

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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[Translation]

MENTAL HEALTH

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

This has been a challenging week for many New Brunswickers, particularly young people, their parents, their teachers, and members of this House.

[Translation]

We know that many New Brunswickers have mental health problems today. I want to take a moment to recognize the contributions of organizations that provide support in difficult times like these.

[Original]

There is Kids Help Phone, at <<https://kidshelpphone.ca>>. There is the Chimo Helpline in New Brunswick, which is at <<http://www.chimohelpline.ca>> and 1 800 667-5005.

[Translation]

There is teljeunes.com.

[Original]

There is 211 New Brunswick, and there is Bridge the gapp at <nb.bridgethegapp.ca>. Given the importance of mental health services for New Brunswickers now more than ever, could the member opposite please share the current benchmark and recruiting targets for mental health professionals in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much. I appreciate the member opposite talking about the various options that are available, and I will add to that. Planet Youth is an opportunity in Saint John that is working in Saint John and Kent County. We also have, in the Greater Moncton area, Atlantic Wellness, to which this government contributed \$500 000. It offers free, free...

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, the RHAs are part of that recruitment strategy in the province. There is more good news from Horizon

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this week, where it says that it has hired more than 2 400 health care and allied health care workers in New Brunswick. That is good news. That is good news, and within that, a number of other options are now available. We now have social workers in the emergency rooms to provide access to people who come in with mental health stress or suicidal tendencies. Some of those recommendations, again, have been worked on for the past little while.

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank the member opposite for that. I look forward to getting into the details on the 2 400 people to specifically address the mental health professionals and their shortage in New Brunswick.

In a report that I think was submitted in October 2022, the Child and Youth Advocate called on the government to fill the gap between the online health service, which I listed, and the emergency services that exist. I want to take a minute to applaud both of the investments that the minister opposite just described—in Planet Youth and Atlantic Wellness. Specifically, I want to applaud the one-at-a-time therapy initiative that this government has advanced, because we have seen some really encouraging progress from that initiative.

The member opposite confirmed a centre of excellence for youth mental health—a strategy to split beds, with eight in Campbellton and eight on Salisbury Road in Moncton.

[Translation]

Here is what I want to know.

[Original]

Is the project on track? Does the \$29.4-million estimate for those two centres for youth mental health services still stand today?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Yes, as a matter of fact, that was a great announcement. My colleagues and I are moving forward with that in the Greater Moncton area in order to provide that forensic ability for individuals to get the services that they need. Going by the last information that I have, it is on track, it is on budget, and it is moving forward.

[Translation]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): I would like to share something specific about mental health services in Indigenous

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communities. We are encouraged by what we have heard about progress in Elsipogtog First Nation.

[Original]

The program that we are hearing about at Elsipogtog is encouraging. We now need to see a plan to extend that same program to the 14 other First Nations in New Brunswick. I am hopeful that I will hear information about that.

We have heard feedback from First Nations communities that many departments have been involved and that it has been difficult for them to identify a lead to take responsibility. In the same report that I mentioned earlier, the Child and Youth Advocate called for the appointment of a clear lead for mental services and suicide prevention for First Nations youth. I am hoping that the member opposite can confirm for us whether that appointment has been put in place and whether she can confirm the status of services to First Nations communities for youth mental health and suicide.

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, PC): Through the speaker to the member opposite, thank you for the question. I want to start by saying that mental health in First Nations communities is tragic. I personally have witnessed it, and I have heard from a number of First Nations with respect to their concerns around this issue.

I am proud that we actually have mental health and addiction supports at Elsipogtog, but I also believe that those supports need to be moved throughout the province and grown throughout the province. That is an endeavour that I am working on right now through Health as well as Social Development to determine how we can make that happen.

To me, we are in a mental health crisis in this province—in First Nations communities and otherwise—and there is a lot of work that needs to be done on that file. I am working collaboratively with First Nations to make sure that we hone in on those opportunities and expedite them where possible. Thank you.

[Translation]

HOUSING

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, people in the Madawaska region are seeking help to get housing through the New Brunswick Housing Corporation. The department says there are no more housing units and the only option is the waiting list. The minister says everything is on the table, but, in the meantime, nothing is available for people who have needs. The minister always says we have to wait for the

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plan the government will present to us at some point, but, if we take the health plan as an example, we see that people are still waiting for results.

It is clear that the minister cannot do two things at once, meaning working on a plan and ensuring that people in need get help. Will the minister assume her responsibilities and ensure that the number of housing units increases immediately and that her plan is completed, which, as we know, will take years?

[Original]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The beauty of being a minister in this provincial government is that although we are standing up here by ourselves and answering questions from you, we have a massive team behind us. I would challenge the member opposite and say that I can absolutely do two things at the same time.

The member opposite was talking specifically about his region in Madawaska and public housing units. I can assure the member opposite that we are working on the plan that is associated with where the units are going. This government has committed \$100 million to new public housing units. Madawaska will not be left out of that puzzle of where we are putting the different new public housing units. In fact, in conjunction with the Housing Strategy...

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

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Mr. Speaker, the Minister responsible for Housing keeps talking about a table. She says everything is on the table. I cannot help but wonder about this: Is this a dining room table, a coffee table, or a small end table? Are the legs of the table wobbly, or has the Premier fully committed funding to support what will be left on that table at the end of the day? Does it include things such as transitional housing in rural New Brunswick that is fully integrated with mental health and addictions supports, contingency plans for shelters in rural New Brunswick, and raising the ceiling on eligibility for a rent subsidy?

In the short term, there are hundreds of NB Housing units that are sitting empty. Will the minister commit to repairing them before the fall so that there can be a few hundred fewer people on the streets next winter?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am going to finish my last answer, and then I will address the question from the other member opposite.

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We will be releasing information very shortly about the location of the 380 units across the province. We will give numbers and areas, and then we will work with the local communities to find the appropriate locations for these public housing units.

On to the second question. We are talking about tables. This is a really important issue for the province. I do not think that we should be making jokes about it.

Housing is a fundamental right for New Brunswickers. It is our responsibility to provide adequate and safe housing for New Brunswickers. That is what this plan is about. That is what the additional public housing units are about. If there are units that need work, I would like the member opposite to please talk to me about that, and we will get moving on it.

SCHOOLS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government likes to talk a lot about population growth and how the numbers are increasing weekly. The government members applaud themselves, but they have no strategy to back it up. We had a debate this week on the lack of housing, which is affecting all kinds of different sectors.

I want to ask about education this morning and about how the population growth is affecting our schools. We heard from the Anglophone East School District this week. It has had 1 500 new students in the last 18 months alone. It has reconfigured schools in the Moncton area to accommodate the increase, but it is out of short-term fixes. It is asking for an immediate increase in the capital budget for new schools, such as a new K-to-8 school in the North End, a new K-to-8 school in Sunny Brae, and a new K-to-5 Bessborough School, and for the addition of a new high school in the Moncton area. It is the same thing on the Francophone side. I know that my daughter's class has two Grade 1 teachers in the same classroom to respect the ratios. What is this government doing to address population growth when it comes to education?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. Prior to answering this, I would like to congratulate the member from Hanwell on his recent nuptials. He has found a wonderful, wonderful woman. Congratulations. I was not attempting to eat up time.

The question that was asked is a very important one. We have experienced a significant growth in the student population in New Brunswick. I think that the last count had us at around 6 200 in the province. It has created a unique problem for us. Instead of looking at closing schools, we are looking at the need to provide space to make sure that we have it for these students. The department is working hard with every school district, including the Anglophone East School District. I met with the superintendent two weeks ago to talk about some possibilities of how we can address this problem. We will continue to do that. Thank you.

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[Translation]

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

The members of the Standing Committee on Climate Change and Environmental Stewardship have worked very hard in the past year. They held hearings in February on SMRs, freshwater health, and the Climate Change Action Plan.

[Translation]

During our last meeting, on February 17, 2023, the following motion was adopted:

THAT the Standing Committee on Climate Change and Environmental Stewardship hold hearings on a clean energy strategy, attended by presenters with energy or environmental subject matter expertise, for the purpose of studying pathways to decarbonization, and the findings must be finalized by the Committee by October 1, 2023.

Since it is mid-May, is the government taking this motion seriously and calling a meeting? If so, when will it be?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, there seemed to be an absence of direction in regard to where that question was going, so I will stand and speak on behalf of a number of my colleagues who work on that committee. I will discuss the fact that the energy strategy and the components of the Climate Change and Environmental Stewardship Committee hearings will come forward in the form of recommendations. Those committee meetings will be continuing. I believe that we are going to be having conversations among ourselves very shortly as to the planning for the next group.

The member opposite has colleagues who are part of that committee. As confusing as the question was, I am equally confused as to why he did not look over to his colleagues and ask what the latest updates are from the committee. I mean, the committee chair is not a minister who answers questions in the Legislature. The entire question was confusing. Perhaps we can get into another line of questioning, where I can talk about all the wonderful things we are doing in Energy and all the wonderful things we are doing...

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

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Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, last June the government released an Air Sector Strategy aimed at increasing services at the province's four airports. The government created a committee that is chaired by a representative of DTI. There is a rep from Opportunities New Brunswick, a rep from RDC, and a rep from each of the four airports that have scheduled passenger services—Bathurst, Fredericton, Moncton, and Saint John. In the press release last year from DTI and RDC, which both have new ministers, the first line says that the strategy is “to encourage growth in passenger air service in the province, without the closure of any existing airports”. I would like to know from the ministers whether they are still fully committed to this objective.

Hon. Mr. Carr (New Maryland-Sunbury, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, air travel in this province is very important to all of us. Servicing those regions is important. I have had several discussions with the member who represents the Bathurst area. I share his concerns that the Bathurst airport is in a precarious situation. It is incumbent upon all of us, including the community that surrounds that piece of infrastructure, to find options to make that viable for not only commercial travel but also medical, health, travel, as medevac services are so important for that area. I will continue to have that conversation with my colleague from RDC and with colleagues from the Bathurst area to try to be part of the solution—not come up with problems—and help with ways that we can make that piece of infrastructure very viable. Thank you.

[Translation]

SHIPYARDS

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Mr. Speaker, we have gone too long in the House without speaking about shipbuilding. I will remind you that, back home in the Acadian Peninsula, specifically in the Bas-Caraquet area, Acadians are known for their expertise in shipbuilding and boat building. Unfortunately, this Conservative government has shown no willingness to support shipbuilding and has even gone so far as to get rid of the buildings it owned in the New Brunswick Naval Center as quickly as possible.

In fact, the first building was sold after a public competition. However, strangely enough, the second, with an estimated value of over \$1 million, was sold to a numbered company for \$400 000 without a call for bids. So, I am asking the Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation for clarification on this. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. R. Savoie (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to answer this question. However, I think the answer was already given several months ago, when the situation occurred. The building was sold to a numbered company, as you rightly

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mentioned. In fact, at the time, the business was already established in the building, and, at some point, the decision was made to sell the building to the business to keep the jobs in the region. The primary objective of our department and the government is always to maintain and support jobs in the region. In this case, I think the government made the right decision for your region, honourable member.

[Original]

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

RENTS

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, the minister said in a previous answer that she can do two things at the same time. In fact, she has been doing that because, on one hand, she has been working hard on the Residential Tenancies Tribunal and moving forward on certain files and, on the other hand, she has been sitting on important files—putting it on the strategy that is coming at the end of June. One of these issues is the rent cap.

Yesterday, we moved a motion on the rent cap, and I felt that the minister was very discreet about what she wants to do with the rent cap. I think that New Brunswickers deserve an answer about the rent cap now because they need to plan. Not only the tenants but also the owners need to know whether that rent cap is going to go ahead or not. I am asking the minister this. Can she get up today and say that there will be rent cap for 2023 or that there will not be a rent cap for 2023? 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 for the question. We did have a very healthy debate back and forth yesterday about the topic of the rent cap. Information was presented by both sides and by all three parties, and it was a very healthy discussion. Very important information was shared that needs to be considered as important decisions such as this are being made.

Mr. Speaker, I have talked a lot about the work that is being undertaken right now. We are communicating with all the stakeholders in the housing continuum to get their feedback on what needs to happen holistically with the housing file and on how we can work together on solutions for the housing crisis in New Brunswick. This is one piece of the puzzle. This will be addressed in the Housing Strategy in June, as I promised. Thank you.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Again, we find that the minister is not giving a clear answer on the rent cap. I think that New Brunswickers deserve an answer right away—right now.

I will move on to my next question. Very briefly, when can we expect... Can the minister give a specific date? Everything seems to be riding on this Housing Strategy, and we are

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looking forward to getting it as soon as possible. Can the minister give us a specific timeline on when that strategy will come out? Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Maybe we will talk a little bit about process, which I think the member opposite would understand because he has been in government before. We are conducting our stakeholder consultation. We are winding that up now. There are a few groups left that we are meeting with. We are putting together all the information that we have collected from our summits—our virtual and our face-to-face summits. We are looking at all the ideas that have come forward from New Brunswickers, from all the stakeholders within the housing spectrum, for solutions as to how we can make housing better in New Brunswick so that all people in New Brunswick can be housed adequately and safely.

That information is being compiled. We will then put together a proposal to Cabinet to be approved. At that point, we will have the plan drafted. Then, at that point, we will release it to the public. It is a long, arduous process, Mr. Speaker, and I cannot commit to a specific date because we are not rushing this. Thank you.

[Translation]

MORTALITY

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. According to the mortality figures published by Statistics Canada for New Brunswick, 9 288 people died in the province in 2022, which makes it the deadliest year ever recorded—ever recorded—in New Brunswick.

CBC interviewed 32-year-old Haley Jones who is fighting heart problems she developed after getting COVID-19. She says she is disappointed that the province is not sounding the alarm about the increase in deaths in the province to encourage people to be more careful.

Mr. Speaker, can the Minister of Health explain why he is not sounding the alarm about the increase in deaths in the province?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is very, very clear that this is a concern. I want to remind the member across the way that when Statistics Canada released that information, it said it was provisional—it was provisional. Last year, there were a number of news stories published when the same situation arose. However, when the data was analyzed, correlated, and finalized, the figures were much closer to a typical year.

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Mr. Speaker, once again, Statistics Canada has released information that is of a preliminary nature, and there is still some work to do. Again, we always look at that closely. Public Health is always in touch with the RHAs and with Vital Statistics. If there is an anomaly, Public Health would certainly act on that and inform the public if there were indeed something to be overly concerned about. But again, I remind the member opposite that these are preliminary figures, similar to a story last year. I am glad to see that he is recycling.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I am assuming that the minister has corrected the problem that occurred in the previous year in delivering the data to StatsCan so that it is no longer an issue.

Mr. Speaker, researchers have documented that COVID-19 causes vascular damage in some infected people. Colin Furness, an infection control epidemiologist at U of T, contends that provinces such as New Brunswick need to study deaths from strokes and heart attacks, not just COVID-19 deaths, to understand the virus's full body count. Certainly, New Brunswickers want to know what is causing the high death rate in our province. Without a public inquiry, that information is unlikely to ever emerge from Fortress Higgs.

Given the high rate of COVID-19 deaths in New Brunswick to begin with, and given the dramatic increase in overall deaths in our province, will the minister initiate a public inquiry to get to the bottom of this?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much. Once again, Mr. Speaker, as you remember, last year the data was in a preliminary form when it was initially released with the notice that it was subject to change. Once those changes occurred and the analysis was done, there was a significant difference. It was much, much different from the preliminary data. So I would remind the public and the member across the way that Public Health does say that further analysis is needed once the New Brunswick 2022 data is complete with Statistics Canada. There will be a reckoning and a consolidation there.

The department and Public Health are always monitoring the data from the regional health authorities and from other parts of the provincial health care system for any unusual trends or anomalies. Again, Mr. Speaker, I know that the member across the way is concerned, as we are, but these are preliminary figures. More work needs to be done, and that work is being done. Thank you.

HOUSING

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will start with a quick one, because I just want to make sure of this. The Minister responsible for Housing said that she cannot commit to a specific date for the release of the housing strategy in June. I am going to take that to mean that it is not

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likely to come while we are sitting and have the opportunity to debate it, but in the second half of June. At least before June 30—I guess that is what you are trying to say.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. What is it that my dad used to say? Under-promise and over-deliver? I will promise that we will have the report by June 30. I will do everything I possibly can to have it ready so that we can debate it in this House. I will extend the offer to the Leader of the Opposition that we will happily share the preliminaries of what is in it before it is released publicly. We can have a discussion about that before it is released publicly at the end of the month. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SCHOOLS

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for that offer. I really appreciate it.

This House received a letter from the Child and Youth Advocate about some comments that were made in this House a number of days ago. I can read it or share it in case everyone has not had a chance to look at the email.

[Translation]

The Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development said that Mr. Lamrock had asked for a few examples and that he had neglected to mention in his statement that he had asked for them up to a certain point in March. That is what the minister said.

[Original]

The Child and Youth Advocate's letter specifies that was not the case and that his office was very specific in its requests for any information that led to a decision for a review and that the date was extended up to that point. I am wondering whether the member opposite or the Speaker... I would like to give them the opportunity to address the comments that the Child and Youth Advocate made.

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Through you to the member opposite, I have checked with the department to see whether I made an error in the date that I said the other day in the House. Perhaps I did misquote the month. I will double-check because we did look at that.

I will point out a part of the report that the members opposite seem to not want to look at. The Child and Youth Advocate indicates that the minister may review any policy that the minister wishes. Thank you.

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Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We certainly did read the report of the Child and Youth Advocate. It is interesting to hear the minister emphasize, as I think he said on the radio this morning, that it is his prerogative to review any policy at any time. It is our responsibility, as an opposition, to hold to account decisions to review that might be unfounded, inappropriate, or causing harm.

I was also surprised to hear the minister say this morning that his colleagues are not hearing from New Brunswick parents about their concerns around the decision to review Policy 713. There is a petition that more than 7 000 New Brunswickers have signed to stop the review of Policy 713. Members of our team, including me, have received numerous emails, text messages, and phone calls, as the minister likes to say, from parents who are deeply concerned about the damage that this is causing to their trans children. Could the member please clarify what feedback he has received?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, that is quite a broad question. I have received a whole range of feedback from all kinds of New Brunswickers from both ends of the spectrum. I have had wonderful conversations with people. I have had voice mails, emails, and texts. I have been called a homophobe and all kinds of different things that are untrue.

It is important that we listen to New Brunswickers. It is important that parents reach out to their MLAs. If we think that children under the age of 16... If we think that professionals should be dishonest with them, then I think we need to talk about that. We have a mechanism in place with our guidance counselors that can guide children through confusing times. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Question period is over.