

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



March 27, 2024

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HOMELESSNESS

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, the Premier’s responses made it painfully clear he is out of touch with the struggles of New Brunswickers experiencing homelessness or the work of the people trying to house and support them. His lack of empathy in comments like it’s better to “save people from themselves” is deeply concerning. Worse still is his solution: Lock them up.

This demonstrates his continued pattern of not listening to the people on the ground or to the experts and researchers who have data demonstrating that forced treatment fails.

The solutions are there. Partner with the community sector to build more supportive housing, implement a rent cap, and fund mental health programs, but with this Premier, it’s his way or the highway. Mr. Premier, would you please commit to meeting with the people experiencing homelessness in your backyard and the community leaders trying to support them?

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 watched question period yesterday. I think that the House knows where I am in the afternoons. I am getting treatment for my cancer. I watched question period at the end of the day, after I got done my treatment. I was incredibly concerned. With the way that the opposition members were talking about the situations that we have in our major cities, and with the way that they talked about our interaction with those cities and the people on the ground supporting our homeless population, there were inaccuracies in their statements. How they were talking about how we relate to the service providers on the ground was inappropriate.

Mr. Speaker, we are working with our service providers every day. We are working with our communities every day. We care about these people. We care about the homeless, Mr. Speaker. To act like this government doesn’t care... We’re there every day, on the ground, and we can tell you about all of the people who are homeless, tell you their history, and—

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the minister’s offer. I am hoping that she can give us an update on the housing hub in Saint John as well as the status of this government’s efforts to house people out of the cold in St. Stephen.

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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): Mr. Speaker, we have been working hand in hand with the city of Saint John. There was a statement made yesterday that our homeless hub was not opening until April 1. Did you guys miss us opening it two months early? We opened it two months early, Mr. Speaker, at the request of the city.

We have been working with individuals. We have been supporting the service providers. We have been working hand in hand with the city. We are working on housing plans. I have been talking to the mayor three or four times per day since we've had issues in Saint John. Intimating that we are not involved and do not have boots on the ground is incredibly incorrect.

In St. Stephen, we are working very closely with our service providers there. In fact, our Premier visited St. Stephen and met with the service providers, the councillors, and the mayor because it's such an important situation for us to be dealing with, Mr. Speaker.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): I appreciate the opportunity to recognize the work of Neighbourhood Works in St. Stephen, Mr. Speaker, because it had to step in when the work of the provincial government failed to secure a location and to secure shelter for people after the municipality declared a state of emergency. Thankfully, we have organizations such as Neighbourhood Works that filled the gap when the provincial government's actions didn't get the result, didn't find a location, and didn't secure housing. The community stepped up. Can the minister tell us what is going to happen next in St. Stephen that the provincial government will have supported?

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): With the way that this is being spun, Mr. Speaker, it is as though the service providers are out there doing their work all by themselves. That can't be any further from the truth. We are working hand in hand with the service providers out there in each community. We support nine outreach teams that work with the homeless in different cities and communities around this province. We have service providers identified in our major cities that support this work. Neighbourhood Works is an incredible organization. We have been working hand in hand with it. We fund it, Mr. Speaker.

They are not out there on their own. We are there, supporting them, working hand in hand with the communities. It is very important that we listen to what the communities' needs are, that we work with them, and that, together, we find solutions to the problems that they're facing. We're not telling them this is how it's going to happen; we're working hand in hand with them. In fact, next week, we're sitting down with Neighbourhood Works, the community—

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



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HEALTH CARE

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to stick with St. Stephen for a moment because we've just learned that it is going to be losing two more family doctors in May.

The need for this government to deliver on its promise of a collaborative clinic in that community is urgent. That was a promise made in 2022. We're still waiting to see action and progress on that file. I'm hoping the minister can give us an update. What progress has been made on the collaborative community clinic promised to the people of St. Stephen?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I know St. Stephen is a great part of the province. The doctors down there have done a great job serving the community. We continue to work with the community. There's a committee set up. We're trying to recruit and find doctors to go there and set up a collaborative clinic. We have invested significantly in the budget that was tabled last week in trying to recruit doctors to hard-to-recruit places. Depending on the location, it could be \$50 000 or it could be \$100 000. We are really working hard with the RHAs, and with the human health team within our department in trying to find a person, people, or a group who would work in St. Stephen. It's the same for Sussex, Sackville, and all the other locations. There has been a significant number of advancements in various communities across the province. I know that, from working with Vitalité and Horizon and with the funding we have put here, I expect additional advancements through the year.

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to make sure that I understand the minister's comments correctly because I didn't hear a date or a commitment. It sounds as though there won't be a sense of when that clinic can open until you have the physicians recruited. Is that what I understand? It sounded as though the situation might be a little different in Sussex and Sackville. There was a commitment to establish a collaborative practice in Sussex, again, back in 2022. Here we are in 2024. Can you let us know how much longer the people of St. Stephen should expect to wait to have that team put together? When can the folks in Sussex expect a clinic to be opened?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I don't want to say that the Leader of the Opposition is naïve when it comes to how people get recruited to New Brunswick. The fact of the matter is that doctors are independent business owners who either set up on their own or... We are trying to provide an opportunity for them to set up in a collaborative practice. They are not employees of the government. Doctors are independent people who make decisions on their own.

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The other day, I had a number of doctors located here to do their residencies. Again, that goes back to the work we've been doing with the college and with respect to some of the initiatives that we've put forward. On an exact date, again, that goes back to when someone decides this: Yes, St. Stephen will be the place where I will practice. We are working very, very hard to not only replace doctors there, but also replace doctors right across the province. We'd like to work and make sure that all people—

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

[Translation]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Health's remarks are a little different from those made by the Premier yesterday. In fact, yesterday, the Premier said health care needed to be done differently. He said the system needed to change, while the Minister of Health is still talking about the old system and referring to doctors as though they're entrepreneurs. On our side, we're talking about collaborative care clinics, with everyone working together; that's teamwork where the government plays a role in creating this infrastructure. However, you have only talked about independent family doctors in the old system.

Can you confirm that the clinics that we want to see in place and that you have promised in Charlotte County, Dalhousie, Sussex, and Fredericton will be new team clinic models and that they will be collaborative and forward-looking? These are things health professionals, patients, and MLAs want, a true health system for the future, or are you still...

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, again, the Leader of the Opposition must have missed my debate on the budget because I talked about those collaborative clinics. I would be more than happy to reiterate those 40 minutes of factual information and insightfulness. The member across the way likes to put words in other people's mouths. That's really a disservice to the members here in the province.

Mr. Speaker, when it comes to some of the doctors down in St. George, there are new doctors in St. Stephen and in St. George. They are taking the patients.

When you look at some of the innovative things that are being done here in New Brunswick, you can see that, when we looked at the number of people waiting for a doctor, we developed NB Health Link, where there are clinics set up with electronic medical records. Even though it's a temporary solution, people can go and get their primary care looked after through those clinics—

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

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RENT BANK

Mr. Losier (Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm going to start off by asking a question that I asked last Friday, which is a simple question. There was \$3 million set aside in the budget for the Rent Bank. Up to \$2 750 is set aside for a maximum grant. Up to 750 households could be eligible for that grant. If you do the simple math with a normal calculator, not like the one that the Finance Minister uses, you get a total of \$2 062 500. There is \$900 000 that is not accounted for. Can the minister explain where that money will be used?

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. I can reiterate my answer from last week. As I said, the maximum grant that can be received under the Rent Bank is \$2 500. The average grant that has been distributed so far is around \$1 686. With the original estimate, if you divide the \$3 million by \$2 750, you get 750 households.

However, Mr. Speaker, we know that not every household is getting \$2 750. We're working with each individual who's calling and asking for assistance through the Rent Bank to help them with arrears on their rent and arrears on their utility bills. These amounts are being paid directly to the landlords or the utility providers. We are making that \$3 million go as far as it possibly can in order to help as many New Brunswickers as possible.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Losier (Dieppe, L): I don't even know what to say. It's less painful to go to the dentist and have a tooth pulled than to hear the answers I'm getting, honestly. It's interesting. Anyway, I'm going to send this question in writing, by the way, because I would like to get a real answer.

There's a lack of communication or some total incompetence within this government. I'm going to tell you why I'm saying that; it's simple. Last Friday, after the budget was tabled on Tuesday, the minister said she was going to ask Cabinet to give her more money to build houses. What's happening? Don't Cabinet members talk to each other?

Three days after the budget is tabled, the minister wants to get more money, when she's not spending any right now. Since 2022, \$108 million has been provided, while there has been little or no construction, and the minister is now asking for more money. Can the minister tell us how many houses will be built this year and when?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New

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Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, we tabled the budget. Hopefully, it will get passed very shortly and we will get into main estimates so that I can answer detailed questions on everything, including the Rent Bank—everything.

There was \$100 million set aside for public housing units, Mr. Speaker. We stood up the New Brunswick Housing Corporation and began working on identifying properties and methods for construction. We're working on traditional construction. We're also working with the modular industry. We're working with our municipalities and other government departments to find properties on which to build these houses.

The intent is to have 380 new public housing units. Now, there was a question because we didn't spend what was allocated this year. We've moved it out further. However, I also said that we have 183 units planned to be built this year. There are opportunities for other properties being brought to us every day, and some are really good opportunities.

[Translation]

Mr. Losier (Dieppe, L): In October 2022, \$108 million was set aside, but very few or no construction projects were done. I'm going to ask you a very simple question. You talk about modular housing. Right now, how many contracts are there in the province to build modular housing?

[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, Mr. Speaker. There are seven modular housing providers in the province, and we have been working individually with each of them to determine what they can supply us in terms of housing for our public housing and other opportunities to work with other developers. We have three contracts. I know for sure that one of them is signed. If the other two aren't signed, they are being signed this week, and we will work with three of the modular developers on some of the units this year. We also have relationships with the other four should an opportunity arise that meets what they can build.

Mr. Speaker, housing is a priority for this government. All hands are on deck working on this. When we began putting a focus on modular housing, we had Finance and Treasury Board jump on board. We had RDC jump on board, and all the other departments are working with us so that we can make it a priority to build houses here in New Brunswick. I am excited about the 183 this year, Mr. Speaker.

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CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Mr. Speaker, based on recommendations 19 and 26 of New Brunswick's Climate Change Action Plan for 2022-2027, the Department of Environment was to collaborate with regional service commissions (RSCs), local governments, and rural districts to ensure that, beginning April 1, 2024—in only a few days—progress on GHG reduction and climate change adaptation plan development and implementation is reported annually. We are aware that local government reform imposed a lot of new responsibilities and duties on regional service commissions and municipalities. We also know that municipal financial reform is overdue. Can the Minister of Environment elaborate on the collaboration with RSCs and municipalities in the production of GHG reduction plans and climate change adaptation plans? By the way, can the minister tell us how much he invested per RSC?

Hon. Mr. Crossman (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will take that under advisement and work with the other part of my department, with the Minister of Local Government. Certainly, when it comes to the climate change money, we will be meeting tomorrow about this. Where the funds are going and how much is going where should become public knowledge in the near future. But for the questions you're asking, I'll have to collaborate with the other half of our department and get back to you. Thank you.

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Well, maybe another minister can be responsible for those action plans.

I will ask my questions to another department. The same 2022-2027 New Brunswick Climate Change Action Plan elaborated 30 main recommendations directed to different departments. By 2024, the Department of Justice and Public Safety was to “evaluate options to optimize available disaster financial assistance so that New Brunswick property owners have increased access to funds needed to implement proactive measures that reduce the impacts of future climate conditions and extreme weather events.” That was recommendation 28, by the way.

[Translation]

Can the Minister of Justice or the Minister of Public Safety give us specifics on the options evaluated, the evaluation results, how properties will have increased access to funds in order to reduce the effects of climate conditions, and the date this will be done? Thank you.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Minister of Public Safety, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, we actually did. I don't know where the member opposite was when we passed legislation in relation to Disaster Financial Assistance. Maybe he dozed off for a bit.

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But we did actually increase the amount allocated for people who are victims of flooding and other natural disasters from \$160 000 to \$200 000. In that legislation, we also ensured that the same properties could not continually draw from that bank over and over again. We capped how much each PID could get from that.

Now, in terms of mitigation, I would recommend that the opposition party members talk to their cousins in the Trudeau government in Ottawa to ensure there is mitigation funding allowed so that, when places like Sussex flood, there will be mitigation money there to build and to mitigate future flooding in these circumstances. But we've made the changes, so I don't know what he's looking for.

MACTAQUAC DAM

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is spring. The snow is melting, the sun is shining for some, the birds are chirping, and lovers are coming out. And, once again, we don't know how the EUB is going to be involved in the Mactaquac life project. How is it going to look at the finances?

I asked the question to NB Power at the public accounts committee, and in an I'm-not-touching-that-with-a-10-foot-pole answer, NB Power said: Call the department, and ask the minister. So I am asking the minister once again. How will the EUB be involved in looking at the financial aspects of the Mactaquac project that is \$3 billion or so? It is kind of big, and it would be nice to know.

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development; Minister of Indigenous Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, I, too, share the optimism of spring as we move into this period in the Legislature. As I enter the latter part of my career here in the Legislature, I want to provide some answers to the member opposite about the substance of what the issue is. That Mactaquac project is significant. It is the battery to back up the generation of power here in New Brunswick. It is not something that we are taking lightly. We are reviewing all aspects of it.

NB Power is putting together a number of different presentations that it is going to bring to us. I don't have a particular date circled on the calendar for when NB Power is going to bring them to us, but I will tell you this: I would far sooner have NB Power measure twice, cut once, and put something together that is valuable. The EUB will have a lens on the financial component of that. We have said that since day one. The EUB will be overseeing—

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



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HEALTH CARE FUNDING

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, New Brunswickers without a doctor or a nurse practitioner are really at the end of their rope. The stopgap measure that this government has put in place, called NB Health Link, which the government hired Medavie to provide, now has waiting lists to get on the waiting list to see a health care provider at one of its private clinics. It is not working. Replacing solo doctor practices with collaborative care teams has been trumpeted as the solution since Premier Bernard Lord was in this House, yet where is the big push?

It takes a budget big enough to pay the team members who are working with the physicians, whether they are part of a family practice or working in a community health centre. Can the Minister of Health tell this House how much Horizon's budget request was to establish collaborative care teams in family practices and at community health centres for the coming year?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am amazed that the member from the Green Party is dissing NB Health Link. This is a made-in-New Brunswick success story that has actually reduced the number of people on the wait list waiting for doctors from a high of . . . Well, the numbers keep changing on a regular basis, but right now, there are just over 54 000 people who are registered with access. Another 30 000 people are registered and are just waiting for the clinics to open up. We have a clinic on the Northside that is just about ready to open up and expand. We have a clinic on Mapleton Road in Moncton.

Mr. Speaker, that is access. That is access to primary care in order to find a solution to the problems that other jurisdictions right across Canada are facing. You don't have to look far. Our friends in Nova Scotia have a waiting list of over 200 000 people without a family doctor. There is a significant investment being made in this budget. I am anxious to get to the estimates where—

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

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, I invite the Minister of Health to join me in my constituency office to meet with constituents who are on the waiting list for the waiting list to see a primary health care provider through his NB Health Link success.

Mr. Speaker, when the former Attorney General with Premier David Alward... Let me start over. When the Attorney General was former Premier David Alward's Minister of Health, he was a big supporter of collaborative care teams then. No one has made an argument to the contrary, yet New Brunswickers remain largely dependent on solo family practices if they are lucky enough to have a doctor or a nurse practitioner. Vitalité has a plan to convert all the solo doctor family practices in its regions to collaborative family care teams. Can the



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minister tell the House how much Vitalité requested in this budget to achieve this, and what is actually included to transition the Vitalité regions to collaborative family care?

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

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much. Yes, Vitalité is one of the partners that we have that is moving a number of doctors into collaborative practices. We are committing \$20 million to Vitalité right now, in this budget, to expand those family practices and make them into collaborative practices.

Mr. Speaker, there were a number of suggestions with Vitalité that savings would occur as these doctors took on a larger number of patients. We want to see those results. We want to see how that rolls out. We know that there are aggressive plans by Horizon, by Vitalité, and by the New Brunswick Medical Society to move the existing doctors into those collaborative practices. This government is behind that investment. This government is making significant investments in the medical field.

Again, with NB Health Link as a temporary measure, that is a way that allows people to get to primary care now as—

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

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, in a landmark report from a forum of medical associations, health care workers, health NGOs, and unions that was hosted by the New Brunswick Nurses' Union and the New Brunswick Medical Society, it is said that an investment of \$70 million would be required in this budget to move away from solo family practices to collaborative care teams, whether the teams be in family practice settings or in community health centres. The Vitalité Health Network has said it will take \$56 million to transform the solo family practices in its regions into collaborative family care teams.

As the minister pointed out, this budget contains only \$20 million for this purpose across the entire province between Horizon and Vitalité. Mr. Speaker, I want the Minister of Health to explain to this House why he wasn't successful in making their case to the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the logic of the Green Party today is just totally flawed. When the member talks about there being only \$20 million, \$20 million is a significant investment to move physicians into collaborative practice. We're anxious to see those results. I visited the clinic in Dieppe, which is an example of how these collaborative practices work with a number of RNs and a number of admin staff who are, again, covered by the RHAs. This frees up the doctor's time to check on the patients as the RNs or NPs are working to their full scope of practice. That clinic is going to expand, and they expect that they'll be able to take on 15 000 patients in the not-too-



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distant future, Mr. Speaker. That's the model. Though the members opposite minimize the investment made in health care—

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

PULP AND PAPER MILLS

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I'd like to raise a subject that's been raised in this House repeatedly over the past three or four years.

[Translation]

The decommissioned plant in Bathurst is an issue people talk to me about every day and every time I'm in my riding.

[Original]

That is the Bathurst mill site. I know that you all have your pinned-up calendars. I'm sure they're hanging prominently somewhere in your offices thanks to my colleague from Bathurst West-Beresford who has been passionately communicating about the importance of this file to the people of Bathurst ever since he was elected.

I was pleased to see that the Premier made a trip up to Bathurst so that he could see for himself this site that is ugly, dangerous, and depressing. Some people call it a war site. My kids call it the apocalypse place that we drive by on the way in and out of Bathurst.

[Translation]

I know a lot of people were very excited about this visit.

[Original]

Can the Premier confirm, for the record, for the people of Bathurst, that he will clean up the mill site?

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

[Translation]

Hon. R. Savoie (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the Leader of the Opposition for her question. I can assure you we are very up to date on the decommissioned plant in Bathurst.

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We at the Regional Development Corporation have also helped the city of Bathurst to hire a consulting firm, Roy Consultants, to assess the site and make recommendations to the city.

I can also confirm that we are still in discussions and working with the city of Bathurst...

