front of us as it relates to housing. We have many opportunities. We have many groups outside of the government that are working on helping to address the housing crisis. We are collecting all that information. We are doing an analysis of the programs that we currently have in place and are looking to see where there are gaps in those programs.

After our face-to-face stakeholder meeting in May, which will be in the beginning of May, we will be compiling all that information and looking at where there are opportunities to help address the housing crisis here in New Brunswick. At that point, we will put together a draft plan with programs in place and I will be asking my colleagues to help me fund the programs that are associated with the housing strategy.

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

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the minister's response. Yes, maybe your government does not write blank cheques. Actually, it writes no cheques. That is your problem. There is no budget. There is no budget for housing. There is nothing new. So how are you going to analyze and look at everything that is going to be presented when there is no budget for it? We have been presented different cases, and we are looking... I believe that the word—and this is the minister's word—is "spectrum". Spectrum is a big word. It is very expensive. There is nothing there, and the Minister of Finance will not go into a deficit position. He has been very clear about that. So where is the money? We do not see it in his budget. That is your plan for the year. Why is it not in there?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Did the member miss the piece in the budget about the extra \$2 million for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation? He must have missed it. He must have missed it.

We have committed to renewing the New Brunswick Housing Corporation. We are moving individuals and programs from the Department of Social Development, the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure, and Service New Brunswick to bring them together so that they can focus on the housing crisis that we have here in New Brunswick and put forward a plan for the future to solve the housing problems in New Brunswick. We have put forward \$2 million to put the New Brunswick Housing Corporation together, and then

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we will present our plan in June, as promised, with funding, so that we can begin working toward solving the housing crisis for New Brunswick, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, just think about the scale. Last year, they announced \$100 million for low-income housing units. That is \$270 000 per unit. It is more than the price of my house, by the way. That is what we are talking about—scale. To move the needle on this, you are going to need some money. You are going to need some budget. Having \$2 million to buy computers and notepads is just not going to cut it. There is nothing in this budget that is going to move the needle on housing this year.

You have been studying it for two years. What are you going to find out in the next couple of months that you have not found out already? We have been hearing it from two ministers now. They have been saying: We have been talking to advocates. We have been going around with different departments. We have been working together.

What are you going to find out in the next month that you could not bring to this budget, with an actual amount of money to help, before it was presented?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I had this conversation with another member opposite yesterday. We are not going to put a plan in place without consulting the stakeholders of New Brunswick. This plan affects New Brunswickers. We do not make decisions here without talking to New Brunswickers to understand what programs are in place, where the gaps are, and where we can put the dollars that we are going to use toward solving the housing crisis and that we are going to use to fund the New Brunswick Housing Corporation and its programs. We are going to put that all together and present a plan in June.

It appears that the members opposite have forgotten about the \$100 million that we put forward for social housing, Mr. Speaker. That is also part of the budget for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation. The member opposite was talking about the cost of the individual units in that program. Well, now that we have a focused New Brunswick Housing Corporation, we will try to add even more units than we had planned for the \$100 million.

POINT LEPREAU

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, last week, the CEO of Ontario Power Generation sent an email to all its 10 000 employees to inform them that OPG and NB Power have entered into discussions regarding a potential partnership at Point Lepreau. As written, it said that the details are still being discussed but are progressing, with OPG leaders visiting the New Brunswick site in the coming weeks.

Mr. Speaker, can you explain to me why the people of Ontario know more about what is going on with our generating station than the people here in New Brunswick? Minister, for

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the love of transparency, can you tell us what is going on with Point Lepreau and what the nature of the discussion is with OPG?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, I really appreciate that. Since we came into the House last week, this is the first chance that I have had to stand and stretch my legs and answer a question. I really appreciate the opportunity. I hope that I am not too rusty.

I would like to begin by talking about the fact that OPG has worked with Point Lepreau several times over several years. There are a number of partnerships that exist or have existed and are continuing to take place. Maritime Electric is in partnership with Point Lepreau. We have talked about Point Lepreau regularly here in the House. In fact, the member opposite has talked significantly—in a disparaging way—about Point Lepreau, so I do not know why he would be concerned about us talking with other stakeholders, working within the close-knit nuclear industry, and providing solutions to make sure that we are getting the absolute best out of that facility. It has provided clean, safe, and reliable energy to the province for over a generation. Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, I look forward to our continuing that work to make sure that we get the best out of our nuclear facility.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, NB Power is not the gold standard when it comes to transparency. The people in New Brunswick are looking to the minister and the government for oversight and for an energy strategy. Neither is being done. We have been told for years by the utility that Point Lepreau is on track and going in the right direction and meeting the performance targets. Now, we hear that there is the possibility of their paying OPG to come in and bail them out. If the minister does not want to actually explain the nature of the discussions with OPG, can he at least tell the people of New Brunswick what the long-term plan with Point Lepreau is?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, there are a couple of statements in the member opposite's question that highlight his lack of business acumen. Partnerships are mutually beneficial. It is not a matter of bailouts or payouts. It is a matter of coming together to collaboratively work on a situation to have the best outcomes for all. Those are the ones that work best, and that is what we are embarking upon and working with.

The member opposite also spoke about the fact that there is the lack of an energy plan, a lack of transparency, and a lack of vision. I am going to be making a minister's statement later on, and I am going to be talking about a recent request for expressions of interest for over 220 MW of renewable electricity and 50 MW of storage. It is work that is very transparently done and that is in partnership with the opposition as it relates to the SMR file. It is work that the opposition is clearly aware of. There have been transparent discussions around hydrogen projects that can create economic opportunity and energy security. We are also talking about natural gas and a cleaner-than-coal option to be able to create other solutions. On this side of the House, we are full of opportunities.

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Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The OPG CEO ends his email by saying—and I quote—that while details are not finalized, the partnership OPG is building with NB Power will be a business relationship that is made in the best interest of Ontario. Minister, can you please reassure the taxpayers of New Brunswick—the shareholders of NB Power—that you are working for the best interest of this province?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, you are absolutely right we are.

[Translation]

AGRICULTURE

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For over 50 years, the government has treated its Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Aquaculture like an export and economic development agency and has completely forgotten how important it is to feed people here in New Brunswick.

Data from Statistics Canada indicate to us that there is a crisis regarding the next generation, since only 6.7% of farmers in New Brunswick are under 35. We are still one of the only provinces with no agricultural training or financial incentives for young people going into agriculture. Now, one way to completely and immediately support existing farms and ensure succession is to implement a local purchasing policy for our public institutions.

So, of course, my question is for the Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries. Can she tell us what percentage of food in our public institutions such as schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and so on is purchased locally?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): I am going to start at the beginning, Mr. Speaker. The member opposite regularly identifies the numbers that spout doom and gloom for the agriculture sector. He highlights the average age of farmers. The fact of the matter is that the average population age in New Brunswick is upper middle age. The good news is that for the first time in 61 years, New Brunswick's population has grown, with 72% under age 45 and one quarter of those under 18 years of age.

So, how do we get our younger population into agriculture? We do it through education and by identifying career opportunities, by emphasizing the importance of agriculture, by engaging young people, by revamping programs, such as the Farm Land Identification Program (FLIP), to put more land into production, by working with our colleagues in other departments, and by having our business growth and development officers accessible to

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help new entrants. If the members know of young people who want to get into farming, I would encourage them to dial 1 506...

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

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): I get scared when I hear 1 800 numbers from this government.

[*Translation*]

Perhaps the minister should pay attention to her notes, because she might make the Minister of Health faint.

However, she did not answer my question, Mr. Speaker. This is what I am asking: Right now, how much of the food purchased by our public institutions such as schools, hospitals, and nursing homes is local? Since the minister has not answered my question, I will give her the benefit of the doubt and say: Again, if you would, what percentage of food purchased by our public institutions in New Brunswick is local?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): It was not a 1 800 number; it was my office number. Pay attention.

Mr. Speaker, the member opposite regularly decries the department regarding our support of exports. He would like us to keep all our goods here at home to feed our own people, and that is laudable. The fact of the matter is that we are self-sufficient in a number of different commodities; however, there are areas in which we are not self-sufficient. To that end, the supply does not meet the demand. In that case, we have to look to reciprocal agreements. We have to look to other agencies, other countries, and other provinces that do have self-sufficiency in those areas. We bring those commodities in and send our excesses out. That is the fact of the matter. Export is vital to the economy of New Brunswick.

As for the actual numbers, I will get them for you. I do not have them at my fingertips at this moment. I should have. I will get them to you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Madam Minister, agriculture is not done on the phone. It is done on farms. So, I urge the minister to go out in the field and meet farmers, because what she is telling us in the House never or very rarely reflects the reality on the ground.

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Quebec has a food strategy for its public institutions. Currently, 85% of public institutions in that province have local purchasing targets. The goal is to have targets in all public institutions by 2025. In 2020, 45% of goods purchased by public institutions in Quebec were produced in Quebec. The goal for 2025 is 60%, and the province is well on its way. Why will it achieve that goal? It is because it has targets. Do we, in New Brunswick, have local purchasing targets for our public institutions?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): First, I think that it is a known fact that, nationally, Quebec is one of the most highly subsidized provinces when it comes to agriculture. So, we are talking about apples and oranges. We have to recognize that the transfer payments that it is willing to accept from the rest of the country are a direct reflection of what it is able to do for its farmers, and that sort of thing.

The aim of our Local Food and Beverages Strategy is to benefit the province's agriculture, aquaculture, and seafood sectors. We want to make sure that we are putting local food into the hands of our people. We have recently worked with Walmart, which is opening a new distribution centre in the Moncton area, and we are making sure that what it is bringing into its stores is local. We are making sure that it is connecting with local vendors and local suppliers to have local products being sold in its stores in the province.

I know that he is upset with my answer.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mrs. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): No, we are not going to do that.

As for having boots on the ground, I have visited close to 80...

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

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We all know about the cost of living. We all know about it. We learned last week that of the around 800 seniors who are in hospital, 400 have been medically discharged but they have to stay in hospital because there are no spaces in long-term care facilities. It was brought to our attention that even though they are there not by choice, they will have to pay \$7 to \$8 more per day. They could stay there for 30 or 40 days. Could the minister please clarify that position for us this morning? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, it has been a long-term common practice that those who have been medically discharged, if they are so assessed, may have to pay a fee in order to reside in the hospital while they are waiting for a place in a nursing home. It is not an ideal situation, and we want to move individuals into nursing homes or special care homes as soon as possible. We want people to be in the place that best serves their needs, and we know that is not in an ALC bed. We work very hard with all our nursing homes and special care homes to identify those that are assessed and to move them along the continuum as soon as possible.

This has been the policy for some time. It is continually looked at. We continually work with our partners in the RHAs to ensure that we move people along as quickly as possible. We know that recruitment is part of this problem. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The sad reality is that people who are currently hospitalized have no way to supplement their income. We are talking about tax breaks for people of means. We are talking about tax breaks for all kinds of people. I personally think of the vulnerable people who are in hospital right now, and not by choice. Does the minister consider it acceptable to increase the amount these people must pay, given the current situation? Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, these individuals will also have to pay when they reach a nursing home. So, this is part of the continuum. There is an assessment process, and the assessments are done with a keen eye. I know that there are difficult circumstances everywhere. That is why we try very hard to move people into the proper place at the right time. We want everyone to receive the right care, in the right place, and at the right time. There are many, many complex factors as to why that is not doable.

Let me just say that, in our partnership with the Minister of Health and the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, we have been working on recruitment efforts to get as many beds as possible open in our nursing homes so that they can be filled with individuals who can have a better quality of life. That is always the goal. We are also increasing our supports to have people age at home, and that is going to be expanded upon. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period has expired.