

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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CONTENTS

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Ms. Holt
Ms. Holt
Hon. Mr. Higgs
Ms. Holt
Hon. Mr. Higgs

ACCESSIBILITY

Ms. Holt
Hon. Ms. Bockus
Ms. Holt
Hon. Ms. Bockus
Ms. Holt
Hon. Ms. Bockus
Ms. Holt

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Hon. Ms. Green
Ms. Holt
Hon. Ms. Green
Ms. Holt
Hon. Ms. Green

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

HOUSING

Mr. Losier

Hon. Ms. Green

Mr. Losier

Hon. Ms. Green

Mr. Losier

Hon. Ms. Green

NURSING HOMES

Mr. Gauvin

Hon. Ms. Bockus

Mr. Gauvin

Hon. Mr. Steeves

ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Mitton

Hon. Mr. Crossman

Ms. Mitton

Hon. Mr. Flemming, K.C.

Mr. Gauvin

HEALTH CARE FUNDING

Hon. Ms. Green

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Ms. Holt

Hon. Ms. Green

HEALTH CARE

Ms. Holt

Hon. Mr. Fitch

HOMELESSNESS

Hon. Ms. Green

Ms. Holt

Ms. Holt

Hon. Ms. Green

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, today we celebrated five amazing New Brunswickers who have made exceptional contributions to our province, recognized by their induction into the Order of Canada: Catherine Akagi, Bud Bird, Isabelle McKee-Allain, Joanne McLeod, and Bernard Poirier.

(Interjections.)

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Yes, it was the Order of New Brunswick. Thank you.

These leaders inspired me with their work to support an inclusive New Brunswick in many different ways.

[Translation]

Isabelle McKee-Allain and Bernard Poirier are two of the particularly inspiring people. Their persistent and courageous work to promote Francophone and Acadian culture and protect the rights of Francophones in New Brunswick is inspiring.

This made me think of the *Official Languages Act* and the Secretariat of Official Languages, which was created a year ago, and which, according to the Premier, was to promote bilingualism and expand on the implementation plan required by the Act. Mr. Premier, can you update us on the work the secretariat has done since December? When should we expect its implementation plan?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Yes, obviously, I too was at the Order of New Brunswick ceremony, and the five recipients were well-deserving. In speaking with the selection committee on the work that they went through . . . I think that they had over 200 submissions, Mr. Speaker, so it was a big test for the committee to figure out which five to appoint, but it was well deserved by those we saw. I know that this was the first part of your comments, concerns, and thoughts, so I want to reiterate that it was a very nice ceremony hosted by the LG.

In relation to the secretariat, it continues to have work in progress. It established a day of recognition here in the province. It is an ongoing process where we start thinking every year about what is next and what we can do differently. I think that we continue to be on a promotional track to help the citizens of our province become fully bilingual. I know that,

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

from the very beginning, I have been asking how we get all our graduates to come out of school fully bilingual. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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 response. I am hoping that you could clarify this. The day of recognition, when was that? And when can we expect the implementation plan committed by the secretariat?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that what I would ask here is . . . I can take this and get a list of what accomplishments and transmissions it has made to date, what connections it has made in each department, and what it has looked at in each department in asking whether we are following the rules and ensuring that we are serving both official languages throughout the province. I mean, that is the goal. The secretariat coordinates with every government department and with service delivery outside of the government.

The point of all this is not to make it a controversial process but to instead make it one that is seamless, one of respect, and one where we implement programs that enhance our capabilities in the province and ensure that we are meeting the needs of the *Official Languages Act*.

Mr. Speaker, I think that the idea is to be able to achieve better results, to have more harmony and collaborate better within the system, whether it be in education or health, and to raise the bar in every part of our province to get better results. That is the goal of the secretariat. It will continue to provide for that goal and to work toward a better outcome.

ACCESSIBILITY

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I think that I heard a bit of an offer to table a summary of a report of the work that the secretariat is doing. We will certainly look forward to that. Thank you.

Another inspiring inductee into the Order of New Brunswick this morning was Joanne McLeod. Joanne is a trailblazing lawyer who advocates for improving conditions for people with mobility impairments, and that brought something else to mind for me. New Brunswick is one of the last provinces in Canada to develop accessibility legislation. The Premier's Council on Disabilities recommended that an Act be put in place by the end of 2021. Last December, the select committee promised draft legislation within a year. So, here we are. Could the Premier confirm whether this House can expect an accessibility Act within this deadline?

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Bill Oliver): The Minister responsible for Seniors.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Hon. Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, Minister responsible for Seniors, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am also Chair of the Select Committee on Accessibility in New Brunswick. I am very pleased to report that I have a meeting planned with the accessibility committee, I believe next Tuesday if I am not mistaken, to bring it up to date on where the plan is. We have a draft framework for the legislation. I am very pleased to announce that, and I am very pleased to continue to work on that. So we do have a definite timeline, and I will explain that to the committee first, if you do not mind. Thank you.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): I just have a point to clarify.

The draft framework is going to be shared next Tuesday. I take it that means that an accessibility Act will not be tabled this year. Can you give us a sense of when an accessibility Act will be brought before this House?

Hon. Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, Minister responsible for Seniors, PC): What we want to do is have a draft framework that we can share with some of the presenters who appeared before the accessibility committee. So, it will not be presented in the House this year, but we are looking at the first of next year to present another document of what we heard from the presenters. As I said, first we will go to the accessibility committee to show it the draft framework. That draft framework will be shared with some presenters who want to come back and comment on it. The report itself is called *Nothing About Us, Without Us*, so if we have missed something, we want to know. We hope to present that to the committee and then to the groups who want to present to us. Work on the legislation is now ongoing. The work is being done in tandem.

[Translation]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier's Council on Disabilities is responsible for this file. One of this council's reports promised that a bill on accessibility would be tabled in 2021. I appreciate that the minister who chairs the committee is speaking on the issue, but the goal will clearly not be achieved.

[Original]

It sounds as though you are saying that you will not get that legislation tabled this sitting. It is disappointing that the 2021 objective has been missed, and now, the year-end date set by the committee has been missed.

This is an authority that reports to the Premier. Given that the Premier's Council on Disabilities has a report that identifies this as one of the things that is underway but not yet complete, could the Premier tell us what actions are being taken to complete the other 47 recommendations in that report?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Hon. Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, Minister responsible for Seniors, PC): I will be quite honest. I am not familiar with all the items in the report of the Premier's Council on Disabilities. However, we are not working within its timeline. As a committee of all parties, we are working within our timeline and within the timeline of the people who need the help. If we have taken a little bit longer to do this, it is just because we are being more thorough. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, minister. I am disappointed that the Premier does not want to answer questions about the Premier's Council on Disabilities and does not appear to be familiar with the work being done on accessibility. I think that is consistent with what we have seen with reports, such as the Commissioner on Systemic Racism's report, which has not been responded to, and as we talked about, the *Official Languages Act*, where we see no progress either.

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

I am going to switch gears to the announcement earlier this week about the changes to a \$200 supplement for social assistance. I am hoping the minister can clarify for us whether government members considered raising the social assistance rate for everyone. Was that considered? If so, why did they choose not to raise the rate and instead design this as a supplement? If they did not consider raising the rate, how come?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Yes, we considered all avenues to raise the rates because we are about helping New Brunswickers, and we understand that this demographic is the most vulnerable demographic in New Brunswick. We did consider different ways that we could provide additional funds to recipients of social assistance, but we also recognized that the speed of getting the supplement out was the most important thing. Changing the rates would take a much longer time than adding a supplement to existing rates. We had a plan to raise the rates in April, along with the CPI increase. We wanted to move it ahead because we understand the affordability issues that New Brunswickers are facing, so we put a supplement in place because we could release that much faster. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the minister's response, but I would just like a few clarifications. So, can we expect there to be, alongside the CPI increase in April, an increase in social assistance benefits?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

Do I understand that the supplement . . . Is there going to be a CPI increase in April and an increase to the rates?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Raising the rates according to the CPI in April happens no matter what. We have now built that into the legislation and regulations. That happens every year.

This \$200 supplement that I announced earlier in the week is going to be released in February. The people who are receiving social assistance will receive an additional \$200 in February on their February assistance. Again, it is this way because of the speed. We really needed to get this out.

We understand that there are affordability issues in New Brunswick. We need to help New Brunswickers, and we looked at the ways to best help the most struggling New Brunswickers. Adding a supplement of \$200 for individuals beginning in February is moving it ahead because we had planned to do it in April. Now we are doing it in February. These are the additional funds that we had to request to be able to do that this year. I am really pleased and proud of my team at Social Development for bringing this in.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you for that. I just want to make sure that I am absolutely clear. There is the \$200 in February, and then the rate will go up by \$200 plus CPI. No, it will just go up by CPI. There is no increase to the rate. There is a supplement in February, and it becomes a monthly supplement.

We mentioned working with people and supporting the most vulnerable, so that is our other question. We saw that the initiatives were targeted to a group of low-income seniors and targeted to people who are on social assistance. I wonder about people with disabilities who are receiving a disability benefit. Did you consider raising the disability benefit rate? If so, why did you not raise it? If you did not consider it, why not?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Before I get into that piece, I will just clarify that the \$200 supplement is \$200 per month. Starting in February and for every month after February, people will be receiving an additional supplement of \$200 to their assistance.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Also, we have done the work with a lot of reform around social assistance. Every April, it gets increased according to CPI. The \$200 starts in February. We will look at the CPI rate in April, and the base amount will be increased by CPI.

Disability . . . Okay, thank you very much. We are continuously looking at all our programs at Social Development. One in particular is our disability program. This is something that we have made a focus. We are doing the work around that and considering what our options are to support persons with disabilities in New Brunswick. Thank you.

[Translation]

HOUSING

Mr. Losier (Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, I took part in a youth housing summit in Saint John. The room was full of experts—and I do say experts—in the field. To my great surprise—but not really—none of these experts shared what the Premier said about housing and homelessness challenges being good challenges to face. Each time the Premier speaks, the bar gets lower; I always think it cannot possibly get any lower, but that seems to be what is happening.

I have a question for the Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation. Last month, I asked her a question about the rent bank. You said that January was the target date, but that you were going to do your best to move up that date. Have you been able to do it? If not—if you have not been able to get it done for January, can you give us a date? Thank you.

[Original]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Yes, that was a good conversation. I have to tell you that I was very disappointed that I was not able to attend the day in Saint John yesterday where they were looking at youth in relation to housing in particular. My team was there, though, and team members provided good feedback. We are going to have a good discussion about anything that they learned there that we may be able to implement in the next version of our Housing Strategy as we continue to update it.

Yes, we had a very good conversation about the Rent Bank. Actually, because you were there, you missed my comments yesterday. I will be coming back to the House not next week but the week after as that will be the six-month mark since releasing the *Housing for All* strategy. I will give an update to the House on everything related to the Housing Strategy and what we have accomplished in the past six months, what we have learned, and changes that we are going to be making. I can tell you that there is going to be some

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

discussion around some things with the Rent Bank. I am going to be really excited to talk to you about that in about a week. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. Losier (Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the minister for her response. From October 2022 to October 2023, the average rent increased by 9%, which is three times higher than the inflation rate in the province.

I assume that the Premier is going to say that it is a good challenge to face or that he is going to blame the federal government, but, if we compare the situation to what it was three years ago, there has been a 28.7% increase, which is the largest increase in Canada. It is double the Canadian average.

[Original]

So, minister, provinces have rent caps in place. A rent cap works. It worked here. Will you put a rent cap back in place? If not, can you explain that to us?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Housing is such . . . It just shows that, when you are quoting numbers, there are so many numbers related to housing. StatCan collects numbers. Our municipalities collect numbers. We collect numbers. Then the team at NB Housing has to take all that data and try to boil it down and understand what measures we can put in place to really change the face of housing in New Brunswick. Much of that is associated with the vacancy rate that we have, which is way too low right now.

One of the things that we found out when we were doing the *Housing for All* strategy was that there is no one measure that is going to fix this. There is not one thing that can fix this. There is not one group. There is not one government department. There is not one anything that can fix this. A rent cap is not going to fix our housing problems. It is a piece of the puzzle that we must consider. So, Mr. Speaker, I would like to say that that is all part of the housing strategy. We released 22 of the measures that we put in place. That is just one piece.

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

Mr. Losier (Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So, I am going to have to assume that that is a no. You are helping New Brunswickers, but not too much, because it would be very important to have a rent cap put in place. Anyway, let's go to something else.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

A few weeks ago, I asked: Of the \$500-million budget, where was the money spent? You offered to sit down with me, in a briefing, which I did. I appreciate that very much. You did a heck of a job, by the way, and I appreciate that. But there is one element that you did not want to answer or you could not answer. That is: Where was that money spent? I will ask again today. Can you share where that money has been spent and where is it going to be spent? Where are we standing right now with that \$500-million budget?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We did not get into those details. We did talk about a lot of details when we got together and talked about the housing strategy. We talked about all of the 22 initiatives and where we stand with those.

I will throw an offer out to you. When I do my update in a week and a half, I will include the financial piece related to that as well. It is supposed to be a comprehensive update. I want the House to know where we stand with our *Housing for All* strategy and all the measures that we put in place.

I would hope that the member opposite would agree, as we sat down and had our discussion around the 22 measures and where we are at with them, that we have made a lot of progress in our five and a half months. We are two weeks short of our six months. We have made a lot of progress. We have learned a lot in the past five and a half months as well, Mr. Speaker. There are changes that we are going to have to make and things that we need to consider, but we have made a lot of progress. I am really pleased with the team at NB Housing. It was a very good move to bring the Housing Corporation in, as a standalone entity, and let those staff row the boat related to housing.

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

[Translation]

NURSING HOMES

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The next issue is a very serious one that is close to my heart. Listen, it is not an issue with which to play politics. It is an issue that is close to our hearts on the opposition side. I talked to the Minister of Social Development and the Minister Responsible for Seniors about it and I know this is an issue that is also close to their hearts.

Mr. Speaker, it was stated in committee that the air circulation in up to 73% of long-term care facilities may be conducive to the spread of viruses. Seniors were severely affected during the pandemic. They are some of our more vulnerable people. This is about not only our seniors, but also the staff in these facilities.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

A large-scale project will have to be undertaken to get the air quality to an acceptable level for our seniors, and this project absolutely has to be undertaken. This is very serious. The health of our seniors depends on it. So, could you give us some clarification about the timeline of the work and the measures that will be taken? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

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

Hon. Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, Minister responsible for Seniors, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I have stated in this House before, we are well aware of the air quality situation in our nursing homes. Some of them do need to be upgraded and repaired.

We have 22 major projects underway at nursing homes now, and we also have a full assessment on the remaining nursing homes just to see what upgrades need to be made. We are very aware of the situation, and we are very concerned about keeping our seniors healthy. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Let's continue to talk about seniors. Yesterday we learned through the media that there are CUPE members who are negotiating with the government. It would seem that there is now an impasse in the negotiations.

Not all the employees can go on strike, because an Act prevents them from doing so—I believe it was Bill 17 at the time it was tabled. However, if a designation is made, up to 40% of employees can go on strike, which would leave only 60% of staff to take care of seniors. As I have already said, we have seen how hard seniors were hit during the pandemic. So, we need every employee, because our seniors deserve that.

So, to whoever would like to respond to it, here is my question on the matter: When is the government going to sit down with them to negotiate in good faith in order to avoid drastic measures that would have seniors pay the price again? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the question. We cannot ever talk about bargaining in the House very much. We cannot bargain here. Having said that, we are bargaining all the time. We are going to conciliation, if need be, and we will go further than that if it has to be that way. But we are always doing serious bargaining with all the unions. The nursing homes are dealt with through the Nursing Home Association. The association does our bargaining for the unions, in that case. Yes, bargaining continues, and conciliation,

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

if needed, will be the next step. But, I mean, do you know what? We continue. But we certainly cannot bargain in here.

[Translation]

ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, New Brunswick is a beautiful province with a vast natural landscape. That is one of the reasons people like to live in it or visit it as tourists. Despite that, New Brunswickers' health is being threatened by pollution and environmental toxins, and the people of the province deserve a clean and healthy environment. That includes clean air to breathe and clean water to drink, and it means that they are not made sick by pollution and toxins.

I have a simple yes or no question for the Minister of Environment and Climate Change. Does he support New Brunswickers' right to a clean and healthy environment?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Crossman (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, PC): Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Thanks for the question from across the way. Of course, we support a clean environment all the way around. As you know, I mentioned before that everything touches the air, the land, and the water. It is certainly important that we have clean air to breathe. You were talking about the air quality in the schools yesterday as well as in nursing homes and at industrial sites a few minutes ago. This is very important, and our department takes it seriously. There are boots on the ground to identify any areas of concern that you may have. We have always had an open conversation. If you wish to reach out on particular situations, please continue to do so, or you could set up a meeting. That would be fine too. Thank you.

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I did not quite hear whether the minister specifically supports the right to a healthy and clean environment. Either way, it is obvious, under this minister and the previous Liberal and Conservative Environment Ministers, that New Brunswickers do not and have not had this right. Just look around the province. The explosion at the AIM Recycling facility in Saint John has contaminated the vegetables that people grow in their backyards, let alone their air. The stench of the Coastal Shell plant in Richibucto is so bad that residents cannot go outdoors. Parlee Beach has been plagued by e-coli contamination that is caused by campground development, and it is making the water unsafe to swim in. Need I go on?

How does the Minister of Environment find these things acceptable for the residents of Saint John, Richibucto, and Shediac if he really supports New Brunswickers having the right to a healthy and clean environment?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Hon. Mr. Flemming, K.C. (Rothesay, Minister of Justice, Attorney General, PC):

Mr. Speaker, a right is something that is actionable in law. Certainly, there are many aspects of our law. There is the law of nuisance, pollution, and everything else like that. Of course, people should have clean air and clean water. I mean, what do you expect, for us to stand up here and say that we are in favour of dirty air and dirty water?

Well, of course we are not. The suggestion otherwise is ridiculous.

I will say this. You use the example of AIM. Well, I am going to tell you that I am on the AIM task force, and I know about the kind of work that is being done there. I know about the research, I know about the experts that we have hired, and I know about the work that we have done. I want to assure you that under no circumstances is this government sitting idly by because of the results and because of what happened at AIM. We will be forthcoming with a complete and full report, and it will give a complete analysis of what happened. Situations like that are not tolerable in this province and will not be tolerated in this province. And yes, New Brunswickers will breathe clean air and drink clean water.

(Applause.)

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, thank you, thank you. That is enough, thank you.

HEALTH CARE FUNDING

On another subject—I know that there are people here today who are very interested in this question—in the last budget, personal support workers got a raise of \$2.50 per hour, and we agree that they deserve at least that. There is no doubt about it—no doubt about it. It is very important. In the same sentence, we saw that human service counselors got \$1. We heard, and I know that the stakeholders heard, that this difference in the hourly wage might be corrected. I think that those people have received a letter saying that it is not going to happen this year. My question is this. Why was the \$2.50 not distributed equitably among the groups? Was that an oversight?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. At the Department of Social Development, we value the team that supports the work we do to protect seniors, to take care of seniors, to take care of people with disabilities, and to take care of the children who need our assistance. The different designations that you have talked about are very important in that continuum of providing care to our most vulnerable New Brunswickers.

There were increases put in place last year. There is some concern around how those increases happened. I can assure the member opposite that our team at Social

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Development is reviewing the salaries and the associated finances around that, and we will have a consideration and information to bring forward at budget time with some requests around salaries and whatnot. That is all being taken care of and considered, and there will be more to talk about with respect to that once we get into the budget in the new year. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to revert to where we left off because I think the minister had an opportunity to tell us whether affordability measures for people with disabilities were considered and why the government decided not to increase their benefit or add a supplement there. I am hoping she can get to that piece of the answer, which I know she ran out of time for.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you for your consideration to let me try to finish what I was saying. A minute can be a very long time or a very short time, depending on the question that is asked.

Yes, Mr. Speaker, over the past several years, we have done a lot of work around social assistance rates and disability rates and allowing some income associated with that. All kinds of work has been done over the past two or three years, with changes, but we are not done yet. I think that the \$200 supplement is definitely an example of how we are considering carefully what is required and making changes.

Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that the disability benefits and the associated programs are a passion of mine. We are working as a team now to look at how the funds associated with those are distributed and at the needs, and then associating that with the budget requests that would be required. It is something that we are actively working on, but it is not ready to go yet, as the \$200 supplement is. There will be more to come on that.

HEALTH CARE

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have talked quite a bit today about different vulnerable communities and minority groups. We have talked about the importance of clean air in nursing homes. We have talked about the importance of support for people who are struggling with the cost of living.

We are hearing right now that a lot of people are struggling with their health. It is flu season. We are seeing a rise in COVID-19 hospitalizations. We are seeing a rise in RSV cases. By this time last year, we had had an update from Public Health on the state of the

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

health of the province, with advice to New Brunswickers on how they should handle all these different illnesses. I got a report this morning that three nurses at the Moncton Hospital are out because they have tested positive for COVID-19, and thus, they are not there to serve people with their health care needs.

I would like to ask the minister whether the Chief Medical Officer of Health will be doing an update for the people of New Brunswick on the state of the flu and illness season anytime soon.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Chief Medical Officer will be giving an update when they see fit. We do not direct them in any way.

But, Mr. Speaker, I find myself keeping the opposition accountable once again here in the House of the Legislature. Yesterday, the Leader of the Green Party said that we are cutting the ribbon on “an unequipped, understaffed clinic”, and he said that we are cutting ribbons on “empty clinics”. The reality or the fact is that that clinic that we cut the ribbon on yesterday, the urgent treatment centre in the Brookside Mall, had staff—doctors, NPs, and nurses. It had equipment—X-ray machines and all kinds of things. It had patients as well, and it had served 60 of them by the noon hour. Mr. Speaker, I ask the member to check his facts. If he was not over the line, he was certainly bordering on being mendacious.

HOMELESSNESS

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I had an additional item that I was not quite ready to report back on yesterday. So today, we are going to talk about the number of 67 that the Leader of the Official Opposition asked about on Tuesday. I would like to report back that, as of November 1, there were 51 individuals who presented as homeless or precariously housed in the St. Stephen regional area. The exact addresses of the geographical area are difficult, since some of the people are of no fixed address, but they are from the catchment areas of Lepreau, St. George, Saint Andrews, St. Stephen, and the Fundy Isles.

The out-of-the-cold shelter in St. Stephen last year had 15 beds. There were 67 unique individuals—this is where the number came from—using this service from last December to the end of April. In March and April, the number of unique individuals using the service for at least one day was 59. Shelter users do not always use the shelters every night. The occupancy rate for that shelter for the winter months was approximately 85%, so that would be 13 beds being used per night.

A rural point-in-time count in the spring of 2023 did not look specifically at . . . Well, it was in that area, but it was associated with the shelters and whatnot. We are going to do an

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

additional point-in-time count this spring in rural areas, looking at both sheltered and unsheltered. We should pick up a point-in-time number for that in the spring. Our new and enhanced outreach services will be able to track more robust data too, because they will be working with individuals in that area. That is a summary of the numbers for you.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for that information. I think that it makes clear the point that St. Stephen is experiencing a significant challenge in terms of people who are experiencing homelessness and find themselves out in the cold right now. I think that the number 51 was given. It is something that is deeply concerning. I understand that the department has been working to try to deal with it. It tried to find space and deemed the space not suitable. The mayor, the councillors, and the community members there are really trying to provide support and to ensure that these 50-some people, or 67 people, are not out in the cold right now. We need more focus and more urgency to make sure that people outside of the urban centres and in rural areas like St. Stephen are getting the attention and the solutions that they deserve. That is a lot of people in a small community.

(Interjections.)

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): I am supposed to ask a question in response? Oh, okay—sorry. When do you expect to have—

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Bill Oliver): Time, member. Minister, the floor is yours for one minute.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There was not really a question there, but I would like to assure the members opposite and the people from the St. Stephen area that we are taking this very, very seriously. In fact, I have a meeting tomorrow with the mayor and some community representatives to try to problem solve this a little more. There is a lot more to this story, and I am not going to share all of that in the House, but it is all hands on deck. We know how critical this is, and we will find a solution. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Bill Oliver): That is the end of question period.