

HANSARD

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COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, March 2, 2022

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER/VIDEO CONFERENCE

Housing Repair Programs for Low Income Seniors

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Public Accounts Committee

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John A. MacDonald
Melissa Sheehy-Richard
Trevor Boudreau
Hon. Brendan Maguire
Claudia Chender
Susan Leblanc

[John A. MacDonald was replaced by Kent Smith.]

In Attendance:

Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

Andrew Atherton,
Assistant Auditor General

WITNESSES

Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing

Paul LaFleche,
Deputy Minister

Kim Silver,
Director - Home and Community

Faizal Nanji,
Executive Director - Policy, Planning, Corporate Services

Department of Seniors and Long-Term Care

Paul LaFleche,
Deputy Minister

Stephan Richard,
Executive Director - Housing Solutions and Development

Ed Lake,
Executive Director - Housing Authorities

Neil MacDonald,
Director - Housing Services



HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 2, 2022

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Hon. Kelly Regan

VICE CHAIR

Nolan Young

THE CHAIR: I now call to order the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. My name is Kelly Regan. I'm the MLA for Bedford Basin and the Chair of this committee.

A reminder for all of us to place our phones on silent or vibrate and keep your mask on except for when you are speaking. I'm going to ask committee members to introduce themselves, beginning with Mr. Young.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I would note that officials from the Auditor General's Office, Legislative Counsel Office, and Legislative Committees Office are in attendance as well.

On today's agenda, we have officials with us virtually from the Department of Seniors and Long-term Care and the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing to discuss housing-repair programs for low-income seniors.

I'm going to ask the witnesses to introduce themselves, beginning with Deputy Minister LaFleche.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Now we will invite Deputy Minister LaFleche to make his remarks.

PAUL LAFLECHE: Good morning, Madam Chair, and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting us here - from both departments - to speak to you about housing-repair programs for low-income seniors. As you probably know, I'm the deputy minister of both departments. These two hats will come in handy today, I'm sure.

Because no single person has all the answers, I brought a team with me, who were just introduced, from both departments. Since we have got a common deputy minister, we have started working together very closely since the Fall.

Older Nova Scotians are a vital part of our society. Many are working and contributing to their chosen field. They may be operating a small business or volunteering. They're often the backbone of their families and their communities. We want them to be able to stay in their homes and in those communities, living independently, for as long as they wish.

To that end, the Province has a number of programs designed to help low-income seniors remain in their homes for as long as they can. This year we have nearly \$19 million available for home repair and adaptation programs. These things include roofing, electrical, or changes that can make a home more accessible to a senior. We have programs targeted directly to seniors only and programs that are targeted in general to the public. Seniors can access all of those programs - and they do.

As of December 2021, more than a thousand senior households had received over \$11 million for home repair and adaptation in this fiscal year alone. We helped 1,860 households on average every year, and 67 per cent of those that receive our assistance are seniors. Seniors have good access to our programs and they are getting the bulk of our funding. Nova Scotians who have projects funded tell us that they appreciate not just the repairs but the peace of mind that having that work done can bring.

I am very pleased to be able to tell you that within this fiscal year, we have allocated an additional \$4 million to the home-repair program to help with emergency repairs during these challenging times of COVID. We also have programs that specifically help people to adapt their homes to become more accessible. Most of these are available to the disability community in general, but older Nova Scotians can also take advantage of these programs to adapt their homes as they age and their mobility has greater challenges.

For all of our programs, emergencies are always a priority. If a low-income senior has a problem with their heating system or their roof or they're about to come home from the hospital with a mobility challenge that they didn't have before they went in, we would

move that person to the top of our list and ensure that they get the support they need as quickly as possible.

We know older Nova Scotians sometimes need more than just home repair in order to maintain their independence. Sometimes they need some support with lawn mowing, snow shovelling, or the other basic daily activities of life. The Province offered, as of this Fall, a new Seniors Care Grant. Low-income seniors can qualify for \$500 once a year to help pay for home repairs, lawn care, snow removal, house cleaning, and grocery or medication deliveries.

I'd like to close by thanking the staff who go above and beyond to support the people applying for our help. They know that older Nova Scotians have worked hard for their families and their communities for decades, and someone should work hard for them. They do their utmost to help people get the repairs they need and clear any obstacles so they can continue to live independently. Thank you. We'd be happy to take your questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Minister LaFleche. We're going to start the first round of questioning for 20 minutes per caucus. We begin with the Liberal Party, then the NDP, then the PC caucus. I just want to let our witnesses know that when the time is up, I will interject. I'm not being rude. I just want to let you know that I will interrupt at that point, and then we'll have a second round of questioning afterward as well. With that, I will call on Mr. Maguire to begin questioning.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Thank you to the witnesses for appearing here today. On my drive in here during a freezing cold snowstorm - the last couple of days, we know have been to the point where - I have three small children, and the schools weren't letting them outside to play because it was so cold. On my drive here, I go down Chebucto Road in Halifax, and I saw multiple tents - some with seniors in them - set up on the side of the road.

The tents have not decreased in that spot. The only thing that has decreased is, over the weekend, a kitchen facility was removed, one that was to be used to store food in a safe manner and cook food in a safe manner. We're seeing tents pop up all over the city, and all over Nova Scotia.

Speaking to our shelter providers, they are jam-packed. They could take on a lot more, and they're turning people away: people of all ages and all abilities. HRM here in Halifax has actually stepped up, and they'll argue that they're doing the job of the Province. We just recently saw that they've opened the Pavilion at The Common to deal with homelessness. They've purchased smaller homes to deal with homelessness.

This is an issue because in the last sitting, the Progressive Conservative Party stood here in the House and made an announcement around housing. They said, and I quote: Winter is coming. They actually stole that quote from me. The Premier and the minister

said, Winter is coming. (Interruption) And I stole it from *Game of Thrones*, I'm not going to lie. They said that this issue was dealt with, they were going to deal with this - \$10 million to deal with homelessness and the importance of getting people off the streets before Winter started.

I have visited the homeless encampments in HRM. They are telling me that the resources they needed were not being provided. There was a gentleman there who could be somebody's grandfather, and probably is someone's grandfather, and he's dealing with medical issues.

[9:15 a.m.]

The help they are getting is from volunteers on the ground. There were some painful videos coming out on the weekend where we had volunteers who would raise thousands of dollars crying because of the way the homeless on Chebucto Road were being treated. We were told in the last session that this issue was to be dealt with, that everybody - that was what the government was saying - was going to be put in hotels and have access to hotels before Winter started. That is simply not true. It hasn't happened. Our shelters are bursting at the seams.

My question to whoever wants to take this is: How much of that money has been spent, the \$10 million? Why do we still have seniors living on the street? What is remaining of that \$10 million to help those individuals get off the street, and why are they saying - I know what the response is going to be in a roundabout way from the department, but the individuals on the street are saying they are not getting the help they need and deserve. This is a basic human right, so why are they not getting it? Where has the money been spent, and what is the solution? Now that Winter's here and it's almost over, I guess this new slogan will be, Spring is here, Spring has sprung.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LaFleche.

PAUL LAFLECHE: Thank you very much, Member Maguire, I guess. Is that what I call them, Madam Chair?

THE CHAIR: MLA Maguire, Mr. Maguire, the Honourable Mr. Maguire.

PAUL LAFLECHE: MLA Maguire. The Honourable Mr. Maguire. He is honourable. I'll start by saying I think it's "Pavilion," the word you were searching for, and I'm glad to hear that you've superseded all those CBC weather people and declared the end of Winter. That's great news for all of us here who got up this morning and were late getting in.

I just want to emphasize that I think both of my ministers, Minister Lohr and Minister Adams, take what you said very seriously about the homelessness and the living

on the street, and some other issues. This is a very important topic, and it's so important that I believe that it is the topic for next week's Public Accounts Committee, not this week's, so I will be reappearing next week with Deputy Minister Taweel, who is in charge of some of what you mentioned in terms of programming and funding, and we will jointly address that issue next week.

This week we are here and we have the staff here to address the issue of seniors' home repair programs. I know that's not an adequate answer for what is a very serious issue and question, but I want to assure you and the public that we will be here and able to deal with that subject on March 9th at Public Accounts.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'll let seniors living on the street know that they'll have to wait another week to get the answers on where the resources are for them. Again, I know we're here about programs for seniors, but some of those people are waiting to get into long-term care. Some of those individuals are waiting to get into shelters. Another week I guess is just another week.

Having regional data is essential for us to make decisions. We know that 11 counties are missing reasonable long-term care wait times. Why is this data missing, and how can seniors and their families make their best decisions without this?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I think you're referring to the data that apparently during the last session of the last government were stopped being reported on the long-term care wait site. I know it really has nothing to do with seniors' home repair, but out of courtesy, I will attempt to address the question.

That's really a question that you should ask Minister Adams, or whoever was the last Minister of Health and Wellness under the last government. Minister Adams did commit in December to getting the long-term care wait times up. She recommitted, and I recommitted again when we went to the Standing Committee on Health and Wellness. I believe Ms. Langille could correct us, but I believe that was some time in January. Is that correct?

KIM LANGILLE: Yes.

PAUL LAFLECHE: We will be getting those wait times up again. They are posted. I am told they are posted, but in doing a deep dive on the data which has been collected by many governments for many years, we have discovered that the way the data is collected and the way it's posted is not exactly that informative for people. We will be reformulating that in the near future and doing a deeper dive on data so that people can really understand the wait times in long-term care.

The 11 facilities you were referring to are the facilities that did not answer an initial questionnaire. I'm pleased to say that I wrote them an evil letter, and I might have even

threatened them that I would show up with you, MLA Maguire, to their doorsteps. I think at least 10 have responded, and we will have their data soon. That's sort of a long answer to a question which is really not on today's seniors home repair topic, but I am pleased to answer it.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: The interrupter clause was used for the price of diesel. The price of gas is creeping toward an all-time high. Energy experts are saying that we're going to hit \$2. Originally, they said before the Summer, now with the crisis in Ukraine, experts are now saying that \$2 are going to hit before the Summer. Inflation is at 4.9 per cent. The cost of food has increased 6 per cent. I mean, statistically, to say the cost of shelter's increased 6 per cent - I would argue that it's up a lot more. The 500 block in Spryfield which used to be \$800 a month for a two-bedroom is now going for \$2,000 a month. Those were supposed to be affordable places.

We know the seniors' pensions do not adjust to inflation. One of the programs that has been spoken about is the \$500 grant. If you live in West Pennant in my riding, to get to the hospital and back, that's about \$120 dollars. That's three trips to the hospital. I'd like to know where the \$500 amount came from, and is there any talk about adjusting that due to the ever-rising cost of living?

What I'm hearing from seniors is that while they're glad to have \$500 in the pocket, it's really maybe two days worth of convenience, if they're lucky. Where did the number for \$500 come from? How has it been justified? Has there been talk, now that we're in budget season, that it will increase due to the ongoing inflation issue?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I'm going to start on this one and then I'll pass it to my colleague, Kim Silver. For starts - and I'm sure the member knows - I can't do much about Vladimir Putin, the Ukraine issue, the world price of oil, and stuff like that - and neither can my members, the ministers, or the Premier.

I can tell you that my ministers and the Premier are very worried about cost inflation with respect to seniors and all Nova Scotians. That's one of the reasons that they've done some of the moves they had in certain areas, to limit to the extent that we who live in Nova Scotia can in the greater world, limit price increases.

I believe the \$500 was a campaign promise in the last election. I don't know - I cannot tell you exactly what the basis of the \$500 was, but it was approximately the cost to do something like snow shoveling, et cetera over the Winter. So it actually increased from zero, which it was before, to \$500, which in my math is an infinity increase.

Right now, although many people have accessed the \$500, there are a number of people who have not fully accessed it. We haven't spent all of the money we theoretically allocated towards the \$500 because there are still people out there who haven't accessed it. Whether it should be raised or not due to inflation, this year the inflation was about 5.4 per

cent, and I will certainly feed that into the system, but right now it's \$500 more than it was six months ago. I'll pass this over to Ms. Silver.

THE CHAIR: Actually, Deputy Minister LaFleche, Mr. Maguire would like to ask you a further question.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I just want to correct some misinformation that was stated, that there was no money for snow removal - that's simply not true. There was money put forward, and they could apply. I think it was the Salvation Army and the YWCA in particular. I had multiple seniors in my community apply for that program for snow removal. To say that there was \$500 for snow removal that wasn't there before is not true.

We know that the Department of Community Services and the Department of Seniors and Long-Term Care have given money in the past and continue to give money to seniors for transportation costs to and from medical appointments and things like that. How do I know? Because I've been an MLA for nine years and I've seen it, and we've done it. My office has helped with that. We know that those seniors are getting those grants and getting that money on a regular basis.

I know we heard the deputy minister say that we can't control international affairs, but what you can do is control what's in your backyard. What's in your backyard is inflation and the cost of living going up. I know the \$500 was a campaign promise, but so was a better paycheque for every Nova Scotian, and we're not seeing that. We haven't seen that. In fact, I would argue that because of the cost of living, our paycheques are being stretched even further. That means seniors on a fixed income are being impacted every day. It's one thing to say that it was a campaign promise, but that doesn't stop us or anyone from reviewing a program.

Again, it's great - nobody's complaining that there's an extra \$500. What we're saying is that this is not the be-all and end-all.

I'm looking across to the Progressive Conservative members. Most of them are from rural Nova Scotia. I would argue that if you asked them how much it costs for a senior to go to the grocery store and back to pick up their groceries, or how much it costs for a senior to go to a hospital appointment, they would tell you. They might not tell you publicly, but they'd tell you privately, that's about maybe a week's worth.

We just saw in *allNovaScotia* that some of the services that they're using like Uber Eats and these different delivery services - now that the state of emergency is being lifted, the cost for delivery of those goods and services is going from 15 per cent to 30 per cent. That's going to not only impact small businesses in our community, it's going to impact seniors.

While I understand we can't control international affairs, we have the brain trust and the money here in Nova Scotia to review these programs before they hit the streets. How often is this \$500 - which is about a week's worth of services if we're lucky - how often will this government and those departments commit to reviewing that to see if it's actually benefitting the seniors as they are claiming it's going to?

[9:30 a.m.]

PAUL LAFLECHE: I think if my minister were here - and she's probably furiously texting me - she would say the \$500 is incremental to everything that MLA Maguire mentioned. Why don't I let Kim Silver address this, as she has some expertise on the subject.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Silver.

KIM SILVER: When we determine how much money is available for particular programs, particularly for seniors, one of the things that we need to consider is at what point it would be considered taxable income and generally that's been around \$500. We have based our Caregiver Benefit on that and based this program on that. The challenge is if we go beyond that and it becomes taxable income, then it bumps seniors out of other programs that have income thresholds.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: It was a campaign promise, so who did the government and the department consult with this program? Was it the Group of VI? What seniors groups were consulted to come up with this number, and what was needed?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I worry that we just lost three members of the Group of IX. I'll have to apologize profusely - I will apologize on your behalf, MLA Maguire.

I will ask Ms. Silver that. Do you want to answer that question? Who did we consult with when we designed the program, not selected the \$500? Ms. Silver, are you there?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Silver?

PAUL LAFLECHE: She doesn't want to answer. (Laughs)

KIM SILVER: The program itself was based on input from seniors through the correspondence we received, through information to MLAs' offices, and based on some data from 211 that identified the area of gaps that they were seeing most frequently. Those were put together to develop the program, and as I indicated, the amount was based on the highest we could go without impacting . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for questioning for the Liberal caucus has elapsed. We will now move on to the NDP caucus. Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I guess I want to just start by addressing that last answer and saying that I've been an MLA for five years and never has a government bureaucrat asked me for feedback that has come to my office. I recognize that I am in the Opposition, and certainly I do contact many deputy ministers and other civil servants who are helpful to me. But I'm always a bit wary when I hear that a program has been designed based on feedback from an MLA office, because that is feedback I have never been asked for.

I do want to go back a little bit. Deputy Minister LaFleche, I appreciate your response to my colleague, MLA Maguire, that we will be discussing homelessness at greater depth and affordable housing next week. But I want to ask if you can comment - I guess mostly for the benefit of the public - on the ways in which government departments deal with housing and homelessness. As my colleague mentioned, there is a sense that in a way - here in HRM, anyway - the municipality is a little bit picking up the slack where the provincial government should be acting.

Part of the issue is that no one knows where to direct their questions or their action towards the provincial government. We have a Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, of which you are the deputy minister, but my understanding is that in fact the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing doesn't deal with homelessness, and that that homelessness portfolio sits in the Department of Community Services. As you mentioned, Deputy Minister Taweel will be here next week.

Can you comment on why that's the case when we know that housing exists in a continuum? I will ask more questions about that, but I just want to understand that structure and whether you think it works, given the housing crisis that we're in.

PAUL LAFLECHE: I think that question is probably best left for next week, but I will give you a front-ender to it. I do think that the structure is working. You mentioned the HRM component of it. That's an interesting component that I know my colleague Deputy Minister Taweel is working on.

We would consider the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing to be a service to Community Services in looking at homelessness. As you are well aware, the homeless issue is more than just the physical space, which is what my department works on in Municipal Affairs and Housing. We provide that component, that context to the Department of Community Services, but they have many other things. They have wraparound supports that they supply for the homeless issue.

We'd best leave that for next week. We are one component of it. We work very well with them, and I think our arrangement with them is in a good spot. I'll allow Deputy Minister Taweel next week to address whether or not the arrangements with HRM are working. It's something I can't fully comment on.

We've had one arrangement with them, and I'm trying to think which of my members could answer that arrangement: the hotel in Dartmouth. Stephan Richard apparently will speak to that. That's where we come in and do the physical side of it with the Department of Community Services, and they provide all the other supports that are so necessary to really make an effect on the homeless situation.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LaFleche, I just want to let you know that MLA Chender has signalled to me that she's fine with the answer she's received - or that's all she's going to get today, anyway - so she'd like to move on to other questions. Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I am aware of the Travelodge situation in Dartmouth and that's great. I just want to say that we will pick this up next week, certainly, but space versus housing or infrastructure, I think, is a bit of a false dichotomy when we're in a crisis situation like we are now, and that's actually a good segue to the next question I wanted to ask.

This government is going to lift the renovation ban. The lack of space is going to lead to increased homelessness. On the way in, I just heard someone from the United Way saying that they were absolutely certain that the lifting of the renovation ban would lead to increased pressure on service providers who work - again, even though they provide space - with the Department of Community Services predominantly to provide spaces that don't exist. It might be a hotel room for a night or two, or it might not be.

I think I want to put a pin in that for next week, but I do want to say that the housing crisis that we're facing is also affecting seniors, and that's what we're here to talk about today. We've got a 1 per cent vacancy rate in the market. The renovation ban is lifting. That will impact seniors, absolutely. While we are seeing housing, because the Progressive Conservative government has talked exhaustively about supply, and we take no issue with that - supply is needed - as we have been saying consistently for years and years, targeted supply is also needed.

My question is: What in particular is being done by this government to meet seniors' unique housing needs? What is the plan to build affordable housing specifically for seniors?

PAUL LAFLECHE: That was a long question. I wish to note the renovation ban, which is part of the emergency order under Minister Lohr, will be lifted, but it has been replaced by legislation which was passed in the Fall by Minister LeBlanc. I won't get into that. That's at the Department of Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services with my colleague Joanne Munro, but it's important to note that there are protections for renovations in that new legislation.

With respect to what we are doing in general in affordable housing - whether it be for seniors or in general - I will allow Stephan Richard to answer that question.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Richard.

STEPHAN RICHARD: First of all, I just want to say that we do recognize that older adults are a vital part of our society. We want them to be able to stay in their homes, find homes that are affordable to them that are safe, live in their communities, live independently for as long as they wish.

Typically at the beginning of last fiscal year, we had roughly \$94 million for programs for all low-income seniors. That's our mandate: to help those who are in core housing need, those Nova Scotians who need affordable housing. We received an additional \$32 million to help with the current housing crisis.

There are different ways that we can help renters or home owners. Just to give you a sense - today's topic is more on the home repair side - we have typically a budget of \$15 million for home repair and adaptation. Again, these are programs that help seniors stay in their homes and their community. We've added \$4 million to that budget for emergency repairs. We want to make sure that in today's market conditions, for people who can't move or can't sell their homes because there's nothing else to buy or they can't find rental housing in their community, they have the option to make those emergency repairs to their homes. So on the home repair side, we're looking at a budget of \$19 million this year.

Rent supplement is another key program that we offer to seniors who just can't afford market rent. This is a significant part of what we deliver to renters, and the vast majority are seniors.

On the supply side, we're looking at a planned investment of roughly \$38 million this year - this includes the Rapid Housing Initiative project. When we look at the spectrum of housing, we do provide rental housing that is affordable to those who just can't pay rent, but also, to your point earlier around working with DCS, we have invested in projects like the Travelodge, like Adsum House in Lakeside. We're supporting Akoma Holdings to meet the needs of African Nova Scotians in HRM. We have other projects that will be announced soon. We are providing a broad range of housing options through a broad range of housing programs. We are meeting the needs of seniors.

For all of these programs I just listed, the vast majority - and I forgot public housing, of course. I have my colleagues here from Municipal Affairs and Housing so I don't want to forget them. The vast majority of our clients, are seniors whether they're homeowners or renters in core housing need.

Our team - which I want to commend, again, because they do a tremendous job, day in and day out, to meet the needs of seniors and other homeowners and renters - are

working hard every day to address the situation. We know it's not enough and we need to continue to do so.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thank you for that information, Mr. Richard. I guess I want to address, first, the deputy minister's comment. The legislation being brought in by the Department of Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services will compensate people who are renovicted - it will not maintain a place to live for them. Again, we have a 1 per cent vacancy rate. I don't wish to discuss that further, particularly, other than to just put that on the record.

What is the plan to build seniors-appropriate affordable housing? Mr. Richard, you got at that a little bit, but Adsum, Akoma, Travelodge - none of those are seniors-specific, although I do appreciate that a number of people on those lists are seniors. I wonder if the department has the data to tell us how many seniors-focused units are a part of that envelope. I guess it was \$38 million, you said.

STEPHAN RICHARD: Looking at my notes here, we could provide data on past projects. I can say just off the top that the majority of affordable housing development that we funded in the past number of years was geared toward seniors. I don't have the list in front of me.

Looking at the current investments, or the planned investments, typically they're not necessarily projects that are exclusive to seniors, but are open to a vast majority of low-income Nova Scotians. With this aging population, typically all the developers we work with, and our partners, the data suggest that an important need is from seniors.

But we could look at the data specifically of the projects that were announced previously to see how many of those were targeted at seniors or what kind of mix we're looking at with these projects.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: That would be great. We would love to get that information.

I know there was some back and forth with my colleague around the wait-list, and I think in the end, deputy minister, you did say that those numbers were now available. Whether or not they're posted, I wonder if you could just share with the committee how many seniors are currently on the wait list for public housing. I ask this as an MLA with a number of public housing units for seniors in my own constituency, and a number of folks approaching my office - so here's some MLA office intel - who are in need of housing.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Lake.

PAUL LAFLECHE: Just before Mr. Lake answers, there's some confusion here.

[9:45 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Mr. LaFleche.

PAUL LAFLECHE: I'm sorry. Maybe I didn't understand Mr. Maguire's question because he gave a long discussion about long-term care facilities. I thought he was talking about the wait list for long-term care facilities that the Minister of Health and Wellness during some time in July, I think, stopped posting on the internet, which was . . .

THE CHAIR: Mr. LaFleche, do you have an answer to the question, please?

PAUL LAFLECHE: It's just a different subject. If the subject this time is public housing wait lists, that's a different subject than before.

THE CHAIR: That is what Ms. Chender has asked you about, so if you could just give the answer.

PAUL LAFLECHE: Mr. Lake will answer that question.

ED LAKE: Thank you for the question. The current wait list information that we have going back to September 2001 is that there are about 2,800 seniors that are on the eligibility list for housing. It's important to keep in mind though that while there are 2,800 approved applicants for seniors housing, not all of them are ready to move.

I'm going to estimate that there are probably at least 500 of those individuals that, if you offered them housing today, they wouldn't be ready to move. What you find is that of that list of eligible applicants, they're planning for public housing in the future. It's a good strategy to, as they see it, submit an application, get approved, and then wait for an offer sometime in the future.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you, Madam Chair. How much time is left?

THE CHAIR: You have four minutes.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Hi, everyone; I apologize for being late. I will just ask a quick question about the housing programs for seniors. I will quickly say that my parents are in a situation right now; I asked my dad if it was okay to talk about this. Two weeks ago, my siblings and I went and did a ton of work in their house to keep them in their house. We moved the laundry upstairs, we did a bunch of moving around electrical work, all that stuff.

It's really important work, and it's a really important expenditure because it'll make them happier. It'll keep them happy, and it will save us a lot of money in terms of them

being in hospital or long-term care, that kind of thing. I won't take up any more time, but if anyone wants to ask me about that, happy to talk about it.

One of the problems about this grant is that the income thresholds feel high, or low - I guess low - because the cost of living is going up so rapidly, and with seniors, it doesn't really matter how much income you have, it's still fixed income. Any expense - all of a sudden, someone needs a knee replacement, they can't do stairs anymore. All of a sudden, there's a \$5,000 expense that they were not expecting on a fixed income.

I'm wondering, in terms of those grants, like the Home Adaptation Grant for Seniors' Independence program and the new \$500 grant, which I have a lot to say about - when was the last time the income thresholds were looked at? When was the last time the grants were increased - or what I'm talking about, the grant ceilings? I'm wondering if there is consideration of publishing what the qualifying income is, because right now that's not available and you have to do a bunch of stuff to find out if you even qualify for the grant.

PAUL LAFLECHE: If I can set aside the \$500 program for a minute, because there's two different programs with different issues there, let's set that one aside. If you want an answer to that, we can deal with that separately.

The home repair program, which is the subject of today's Public Accounts Committee meeting - the last time it was looked at was very recently, because we were making changes which are effective April 1. I'll allow Mr. Richard to answer most of this, or Mr. MacDonald, I think, because some of these programs are co-funded with the federal government and they require federal approval. Where we can move ahead and make some changes we have, and there will be some changes Mr. MacDonald can describe for April 1st in some areas of the province, but others require federal permission and we're working on that.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacDonald.

NEIL MACDONALD: The household income limits that are used for the home repair and adaptation programs are actually set by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. They're used to reflect what would be 30 per cent of your income, so for those who are in core need, that's what they're targeted to.

Typically, CMHC does a review of their household income limits annually. They were increased in, I believe, April of 2021, and they've just actually been recently looked at by the Province. We've had some issues where in three particular counties - Kings County, Colchester County, and Pictou County - there's a lot of concern that in some areas of those particular counties, the household income limits reflected the lower household income limits that are attached to the small towns ...

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for questioning by the NDP caucus has elapsed. We'll now move on to the PC caucus with Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Many seniors live in rural communities where housing options are limited, and the needs of older adults vary according to their health status and income. It's great if you have family members who may live locally to help out, but I can think of a lot of examples, especially in rural Nova Scotia, where family members may have moved away, not living locally, and they would normally help out with certain tasks.

My question is: What are the expected benefits of the new government grants such as the Seniors Care Grant for rural seniors specifically?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LaFleche.

PAUL LAFLECHE: I'm going to allow Ms. Silver to talk about the \$500 grant.

KIM SILVER: I think it's important to point out that this is the first year for the grant, that we were really focused on having something out before the snowfall, and that we'll continue to review and figure out what this program is going to look like in the future.

There are a number of different items that qualify in terms of the Seniors Care Grant, so while some things like taxis may not make sense in a rural community, other things like snow shovelling might. The intention is to support people who don't necessarily have family around in rural areas who can do that work. There are often neighbours or local students or local businesses who can support that. The hope is that there's enough of a range in terms of what people can apply for that there's something to support everybody.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Smith.

KENT SMITH: I'm also apologetic for being a couple of minutes tardy. The weather was not the best for my drive in from the Eastern Shore this morning. I'm going to direct my questions to either Mr. LaFleche or Mr. Richard. I'm going to talk a little bit about the recently announced housing strategy and the \$35-38 million that was announced to fund 1,100 new affordable housing units across the province. I'd like to know how this investment is going to specially impact rural and how it's going to be helpful for some of our seniors.

PAUL LAFLECHE: You're talking about the quick-start investments strategy that was originally \$25 million and later boosted to \$35 million? Is that right, MLA Smith?

KENT SMITH: Yes, sir.

PAUL LAFLECHE: Stephan Richard is probably the person to answer that question.

STEPHAN RICHARD: Actually, the best person to answer the question is not here, but you're stuck with me today. I can tell you what our team is doing is using a portion of the additional funding and investment as a result of the Affordable Housing Commission.

As you know, government is committed to implementing those recommendations. There were four quick-start initiatives that the commission laid out in its report in May. Part of the four quick-start initiatives included doubling the base budget for the affordable housing program, which traditionally was around \$2 million. That was increased to \$4 million.

In total, it was initially \$20 million from the quick-start investment. There was doubling the HP. There was additional funding for public housing. There was additional funding to create 425 new rent supplements. In total, what this funding associated with the recommendations of the commission really targeted was an increase of 1,100 new units and 425 rent supplements.

In terms of impact in rural communities, we haven't announced all the projects that have been submitted by proponents. I can tell you that some of the projects that we've seen are predominantly outside of HRM and outside of CBRM - although there are quite a few from the Sydney area, maybe two or three different projects. There's quite a bit of rent supplements.

I'm looking here at the distribution across the province. We do have quite a few. We currently have over 4,700 rent supplements in use. By the way, I should mention that the 425 new rent supplements that were announced with the additional funding - we've actually met that target last week. This is good news for those that needed the help. We're on track. We've actually met that target, and we're on track in terms of allocating all the rent supplements that we have.

We have right now over 4,700 rent supplements in use - they're delivered through the housing authorities. We have just under 600 rent supplements available in Cape Breton. We have 568 Cobequid, which would cover Colchester and Cumberland. Eastern Mainland - Antigonish area, Guysborough, Pictou County - we would have just over 250. In the western region, more than 800 rent supplements are in use.

Those are just some examples of how we are, through the broad range of programs that we deliver - again, whether it's public housing, whether it's rent supplement, home repair and adaptation program, and investment to create new supply. We do work with a lot of partners in regions. We support a lot of low-income households in rural areas, and we're going to continue to do so.

KENT SMITH: Switching gears ever so slightly back to the home repair and renovation programs. Those programs aren't just eligible for seniors, they're eligible for most folks who are homeowners and of low-income, but I'd like to talk a little bit about

the impact that it has for seniors, and specifically seniors with disabilities. Perhaps Mr. MacDonald or Mr. LaFleche, you can direct where you think the question should go - the uptake in the home repair and renovation grants for seniors and seniors with disabilities.

[10:00 a.m.]

PAUL LAFLECHE: I think Mr. MacDonald is best to address that. I will note that there are some programs which are for seniors only - and Mr. MacDonald can get into that.

NEIL MACDONALD: You're quite right. We do offer a suite of home repair and adaptation programs. Most are open to all low-income Nova Scotian households or homeowners, but we do have some that are actually specific to seniors. Of the larger group that we offer, a lot of the uptake is actually related to seniors. In 2021 up to December, 72 per cent of our approved applications for the programs were actually taken up by seniors. That equates to \$11 million from our home-repair and adaptation programs up to that point.

We also do have a couple of programs that are specific to seniors. Our Senior Citizens Assistance Program provides a grant of up to \$6,500 to do urgent emergency repairs, which may encompass a furnace that isn't working, water or septic issues. It may involve roof repair, electrical - anything that's of an emergency nature.

We also offer Home Adaptations for Seniors' Independence, which is a program that provides up to \$3,500 for minor adaptations to assist seniors to age in place. Under that program, we would provide funding for things like levered handles, grab bars, widening doorways, hallway rails, and things of that nature.

Certainly, under our RRAP for Persons with Disabilities Program and our Access-A-Home Program, we do also assist a lot of seniors throughout those particular programs as well. It does make a big difference in the lives of the people we serve.

In one particular case, we had a lady who was 84 years old and wasn't able to leave her home for two years without adaptations to her home. It made a huge difference in her life. We like to think we're making a big difference in the lives of seniors and low-income Nova Scotians.

KENT SMITH: Thank you for the responses, Mr. MacDonald. I believe I'm passing it over to my colleague, Mr. Boudreau.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: Thank you, Madam Chair. Do you know what time I have left?

THE CHAIR: You have 10 minutes.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I appreciate the witnesses being here on a stormy day. Luckily, you made it here yesterday instead of driving from Cape Breton this morning.

As many here know, I'm a new MLA. One of the concerns I hear a lot in my rural riding are from seniors and from people looking for supports for their homes. I was quite surprised by how many weren't aware of the program. We talk about how there's a good uptake, but there are quite a few people who aren't necessarily as aware as I would have expected.

Maybe this is a question for both departments, through Mr. LaFleche. What are the departments doing to promote grants and assistance programs to our seniors and to those in general?

PAUL LAFLECHE: At a high level, I think I'll start with Mr. Nanji. He has years of experience in promoting programs with seniors. Then Mr. Richard can take over for the exact details, and Ms. Silver.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Nanji.

FAIZAL NANJI: Thank you very much for that question. Through the Department of Seniors and Long-Term Care, we have long-established relationships with key community stakeholders, many of which you'd be familiar with. A big one for us is Nova Scotia 211. We've developed a good partnership with them over the years. They took over our general 1-800 line, where we received thousands of calls yearly from seniors about programming. They've turned that into a very accessible service, offering access to information on programs by phone, internet, and in multiple languages, with service 24 hours per day.

We also promote through our homegrown publication that's been running for 40 years now, the Positive Aging Directory. We hear that guide is beneficial to a number of older Nova Scotians who don't have computer access. For example, they can pick up that guide and they can find information on a whole host of programs that support them to live and age well in their homes and communities.

We also have a strong relationship with what was referenced earlier in the session: the Seniors Advisory Council of Nova Scotia, formerly known as the Group of IX. They have access to thousands of older Nova Scotians via their membership. We meet with them on a regular basis and promote and keep them apprised of our various programs. They then in turn take that back to their members.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Richard.

STEPHAN RICHARD: On the housing program side, there are various ways that we're able to reach out to Nova Scotians. One of the ways is through our website, so

housing.novascotia.ca is where I encourage everyone to go through and I realize that you'll see a long list of programs. We understand that it might be confusing for some people. Once you go on our website and you look at the broad range of programs, my advice would be to anyone with any questions to give us a call. We have a toll-free line.

Alternatively, 211 has professional staff who can assist Nova Scotians who have any housing needs. The 211 service is a very effective program. They ask the right questions. They can try to figure out what kind of housing needs you have and advice on who to contact and what kind of program might be able to help out.

We do engage with all of our elected officials at the provincial level, federal offices, and also municipalities. Our staff do a lot of presentations to municipal councils on a regular basis. I've had the opportunity to do that as well. We attend annual meetings of the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, also the Association of Municipal Administrators Nova Scotia. We participate in various regional housing coalitions. In Cape Breton for example, Mr. Boudreau, you might be familiar with the Affordable Housing and Homelessness Working Group. We have our program manager, Stephen Hines, in Cape Breton, who's a permanent member of this group.

We're called from time to time to make presentations, whether it's a housing forum or other kind of meeting. That's primarily how we provide - and we share information about our programs, but as you pointed out, we also know that on a regular basis folks are learning about our programs, so I think there's an opportunity to do even more. We always listen to good ideas.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: As a former councillor, I've had presentations from housing giving good feedback. It's one of those things where you're trying to get all that information, and sometimes it's a lot for anybody to go through. I know I have a wonderful constituency assistant who does a fabulous job trying to work with the seniors and people in my community. I continue to try to learn as well and educate myself. You always think you're doing enough, but sometimes it's how we try to communicate with people that makes a big difference.

I'm going to switch gears a little bit and talk a bit about something that some of my colleagues have mentioned: energy costs, and the cost of living going up and inflation. Certainly for our seniors on fixed incomes, that's an important topic and determinant for what they're able to afford. What does the department do to invest in making seniors' homes more energy efficient? It's partly energy-efficient, but also supports for supporting them during these times of need in terms of home heating and that sort of thing as well.

STEPHAN RICHARD: Obviously, this is a really important topic, not only when we're thinking about climate change and what we all need to do on this front, but energy costs have a serious impact on the pocketbook. Thinking of seniors on fixed income, as energy costs continue to increase, it makes housing less affordable.

This is something that we're really aware of, and we understand that we have a role to play to help those low-income seniors who own their home to make improvements. Our program can help with some of it, but we also work closely with Efficiency Nova Scotia. Our staff will refer seniors, for example, and other clients to the HomeWarming program if they qualify so they can get some of the renovations too.

Through other government departments, there are also programs such as the Heating Assistance Rebate Program and Home Energy Assistance Top-up Fund, which is administered by Salvation Army - so working all together through various departments. On our end, what we're focusing on is making sure that repairs - whether it's a heating system, an old heating system - can be done to those that are eligible for our programs.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: How much time is left?

THE CHAIR: You have just over a minute.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I'm fine with my questions at this point. I don't know if Ms. Sheehy-Richard can fit in another question in a minute.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Sheehy-Richard, you've got one minute. You can start your question, if you want.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: How about I'll give you a heads-up, Mr. Richard, of what it is that maybe I'd like to speak about if I get the chance in the next round. It is the innovative forms of housing for seniors. Are you looking at any of those, like other jurisdictions are doing - for example, the companion housing and co-housing communities?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Richard, you actually have 30 seconds, so you can start your answer.

STEPHAN RICHARD: Absolutely. The short answer, which is something I'm not really good at - we are looking at various companion housing options. Actually, in Victoria County a couple of years ago, there was a billeting program where they were able to match students and younger people with older adults. That is a housing option. It doesn't need to be new supply, but it's looking at various ways we can all address the different issues, whether it's new supply or services, and the way that people live together.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your answer. Now we will move on to our second round of questioning. Each caucus will receive 12 minutes, beginning with Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Just hoping that we can get short answers and a little less preamble from both of the questions on my side and, obviously, from the answers just so

we can fit in as much as possible. Just a quick question for whomever wants to take this. How many senior affordable housings currently are in the build process, and how many do we expect to open in the next month, two months, three months?

[10:45 a.m.]

PAUL LAFLECHE: Is that public housing you're talking about, MLA Maguire, or the ones that we are co-funding or funding in the private sector?

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Seniors' affordable housing, so that would be both.

PAUL LAFLECHE: As far as I know, we are - I might be wrong. I'll look at Mr. Lake. Are we constructing any new ones? Do you want to answer that?

ED LAKE: Currently, we're not constructing any new. Our strategy is to work with the private sector and develop seniors' housing and other forms of housing using the expertise of private sector developers, leveraging their ability to borrow in the private markets and offering subsidies to buy down the capital cost of those projects. Also, we're using it as an opportunity to leverage the rent supplement program so that we can offer affordable housing to people.

PAUL LAFLECHE: Madam Chair, if I can . . .

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LaFleche, I really just have to ask you to wait until you're recognized because you keep speaking over me. We will go back to MLA Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Deputy minister, that was the answer that I was looking for, so I appreciate that from both you and Mr. Lake. Could somebody quickly define - in just a couple sentences - what seniors' affordable housing means?

PAUL LAFLECHE: Maybe I'll toss that over to Stephan Richard.

STEPHAN RICHARD: Obviously, our programs, as we discussed earlier, are income-based, which means that in order to be eligible for our programs, you need to meet the income threshold. Affordable would essentially be housing that those who are eligible for our programs cannot afford and therefore require assistance from our programs.

There's also the concept of core housing need, which the member might be familiar with, which really looks at Nova Scotians who spend either more than 30 per cent of their gross household income towards their housing costs or are not living in suitable or adequate housing. That would be another definition, and in this case it would be either Nova Scotians who are aged over 58, in the case of public housing, because that's the age requirement to be eligible, or 65 for other programs.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: The reason I ask that question is because the previous answer we got was government is relying on the private sector and their partners in the private sector to help deal with the affordable housing issue. Apartments and housing are being built all over HRM and Nova Scotia. I don't know the last time the department checked the prices of those apartments, but they're not affordable.

Spryfield was one of the most affordable places in all of Nova Scotia. We're seeing renovations being done in those communities and \$500-600 apartment buildings are going up to \$1,800, \$2000, sometimes \$2,500. That is not 30 per cent of a senior's fixed income. That is probably about 300 per cent of a senior's fixed income.

We are seeing agreements being signed with the private sector where they have to produce a certain amount of affordable housing. The definition of affordable housing for the private sector and for those on the ground are completely different. What we're seeing is 10 per cent below market value. When you have a 1 per cent vacancy rate and the market value is going through the roof, we're seeing rents rise faster than they've ever gone up. Ten per cent of \$2000 is still \$1,800 a month.

When I ask what affordable housing the department is providing, because they're clearly not building any more public housing, which - let's be honest - is what is affordable for most people on a fixed income and income assistance. When I ask what affordable housing is being built, I am asking you, what is being built in the \$400-\$600-\$700 range that most seniors can pay? I would argue that \$700 is probably a lot for most seniors on a fixed income.

In that range of rent, how many units are going to be coming online, and how much money has been provided to the private sector to produce those affordable units?

PAUL LAFLECHE: There are several questions there. I'll allow Mr. Richard to answer them in order.

STEPHAN RICHARD: First of all, I would want to say that the private sector plays a key role in building supply, rental supply across Nova Scotia. Our program for new construction initiatives is meant to achieve affordability. What we're looking at is any developer - and by the way, we work with several non-profit groups as well, so our programs are available for non-profit developers as well as the private sector.

Essentially, the capital contribution that we provide, which is typically around up to \$50,000 per unit, helps achieve or buy some affordability over a period of time, which is typically 15 years under the Affordable Housing Program. That's how we're able to discount the market rate. Without our support, the market rate would be charged to all tenants.

What I would say to your point, Member Maguire, is that we know that for some Nova Scotians, even at 80 per cent of the area market rate is too high. It's not affordable. In these cases, we can provide a rent supplement to the landlord in order to make that - or directly to the client so they can afford even that discounted rate. Typically, our programs are designed to achieve at least around 8 per cent of the market rate for a particular area, and then for those that have a lower income, we can use other tools that we have in our toolbox to support them.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I appreciate the answer, but the truth on the ground is that 80 per cent of market value is still unaffordable for the majority of Nova Scotians. I say the majority of Nova Scotians because this isn't just some Nova Scotians. I know we're talking about seniors today, but these are single families, these are working families, these are students who cannot afford the market value that's happening right now.

What I'm really concerned about is that we are giving money to the private sector without specifically saying that we need actual affordable housing. Twenty per cent below market value is not affordable when the prices are skyrocketing.

We have about 30 seconds to a minute left. I'm asking specifically on all the new units coming online. We haven't heard any time frame, actually, when anything's coming online - let's say over the next six months. How many of those are in the \$500 to \$900 range for a single-bedroom to a two-bedroom? How many of those that the government is giving money to the private sector for are in that price range?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LaFleche, where would you like to direct that question?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I'll redirect it to Mr. Richard. He's doing well.

STEPHAN RICHARD: I don't have the data, but we can certainly look at the different projects that have been recently approved to figure out what is the timeline to completion. As you know, it's a long process that involves municipalities and other lenders sometimes. We're only one of several partners when it comes to real estate development.

What I can say is the Rapid Housing Initiative, which is a federal program for which the Province invested, is targeting vulnerable populations and those who are really at the lower end of the income scale. We can provide more information on that.

I would just close by saying that we're looking at a planned investment of \$38 million this year, which will lead to 1,100 units, so we can provide more information in terms of what the range of those units are going to be.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I would say thank goodness for the federal government because what we heard from the new government - and we heard it from the Premier

himself - is that the private sector will take care of this. We know that the private sector is not going to be building voluntarily \$500 to \$800 units. I'm not being partisan here. If it wasn't for the federal government, I don't think we'd have any of these units right now under the current government.

I would like to get the numbers on how many units are being built in that price range over the next 12 months that the government is contributing funding toward.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the Liberal questioning has elapsed. We now move on to the NDP caucus. Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just want to continue on this a little bit more. I had some thoughts from the first round, and I just want to also talk about - the situation that Mr. Maguire was talking about in Spryfield is very similar to my community. Dartmouth North was the place where people went to get an affordable place to live, and that is no longer possible.

I want to say a couple of things about what we heard earlier. First of all, when Mr. Lake said the number of people on the waiting list for affordable housing units was 2,800, but then maybe 500 weren't ready to move, so 2,300, it's profoundly shocking. I don't think that we ever knew those numbers before.

In my mind, the way we used to measure that was how many years you were on the wait-list. We tell people who come to our office it's five years for a unit at this place. Sometimes that shifts, and there are more - people get priority access, but even priority access, it's a huge waiting list now. With priority we're talking about vulnerable seniors, people in domestically violent situations, so priority has to be really quick.

Then the rent supplement part of that - we can't get you into a unit, but we can give you a rent supplement. I have to say that of late, the portable rent supplement has been very useful to a number of people in our office. Someone comes to our office, and they can't afford the cost of living, they're in arrears with NS Power - it's a mess. We're able to say, here's your heat-fund application, here's your water-fund application, here's your Salvation Army application, and here's a rent supplement application, and those combined actually make a difference.

I will point out, of course, that that rent supplement is supplementing, in large part, large multinational investment REITs. Government money is going directly into the hands of investment REITs who basically own most of the rental properties in HRM, at least. I know there are other smaller private landlords, but I'm saying that in general, the folks who are coming to us are the ones in the MetCap, the Northviews and TransGlobe and those types of buildings. So number one, that's an issue: government money going directly into the pockets of large investment REITs.

Secondly, it's not enough money. We had a woman in yesterday who we were working with. She definitely qualifies. If you look at the 30 per cent rent-geared-to-income, it's a chunk of money - awesome - but then, because her rent is above the threshold, it's going to be much more.

When we're looking at these subsidies, and we're looking at all of these programs that we're talking about today - even though somebody said that the CMHC rates change every year - I want to know for sure, are we changing our programs to relate to the CMHC every year?

I also want to say that we need to do more. The money available is not enough to do the trick. I want to know from Mr. LaFleche or Mr. Richard - earlier this year, Minister Lohr was on record as saying that \$1,700 was an affordable unit in HRM. I want to know if the department agrees with that statement and if that is the kind of ballpark we're talking about here. The fact is that on the ground - in Dartmouth North, in Spryfield, in St. Peter's - \$1,700 is not affordable for basically anyone, let alone people on low fixed incomes.

I'd like to hear from the deputy minister about that \$1,700 number. Please address that.

PAUL LAFLECHE: Ms. Leblanc, can you tell me again who said that and when they said it?

SUSAN LEBLANC: Mr. LaFleche, it was Minister John Lohr and it was at a housing announcement. I can't remember which project it was for, but it was in the news, reported in the mainstream media: \$1,700.

PAUL LAFLECHE: I don't know anything about that statement by Minister Lohr, nor if it was accurately reported in the media, so I won't comment on that.

Obviously, affordability is dependent on one's income level, and \$1,700 would not be affordable to someone who's working on minimum wage, but it might be affordable to someone who's making \$100,000 a year. I don't know where you want me to go with that exactly.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Well, thank you very much for that answer. I mean, honestly, let us call what we're talking about here - I find the answer quite offensive, actually. I'm not going to get into a game of what's affordable for one person, what's affordable for the other person. If we're talking about the definition that Mr. Richard used earlier in this meeting being 30 per cent of one's income, then for the vast majority of middle-income Nova Scotians - I think the median income of Nova Scotians is \$46,000. I can't do the math really quickly, but \$1,700 is at least pushing it. I think it's probably way more.

I'm going to leave that there. I want to go back to the home adaptation grant for a second. I believe it was Mr. MacDonald who talked about the grant and how there's the grants for pull bars and that kind of thing, adapting the home to make sure that seniors can stay in the home longer, to age in place. I'm wondering if with that grant, those are specific things laid out - like checked boxes, yes, I'm doing pull bars so that's great, I qualify - or if it is a more flexible grant.

[10:30 a.m.]

Going back to my parents' situation, for example. They had all that stuff already, but what they needed was a new dryer plug upstairs. To pay the electrician to do that, they needed new plumbing upstairs to move the dryer, so it's a very particular thing for their home, their situation and their physical needs. I'm wondering if that grant is adaptable or flexible for whatever the need is if you can make the case for it.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacDonald.

NEIL MACDONALD: The program I was speaking to specifically was the Home Adaptations for Seniors' Independence, which provides up to \$3,500. For some items, it may not specifically cover moving a washer and dryer from, say, a basement to a main floor or a washroom from an upstairs to a main floor, but our overall suite of programs are actually very flexible. So if we can't do it under that particular program, we may be able to do it under our RRAP for Persons with Disabilities Program or under some of our other programs.

We actually do have a lot of flexibility, and we rely on our applicants to provide us with what it is they're looking for. When they apply, they tell us what their needs are, our case workers will speak with them, and our inspectors go out and take a look. If we need to have an OT assessment done, we can have one of those done as well. The programs do provide a lot of flexibility to try to address a lot of different needs in order to help people to stay in their home as long as they are able and as long as they choose to.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I wanted to also ask a question about the Seniors Care Grant - the new \$500 grant. I'm wondering if maybe Ms. Silver can tell us how many applicants to date have been approved under that program. How much money has been paid out under the program? What are the key indicators that it's having its intended effect?

KIM SILVER: The program is still fairly new. We're about halfway through this application period. We have a little more than 18,000 grants provided. There's a very small number of refusals. Those are all linked to people who don't qualify - don't live in the province, other kinds of things, don't meet the financial criteria. Generally, there's a lot of flexibility in terms of the program when people call in and indicate what it is that they're looking for. We haven't evaluated the program yet because we're only halfway through the first term of it.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you for that. That's helpful. Looking forward to hearing more about it after this year.

I want to go back to the HomeWarming program with Efficiency Nova Scotia that I believe Mr. Richard was talking about. We know that Nova Scotia has a high level of energy poverty, and that is worse in our senior population. I know that the HomeWarming program is really effective. I extol the benefits of Efficiency Nova Scotia programs as much as I can in this House. I've benefited from many of the programs.

If we have the home adaptation program, which has a \$6,500 cap, and we have the HomeWarming program - sometimes home warming can mean a senior can stay in their home. It does provide repairs like windows or whatever that need to be done. I'm wondering if those programs can work in tandem to provide more for a senior homeowner trying to stay in their home.

If the income thresholds are different, are there people falling through the cracks of those programs? Do they qualify for one but not the other? Can someone tell me about how that relationship works?

NEIL MACDONALD: In our home-repair programs, we typically only do energy-efficiency-related repairs when, for example, if we're repairing a wall that may have wet insulation inside - we would pay to replace that insulation and fix the wall.

When it comes to other energy-conservation matters, that's where we work in tandem with Efficiency Nova Scotia. When applicants apply, we have a form that we ask them to fill out that gives us the applicant's consent to provide the referral to Efficiency Nova Scotia, then they kick in with their piece to look at what energy-saving measures can be put in place for these applicants.

In so doing, we try to work as closely as we can between the contractors who are doing the . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the NDP questioning has elapsed. We will now move back over to the PC caucus. Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Thank you, Madam Chair. I have one question before I hand it back over to Ms. Sheehy-Richard. I think I heard in another question household income limits. In terms of eligibility for these programs, can you tell us about the inequalities within the three counties of Pictou, Colchester, and Kings, and how they're being addressed with respect to HILs, or household income limits?

PAUL LAFLECHE: That is what I referred to earlier, that we're correcting as of April 1st. Neil MacDonald will talk about that, but I want to point out that in all these issues that arise, we're very sympathetic to these issues with respect to income differentials - one

side of the street to the other, in some streets. Some of these are bound up in federal agreements, so we've been scrambling to try to change those agreements. We're doing the best we can to uniform everything.

Mr. MacDonald, do you want to talk about those three counties in particular, where we've had some issues? I think we've got corrections for most but not all programs.

NEIL MACDONALD: Thank you for the question. In the three particular counties, as I mentioned in a previous answer, the household income limits are set by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. They use what they call the census metropolitan area for Halifax, they use what they call census agglomerations for those three particular counties, and then they have a measure for the rest of Nova Scotia.

In that particular instance, there are parts of Kings County and parts of Pictou County and parts of Colchester County that fall under the census agglomeration, which was the lowest income limit. The way they do their income thresholds is based on that geography, plus what they call the bedroom count, which is essentially the household composition.

The household composition is actually based on the national occupancy standards, so if you're what they call a one-bedroom count, you would be a single person or a couple. The household income limit for the census agglomerations for that one-bedroom count was \$28,500 up until March 1st. That's when the change came into place, and now it's up to \$47,500, so it's quite a significant increase.

We have been kind of tracking the disparity between what CMHC was producing in terms of HILs for that census agglomeration area, as compared to HRM or as compared to the rest of the province. In HRM, that one-bedroom count would be \$41,000. That was quite a bit of difference, but we have corrected that so that the rural rates apply - that is, \$47,500 for a one-bedroom count, \$54,500 for a two-bedroom count, and \$64,000 for a three-bedroom count in those communities that were previously regarded as census agglomerations.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Now we go over to Ms. Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I would like to go back to my question that was quickly answered. Could you elaborate a little bit, Mr. Richard, on the policy changes both to the municipal and provincial levels, such as allowing the secondary suites and inclusionary zoning, how those could work in conjunction with the home-repair programs that we've been discussing here today, and how that will allow seniors to live independently at home.

STEPHAN RICHARD: I will attempt to answer the first part, and then maybe ask my colleague Neil MacDonald to add. We do have some support available for secondary

suites, but this is something that we are increasingly looking at for the future. We understand that in some communities, what we consider gentle density through secondary suites - or backyard suites and tiny homes - is really making a difference. Those are real, affordable housing options for Nova Scotians, so we definitely want to support that.

My understanding of the recent changes through the Municipal Government Act - and some municipalities are now changing their own zoning, like HRM has done, to allow secondary suites throughout the municipality. Previously, there was what was considered R1 zoning. That's no longer the case. Not all municipalities allow secondary suites everywhere, but this is something that a greater number of municipalities are looking at. We're having conversations with many elected officials and municipal officials on that very topic. We do have some programs, I believe, to help homeowners who may want to build an apartment for a family member, for example.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Were we going to follow up on the other part of how those repairs go in conjunction, or did we get to that a little bit? You said that your colleague may have some other comments on that.

NEIL MACDONALD: We do currently offer a program that provides for the creation of a secondary suite, which may be a basement apartment or an external structure on the same property. We provide up to \$24,000 as a forgivable loan for those products. Right now, it's geared toward persons with disabilities or seniors. As part of the Affordable Housing Commission report, we are looking at perhaps an expansion of that program to serve a wider group of folks. Perhaps with some changes in the municipal bylaws, as Mr. Richard was referring to, we'll be able to do that.

If you have an existing basement apartment or an existing secondary suite, we may be able to assist with that through our rental RRAP program. If you are renting that out and there is a need for a repair, we may be able to assist you through the rental RRAP program, which provides up to \$24,000 per unit as a forgivable loan for rental apartments. We also have a program under rental RRAP, which will assist with rooming houses as well. I'm hoping that answered your question.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Yes, it does, thank you. How much time, Madam Chair?

THE CHAIR: You have four and a half minutes.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Four and a half minutes, fantastic. Since you brought up the topic of the report, could you talk a little bit about what has been done to address the concerns from the 2019 report of the housing needs of seniors to date?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Richard.

STEPHAN RICHARD: Earlier, I mentioned the quick-start investment that government has made quickly after the release of the Affordable Housing Commission report in May 2021. Since then, there's a commitment by government to implement the recommendations of the Affordable Housing Commission.

I did mention the \$35 million investment to help create 1,100 new units. There's additional funding for the rent supplements. I mentioned the 425 rent supplements. There has been more investment into other programs like public housing.

[10:45 a.m.]

Some initiatives that I haven't mentioned so far but are on track is a new community housing growth fund. Earlier, we talked about the importance of the private sector. I would argue that the community housing sector - co-ops and non-profit housing providers - is critical to our housing stock, in particular to meet the needs of those who are most vulnerable in our communities. There's an investment committed of \$2.5 million on that, so we're on track to deliver that.

Another key piece is a provincial housing needs assessment to help municipalities and all stakeholders learn more about housing supply and demand. Overall, we're on track. There's a progress report that was published in January - we can share this progress update with members of the committee, but it's also available on the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission website.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Richard. Ms. Sheehy-Richard, you have two minutes left.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Two minutes. Goodness, that seems like a long round. I don't know that I have . . .

THE CHAIR: We're not used to this, are we? (Laughs)

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Yes. If any of my colleagues would like to put in any other questions, or I can continue. I think I was quite pleased with my answers today.

I'm excited to hear about the innovative ideas and looking outside of the box. Mr. Richard, we've met on a couple of occasions, now, and I was pleased when I saw you at the local housing commission meeting that we had the other day just to speak with these outside-of-the-box and innovative ideas and reaching out to local developers trying to see how they can make their units more available, make their units more accessible, to remove as many barriers as we can for our seniors who are needing these adaptations done, and making sure that we can work together as MLAs to get the information out the door.

If we're at the halfway point of that \$500 seniors rebate, I would like to see all my colleagues try to reach out to seniors in the community and get the word out there. I certainly know - for an example in my constituency, I had a senior whose husband passed, and he was no longer around to help her with her plowing, so I introduced her to the seniors grant. She's now hired a local contractor who will come in sync with her oil delivery. She was very happy and pleased, so it's working really well in that situation for me.

I think I'll close my comments there and thank you for joining us today virtually and look forward to working together with you all in the future.

THE CHAIR: We now come to the end of questioning. Deputy Minister LaFleche, you have a heavy load with two big departments here. Would you like to make some closing remarks?

PAUL LAFLECHE: Yes, thank you, Madam Chair, and I apologize for cutting you off a couple of times. As you know, I get quite excited. You've seen me before.

THE CHAIR: Every time.

PAUL LAFLECHE: I would like to conclude slightly off-topic because we spent a lot of time on important subjects. They might have been slightly off home repair, but they're important subjects and were brought up by many of the members who are concerned about their constituents. That's really the housing supply issue.

As you know, the government has created a housing supply task force for Halifax. The government is also looking at what are the needs of rural areas in Nova Scotia re: housing supply. We can all debate whether the supply should be built by the profit sector, the non-profit sector, the community sector, or government itself. I'll leave that debate aside. What we really need is a lot more housing, because we're getting a lot of population increase which we've never experienced before. Other jurisdictions have, but we have not. This is all new to us.

In order to meet this supply, we should have started five years ago. That's not blaming anybody or any previous government. That's just something that is a fact. It takes a lot of time to get things approved, to get permits done, to get development agreements in place, especially in urban centres. We're starting from a base where we have to quickly ramp up.

There were very good questions about when we will have this constructed at this level of affordability. Well, the answer is we should have started a few years ago to do that. We will have things done as soon as we can. Not everybody is happy with the Halifax housing task force and the ability of the minister to basically intercede in getting permits approved and development agreements put in place, but that's what that's meant to do quickly so that we can actually get true affordability for everyone in the spectrum. We're

very aware that at the bottom end of the income spectrum, there is a complete lack of affordability right now. We've got to get that addressed, so that's our main focus.

In terms of seniors, we're obviously doing a lot of work. We've got 2,800 new and renovated builds on long-term care facilities, but as we look at those, the staff are looking at whether there can be assisted living on the same site, located next to it. Can we participate in helping to develop that assisted living? Can there be seniors apartments on those sites? So there's a true campus spectrum, and that's what we're looking at.

We're starting now, so obviously we've got a ways to go. It'll be two to three years before you see some of these in place. But these are things we need to do as a society. We need to serve those seniors who are on fixed and modest incomes, and we need to serve those who are on the lower end of the income spectrum. The more supply we can develop, the faster we'll do that.

Thank you, MLAs, for your focus today. We will be back next week to specifically talk about homelessness with Community Services and how we can help that department in its quest to achieve some betterment of that very sad situation.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Minister LaFleche, and thank you to all of our witnesses before the committee today. It was a pleasure to see so many familiar faces once again.

The witnesses are free to go. You don't need to attend while we do committee business. In fact, there is no committee business on the agenda - I think this is the first time this has happened since I've been Chair. Is there any other committee business that anyone would like to add? Please say no.

Hearing none, I would like to let the members know that March 9th is our next meeting - March 9, 2022, when the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Department of Community Services, and the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia will be our witnesses. The topic will be Economic Impact of Homelessness and Return on Investment of Housing Provision. There being no . . . (Laughs). Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I just wanted to ask if we're going to meet the following week, the week of March Break.

THE CHAIR: No.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Okay. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: There being no further business, I now adjourn the meeting.

Just a reminder for the members of the subcommittee that we're going to take about a 10-minute break and then we will move into the subcommittee.

[The committee adjourned at 10:52 a.m.]