



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

DEBATES AND PROCEEDINGS

Speaker: Honourable Keith Bain

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First Session

FRIDAY, MARCH 24, 2023

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House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, FRIDAY, MARCH 24, 2023

Sixty-fourth General Assembly

First Session

9:00 A.M.

SPEAKER

Hon. Keith Bain

DEPUTY SPEAKERS

Angela Simmonds, Lisa Lachance, Kent Smith, Danielle Barkhouse, Nolan Young

THE SPEAKER: Before we begin the daily routine, I would like to make another Speaker's Ruling. It is a clarification on content of Statements by Members.

Yesterday I ruled it out of order on the order paper, such as the Estimates or a bill, to be the subject of Statements by Members. Some members in the Official Opposition were of the view that my ruling reflected a change of practice and asked for a clarification.

Statements by Members were inaugurated when this House enacted Rule 29A in October 2014. The text of the Rule is quite minimal. Speaker Murphy issued a Speaker's Statement setting out the guidelines that would apply during Statements by Members, which reflected the practice of the House of Commons, on whose practice we have modelled our own. Speaker Murphy stated, and I quote: "A statement should not be used to debate any legislation or resolution currently before the House." You can see that in Hansard, October 20, 2014, at Page 1154.

The prohibition on making statements about legislation and resolutions already before the House is not a new practice. It has been in effect since the beginning of member statements in this House. It has been upheld many times in the past. See the rulings of Speaker Murphy on November 5, 2014; March 27, 2015; April 22, 2015; May 17, 2016; February 17, 2017; and April 11, 2018. The prohibition was also stated in the guidelines I circulated to members on November 2, 2021, in connection with the ruling I delivered the same day concerning the content of Statements by Members. Copies of the guidelines have been recirculated to the members in their mail slots outside the Chamber.

We'll begin the daily routine.

PRESENTING AND READING PETITIONS

PRESENTING REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

TABLING REPORTS, REGULATIONS AND OTHER PAPERS

The honourable Minister of Justice.

HON. BRAD JOHNS: Speaker, in my capacity as the Attorney General of the Province of Nova Scotia, I hereby beg leave to table the *Nova Scotia Civil Procedure Rules Amendment (Rule 31)*.

THE SPEAKER: The report is tabled.

The honourable Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: Mr. Speaker, as Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture, I hereby table and grant permission to table the 2021-22 Annual Report of the Nova Scotia Fisheries and Aquaculture Loan Board.

THE SPEAKER: The report is tabled.

The honourable Minister of Justice.

HON. BRAD JOHNS: Mr. Speaker, in my capacity as the Attorney General of Nova Scotia, I hereby beg leave to table the *Nova Scotia Civil Procedure Rules Amendment (Rule 91)*.

THE SPEAKER: The report is tabled.

The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic on an introduction.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Mr. Speaker, I'd just like to make an introduction. In the West Gallery, we have ATVANS here, but I want to introduce someone in particular. That would be Thomas Arnold from Herring Cove, who is the vice president of ATVANS. I know the whole group is going to be introduced, but I'd like to introduce him as someone I grew up with, and a good friend.

It's good to see you here today, Tommy. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: Could I also make a word of introduction?

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

GARY BURRILL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like for the House to welcome this morning Jessica Duffney, who is here with us in the West Gallery. Jessica, could you maybe raise your hand?

Jessica is a third-year political science student at Dalhousie who is taking part in an internship program in the constituency office for Halifax Chebucto. It is an internship program that is singular in that it has been organized by the students of the political science society at Dal themselves.

This is Jessica's first visit to the Nova Scotia Legislature. With her is the constituency office coordinator for Halifax Chebucto, Tessa Pekeles.

I'd ask the House to welcome them both this morning. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition on an introduction.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm sure the government will make an introduction as well, but I do want to recognize Cassidy Megan, founder of Purple Day; Angela McCarthy, proud mother of Cassidy; Scott Ferguson, the interim director of Epilepsy Association of the Maritimes; and Jordan Thomey, Purple Day coordinator.

We did a statement yesterday in recognition of the great work they're doing, but I also want to tell the House, in case they're not aware, that Cassidy is going to be flying to Florida in a few hours, where she will open up Purple Day at Disney World. EPCOT is going to be lit up in purple, which I think is something very exciting, and something that we're all very proud of.

Congratulations on the great work, Cassidy. Keep it up. (Applause)

STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS**GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION**

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture.

RESOLUTION NO. 586

HON. STEVE CRAIG: Mr. Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas government is conducting a review of Nova Scotia's aquaculture regulations so that they will support low-impact sustainable growth in this important industry; and

Whereas we called on the Aquaculture Regulatory Advisory Committee to consult extensively with the industry, stakeholders, the public, and the Mi'kmaq to make recommendations to government; and

Whereas their work shows that our existing regulations are a good foundation to build on, and their recommendations will guide us in making improvements;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House join me in thanking the committee, and everyone who participated, for sharing their insight to help us with this important work for a healthy and sustainable aquaculture industry here in Nova Scotia.

Mr. Speaker, I request waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Public Works.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: By all means, please.

[9:15 a.m.]

The honourable Minister of Public Works.

HON KIM MASLAND: In the gallery today with us, we have members of the ATV Association of Nova Scotia. Of course, the Executive Director who is no stranger to this House, being a former municipal councillor, MLA, and minister and now executive director of ATVANS, Mr. Barry Barnet. Please stand, Barry. (Applause)

Joining Barry, we have Paul Smith, Tom Arnold, Jen MacIsaac, and Eric Rideout. I'd like to thank them for being so instrumental with all their support in this bill that I'm about to table in the House. Please stand and receive the warm welcome of the House. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Indeed, we welcome all visitors to the House and we hope you enjoy your stay with us.

The honourable Minister of Public Works.

Bill No. 273 - An Act Respecting the Operation of Off-highway Vehicles on Designated Highways. (Hon. Kim Masland)

Bill No. 274 - An Act to Continue the Corporation Known as the Catholic Cemetery Company. (Hon. Brian Comer)

Bill No. 275 - An Act to Amend Chapter 217 of the Revised Statutes, 1989, the Income Tax Act, Respecting the Basic Personal Amount. (Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin)

Bill No. 276 - An Act to Amend Chapter 27 of the Acts of 2000, the Employment Support and Income Assistance Act. (Hon. Zach Churchill)

THE SPEAKER: Ordered that these bills be read a second time on a future day.

NOTICES OF MOTION

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Colchester-Musquodoboit Valley.

LARRY HARRISON: Before I read my member statement, I'd like to recognize National Cerebral Palsy Awareness Day. I beg leave to make an introduction, please.

THE SPEAKER: By all means.

LARRY HARRISON: Visiting us today in the Speaker's Gallery is Kiera Lucas. Kiera is a very passionate advocate for people with disabilities, including those with cerebral palsy, like herself. She is a motivational speaker, an accessibility consultant, and writes a travelogue called Kiera's Accessible Adventures, that helps people with disabilities navigate local, national, and international travel.

She is a member of Club Inclusion and helped design, create, and deliver its Mentors for Mental Health program. She currently volunteers with the Nova Scotia Museum accessibility committee to help make museums more accessible across the province. I ask her to now accept the warm welcome of the House. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Indeed, we'd like to welcome you here this morning as well.

The honourable member for Colchester-Musquodoboit Valley.

NAT'L CEREBRAL PALSY DAY: EDUC. AND DISCUSSION - RECOG.

LARRY HARRISON: I rise today in recognition of National Cerebral Palsy Awareness Day, which is tomorrow, March 25th.

Approximately one in 500 Canadians live with cerebral palsy, a neurological condition, affecting muscle tone, movement, and balance. This year alone, nearly 10,000 Canadians will be diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

There are a large number of misconceptions surrounding cerebral palsy. This day presents an opportunity for discussions and self-education about the condition. Despite the challenges they face, Nova Scotians with cerebral palsy contribute to our communities in many ways.

Mr. Speaker, I ask that all members of this House join me in observing National Cerebral Palsy Awareness Day and in encouraging Nova Scotians to learn more about this condition.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Yarmouth.

FALLEN OFFICERS: FAMILIES AND FRIENDS - CONDOLENCES

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: I rise to express my sincere condolences to the loved ones, communities, and colleagues of Constable Travis Jordan and Constable Brett Ryan, who were killed in the line of duty last week in Edmonton. Constable Jordan grew up in Kings County and made a great impact on the people in the community there.

The MLA for Kings South paid respects to these officers earlier this week. The funeral for Constable Ryan and Constable Jordan will take place on Monday. I want to reiterate our condolences to all those mourning this loss.

To his family and friends, I want to send our deepest sympathies as you continue to navigate an unimaginable situation. I want to recognize Constable Jordan and Constable Ryan, along with other law enforcement officers, for their continued bravery and sacrifice in keeping communities safe. Their commitment to serving us cannot be overstated.

To echo the member for Kings South's message to all those impacted by this event, you're not alone. This event was senseless and nothing short of tragic. The caucus and I, and our sympathies, will continue to be there for all those coping with this loss. Please know that Nova Scotia stands with you.

THE SPEAKER: I know the member corrected himself, but please be careful with the use of proper names in your statements.

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: May I make an introduction?

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'd like to draw the members' attention to the West Gallery, where today we have two residents of Dartmouth North, Eri Fujita and Dr. Emily McEwan-Fujita. Emily is the founder and owner-president of Bradan Press, which is a Gaelic press in Nova Scotia, and I'm going to do a member statement about Bradan and Emily. I ask the House to join me in welcoming our guests. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

BRADAN PRESS: PUBLISHING GAELIC BOOKS - RECOG.

SUSAN LEBLANC: When people think about Gaelic culture in Nova Scotia they likely think of Antigonish or Cape Breton, but I am here to tell you that they should also think about Dartmouth North. Bradan Press, a Scottish Gaelic publishing company was founded by Dartmouth North resident Dr. Emily McEwan-Fujita in 2016. Bradan is proud to carry on Nova Scotia's 185-year-old Gaelic publishing tradition.

The first Gaelic book was published in Nova Scotia in 1836. In January, Bradan celebrated seven years in business and Emily travelled to Scotland for Bradan's first in-person trade show in Glasgow. Bradan's books include children and young adult titles, graphic novels, books of poetry and academic essays, several Gaelic tattoo handbooks, audiobooks, and even a Scottish Gaelic colouring book.

Bradán and Emily garnered national media coverage including on CBC's *As It Happens* and in the *Globe and Mail* for *Anna Ruadh*, the Gaelic translation of *Anne of Green Gables*.

I ask the House to join me in extending *meal do naidheachd*, or congratulations, to Emily and Bradán Press on their role in keeping the Gaelic publishing tradition alive in Nova Scotia. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: We'll have to ask the honourable member from Antigonish if you said that right or not. (Interruption) You passed the test.

The honourable member for Lunenburg.

HON. SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: Before I read my member statement to recognize Purple Day, I beg leave to make a re-introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Yes. By all means, please do.

SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: Visiting us today, as noted, are members of the Epilepsy Association of the Maritimes, including Megan Kennedy, Angela McCarthy, Scott Ferguson, and Jordan Thomey, but it is my distinct honour to welcome Cassidy Megan, who founded Purple Day when she was a little girl, just eight years old, and now headed to Disney, so I am super, super jealous, not that this isn't a magical place here (Laughter).

Purple Day is now acknowledged in almost 100 countries. Cassidy Megan, a global influencer, I ask if you would again rise and receive the warm welcome of the House. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Lunenburg.

PURPLE DAY: EPILEPSY AWARENESS - RECOG.

SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: I rise to celebrate March 26th as Purple Day, which was created to bring awareness and dispel myths about epilepsy. Purple Day was created in 2008 by Nova Scotia's Cassidy Megan, and 15 years later has participants in 85 countries around the world. Epilepsy is a disease that impacts approximately 50 million worldwide.

Purple Day is an opportunity to increase education, to help destigmatize this neurological condition. When we feel more comfortable talking about epilepsy it allows us to be better advocates for those living with it.

I ask that all members of this Legislature join me in congratulating Cassidy Megan for bringing awareness to epilepsy and encouraging people around the world to join in this important discussion. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

NORTHWOOD RESIDENTS COUNCIL: DISCUSSION - THANKS

BRAEDON CLARK: Today I just wanted to rise and thank the members of the Northwood residents council, which is obviously a group of residents at the Northwood facility in my riding of Bedford South. I was invited there a couple of weeks ago to speak with the residents and it gave me a great opportunity to hear from them, to hear their ideas, their challenges, their issues that they face, and their opportunities. There are wonderful members of the community we have in our riding. They are very engaged and motivated in politics and in issues, and they are very kind to you, which is always nice. It was a wonderful visit. I am sure I will be back there again soon.

Today I just wanted to thank the members of the residents council and the staff, who always give me a warm welcome and give me a chance to speak with people face-to-face, which is wonderful. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

PROWSE, PEGGY: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I rise today to recognize the passing of Peggy Prowse, a lifelong advocate and the first female candidate for the Nova Scotia New Democrats in the 1963 election. Peggy dedicated many years of her life to the New Democratic Party provincially and federally. She served on the executive of the provincial party as secretary and in true NDP style, and in her own signature scrappy and enthusiastic style, she ran the provincial office from the basement of her home.

In 1967, she was elected to the NDP National Council, where she became the first woman from the Atlantic Provinces, and the second woman overall, to serve as vice-president of the federal party. Peggy also served in many co-operative roles and was a leader in the co-operative movement. Even in her retirement, she continued to give time to volunteering, including leading tours of the Nova Scotia Natural History Museum.

Please join me in honouring Peggy Prowse for her fierce dedication to activism and democracy in Nova Scotia.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Colchester North.

MACKINNON, ELMER: COM. SERV. - THANKS

TOM TAGGART: Mr. Speaker, today I rise to speak about Elmer Mackinnon, a long-time family friend who has made significant contributions to our community as a volunteer and musician throughout his life.

When Elmer grew up, his family did not have much money, so he learned how to play the guitar and began playing at dances in Portapique at the age of 16 to earn money. He continued to play until the early 2000s. Elmer's love of music led to his supporting the Central Colchester Junior High Band Auxiliary for several years, supporting youth getting involved in music.

In the early 1970s, when the youth in his area had no indoor ice rink, Elmer was a founder of the West Colchester United Arena. He remained a board member and treasurer for many years. This rink still provides enjoyment to thousands in the West Colchester community.

As well, Elmer and his wife, Ethel, were instrumental in starting the Lower Onslow Community Centre, with Elmer organizing weekly fundraising open mic events.

Elmer has also been a member of the North Star Masonic Lodge for 64 years, and is an active member of the Trinity United Church. Elmer was also a 23-year member of the Colchester Co-op Board, and he was an elected director of the Co-op Atlantic Board for nine years.

I ask all members of this Legislature to join me in thanking Elmer for his many years of volunteering in our community.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

BISHOP, CHRIS: QPJ MEDAL RECIP. - CONGRATS.

CARMAN KERR: Mr. Speaker, one of the personal highlights of my time as MLA so far was having the honour of presenting constituents with the Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medal. This medal recognizes exceptional Nova Scotians who make our communities even better places to live, work, and play.

One of these constituents who I had the pleasure of presenting a medal to is Chris Bishop. For nearly four decades, Chris was a committed member of the Annapolis County Ground Search and Rescue team, including terms as president and vice-president. He was involved in hundreds of searches in Annapolis County and throughout the province. When I presented Chris his medal - apparently, I was fishing when I was younger with him and his son Mike and disappeared into a hole for a few minutes, and Chris found me. He saved my life potentially. He saved other lives.

I invite all members of the House of Assembly to join me in congratulating Chris Bishop on receiving the Nova Scotia Platinum Jubilee Medal.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

ORGANIZERS: TWO-SPIRIT AND INDIG. LGBTQIA+ DAY - THANKS

LISA LACHANCE: Mr. Speaker, the queer community in Canada is unique and special in that we have Indigenous folks across Turtle Island reclaiming long-held traditions and beliefs about gender - gender identity and gender expression - that fall outside the colonial binaries of male and female. This is called the two-spirit identity.

March 20th was Nova Scotia's first Two-Spirit and Indigenous LGBTQIA+ Celebration and Awareness Day, organized by the amazing Wabanaki Two-Spirit Alliance. This day will pay tribute to two-spirit folks in our communities every year, and their resilience in reclaiming this identity, which has long been opposed by various colonial institutions.

I ask my colleagues in the House to join me in celebrating Two-Spirit and Indigenous LGBTQIA+ Celebration and Awareness Day, and thanking executive director John Sylliboy, and the Wabanaki Two-Spirit Alliance for always uplifting and advocating for this community.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Eastern Passage.

RECIPS.: QUEEN'S PLAT. JUB. MEDAL - RECOG.

HON. BARBARA ADAMS: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize the 15 recipients of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medal in the Eastern Passage constituency, which includes South Woodside, Shearwater, Eastern Passage, and Cow Bay.

Each of these recipients has shown exemplary community service efforts: George Anthis, Leslie Chambers, Kenneth Evans, Thomas Harmes, Logan Harvey, Hazel Joyce, Cindy Morash, Eva Naugle, Mandy Raftus, Angela Riley, Daniel Searl, Catherine Silver, Dominique Surette-Lombard, Wendy Smith, and Nada Toulany. They are all very deserving of this special recognition. Each and every one is appreciated equally for all that they do for the betterment of our community and our province.

I ask all members of the Nova Scotia Legislature to join me in recognizing this outstanding, wonderful group for their dedication and unmatched work ethic of giving back to our community. We recognize you for all that you do and the inspiration you are to others.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect.

[9:30 a.m.]

FRITTENBURG, HADLEY: PARA HOCKEY ACHIEVEMENTS - RECOG.

HON. IAIN RANKIN: Mr. Speaker, I have another young athlete to recognize today. Hadley Frittenburg of Timberlea was selected to the national Women's Para Hockey team. Hadley was the only Nova Scotian selected for the team.

Hadley was born with a condition that causes her joints to curve, resulting in muscle shortness and the inability to flex and extend her legs. Her pencil-thin ankles meant she was never able to play any sports until she was introduced to para hockey several years ago. Since her introduction to the sport, Hadley has dedicated herself to para hockey from grassroots development to playing at an elite level of competition on Canada's national stage.

I'd like the members of the House of Assembly to join me in congratulating Hadley on her success, her determination, her positive attitude and her self-discipline to achieve this opportunity and level of success.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

LOCAL JO CAFÉ: CLOSING - RECOG.

GARY BURRILL: Mr. Speaker, this weekend marks the conclusion of a significant chapter in the west end of Halifax with the upcoming closing on the 26th of Local Jo Café.

Local Jo has been an important part of the Halifax Chebucto landscape for pretty nearly 20 years. The NDP launched our provincial campaign there in 2017. The wonderful bookstore Outside the Lines, which was on Quinpool Road for many years, used to hold their book launches at Local Jo. I remember them as warm and word-filled occasions.

So many people have so many friendly memories of hours of thoughtful conversations at the café on the corner of Oxford and Liverpool. It's out of all of those warm memories that we wish all the best to the staff who have made Local Jo's such a great gathering location.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Antigonish.

CJFX/XFM: 80TH ANNIV. - CONGRATS.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize CJFX/XFM on their 80th birthday.

On March 25, 1943, CJFX first went on the air as an AM station. The station devoted much of its programming to adult education produced primarily by volunteers, showcasing study clubs and promoting local talent and culture.

In 2003, CJFX changed its on-air branding to 98.9 XFM. XFM is broadcast through northeastern Nova Scotia, including Inverness, Richmond, Pictou and Guysborough counties, as well as Antigonish. Some of my fondest memories are driving over Hunters Mountain and listening to Scottish strings as a child.

Under the direction of general manager, Kenny Farrell, staff of XFM are champions for local organizations and businesses. In 2019, XFM was awarded the Ian Spencer Excellence in Business Award from the Antigonish Chamber of Commerce. In 2020, Pictou Chamber of Commerce presented them with the Community Recognition Award.

XFM proudly brings quality information and entertainment programming to listeners throughout northeastern Nova Scotia. I ask all members of the House to congratulate XFM on 80 years, and I wish them continued success.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

ROLLS, NELSON: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I rise in my place to recognize Nelson Rolls, who the community lost recently.

Nelson was a pure gentleman. He dedicated his life to not only serving his community, but supporting youth, and supporting his neighbourhood. He grew up originally in Whitney Pier, moved to Ontario, and came back to Sydney, and met the love of his life, Rose.

Many people would know Nelson for a lot of the community work that he did in his community of Howie Centre - building playgrounds for kids, coaching Little League, and doing whatever he could to support youth. Many would also know him as he was a proud member of the Howie Centre Volunteer Fire Department for 35 years, where he served as chief for 18 years of it.

To Rose and to the family, I rise in my place to recognize Nelson for his amazing contributions to his community, and to personally how well he was to me. Thank you for this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, and again I rise to recognize a really great man that our community lost.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

BLACK LOYALIST EXODUS: 231ST ANNIV. - RECOG.

SUZY HANSEN: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to remember the Black Loyalist exodus. January 15th was the 231st anniversary of the 15 ships departing the harbour of Halifax in 1792. The conditions and causes that led the exodus of 1,196 self-liberated Black Loyalists were conditions of abject institutionalized racism. This departure took place at the height of the transatlantic slave trade - one of the cruelest chapters in the history of humanity.

People of African descent have been a product of Canadian society since the early 1600s and their enslavement occurred on this land for centuries. The Black Loyalist departure is linked to the failure of institutional, political and societal will to fulfill the promises that were made to the communities that left for Sierra Leone. On March 10, 1792, the settlers reached the shores of Sierra Leone.

I would like to recognize the ongoing significance of the U.N. International Decade for People of African Descent, and the importance of recognizing the history of Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia, and how all communities in Nova Scotia continue to be affected by this history.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

MAR. PROVINCES: NEED FOR COLLAB. - RECOG.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I want to thank the member for Halifax Needham for that statement.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to encourage my colleagues and all Nova Scotians to embrace opportunities to increase collaboration with our neighbouring Maritime provinces.

We all know the Maritimes are rich in history, diverse in culture, and have all the components needed for a wealthy, robust region. I believe now is the time for our Maritime provinces to start working together more effectively - remove interprovincial barriers, capitalize on the economic viability of our region, and take back regional political strength. We need to remove interprovincial rules and regulations that inhibit natural trade and movement of people, and form a united force that will result in the strengthening of our Maritime region, on all issues, but most importantly, health and economic.

If we work together to share our valuable resources then we will be stronger. A stronger future is in the hands and the hearts of all people as we work together as a region.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Chester-St. Margaret's.

SON, LOGAN: F2F TOUR PARTIC. - BEST WISHES

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I never do this, but today I would like to talk about my son Logan Barkhouse. Logan has won the opportunity to play and be one of Nova Scotia's representatives at the Face to Face Tour Ottawa by winning a qualifier ticket in Magic at Lantzalot Game Store in Blockhouse.

I've taught all three of my children to be proud, respectful, independent, and hard-working. I have to say, Mr. Speaker, all three show those positive attributes every day.

I ask the House to join me in wishing Logan good luck this weekend in Ottawa at the Face to Face Tour. I just wanted to say good luck, Logie, bring it home to Nova Scotia.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

PRIME, KEVIN: RETIREMENT - CONGRATS.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Mr. Speaker, I would like to take a moment to recognize a familiar face to a lot of us. After 31 years of working events at the Scotiabank/Metro Centre, Kevin Prime has retired. Kevin's smile, friendly attitude and knowledge will be missed. The Metro Centre will not be the same without you, Kevin. Enjoy your well-deserved retirement.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

FOOD BANKS: NEED INCREASED - RECOG.

KENDRA COOMBES: Mr. Speaker, since we all gathered last, I have had the opportunity to visit several food banks. The people who work and volunteer at the food banks in our communities do tremendous work to provide groceries to clients.

There was a disturbing theme that emerged from my conversations. Each food bank, when they opened, only expected to be there for 6 months to a year. They didn't expect, 40 or 50 years later, to remain in business. Every food bank has seen a doubling of its clients. They have witnessed donors and volunteers becoming clients. I have heard that they do not want to be in business but are forced to because people don't have enough to eat. I heard from so many that if they could only alleviate the pressure of someone being able to pay bills, buy medication, provide groceries, they have done their job.

They have told me they await the day when everyone has enough money to live so they can close their doors.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Digby-Annapolis.

DALTON, GRAHAM NEIL: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

HON. JILL BALSER: Mr. Speaker, it is with great sadness that I stand here today to recognize the life of Mr. Graham Neil Dalton, who passed away on February 17, 2023.

Graham completed his secondary education at Acadia University with a B.A. in geology, followed by a B.Ed. in order to stay close to the love of his life, Dinah. Graham had a career of 32 years as an educator teaching junior high science, math, and industrial arts at Clark Rutherford and Annapolis Royal Academy. Graham was active in both Scouts Canada and the Royal Canadian Army Cadets, earning the rank of Master Cadet. His Summers were spent on the range with the cadet rifle team, where he rose to be top marksmen. His passion led him to later become an instructor for sea cadets at CFB Cornwallis as a range officer.

In his retirement years, all his skills accumulated into the creation of a masterpiece barn, derived from his own design, lumber, and construction. He also spent much time on the range or in the woods with his tools. He lived a rich life, full of many passions.

Let us recognize the great life of Graham Dalton. I would like to send my deepest sympathies to Graham's family. He will be missed by all who knew him, and was a true asset to the community.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Preston.

OPUS CAFÉ: HARD WORK - RECOG.

ANGELA SIMMONDS: Mr. Speaker, I rise in the House today to acknowledge Opus Café. The owners are Debbie and Glen Higgins. The Opus Café is a community space that provides old-fashioned, all-day breakfast and catering. They are seasoned with more than 10 years of experience in catering and their goal is to afford their customers with the best food and customer service through old-fashioned approach.

The Opus Café catering is one of its kind and is located in the Kinney Place, which was formerly known as the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children within the community.

I want to say that I have known Debbie my entire life and it is her spirit, her passion, and her commitment to community that makes Opus Café so welcoming. I would ask the House to recognize the hard work of the Opus Café.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

TUTTON, MICHAEL: HUMAN RTS. AWD. RECIP. - CONGRATS.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I rise today to recognize Canadian Press reporter and Dartmouth South constituent Michael Tutton, who late last year received a Nova Scotia Human Rights Award for his journalism. Michael has been reporting on issues affecting people with disabilities since 2009, when he broke the story of abuse and neglect in large facilities around the province. Since then, he has brought numerous stories and issues to light that affect the community, many of which stem from a lack of adequate housing or investment in the lives of people living with disabilities.

Michael's work informs the work we do in this House to create policies that respect humanity and do not only consider the bottom line. Please join me in honouring Michael Tutton for his contributions toward attaining a just, equitable, and inclusive society in Nova Scotia and to congratulate him on this well-deserved award.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Lunenburg.

SPECIAL ADVISOR, MITCH MALTBY - BIRTHDAY WISHES

HON. SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: I rise today with the very happy purpose of wishing my special advisor, the pride of Amherst, Mitch Maltby, a very happy birthday. It's hard to believe I've only known this guy for a year and a half. Unlike many of my colleagues, Mr. Speaker, I did not come into this very privileged position with a suggestion for someone to fill this critical role. To be honest, I'm not sure I entirely understood how vitally important it is, but I will be forever grateful to James Mitchener for pairing us together. It's a great match, with shared political sensibilities, work ethic, and sense of humour. Anyone in this House would be lucky to road trip with us. We are hilarious, if I do say so myself. Mitch, my colleague and now friend, happy birthday.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Armdale.

EURO PIZZA: FOOD SERVICE - RECOG.

ALI DUALE: Mr. Speaker, today I would like to recognize Euro Pizza. For decades they have been delivering fresh-baked slices of pizza for residents of Halifax Armdale and beyond, always doing so with a smile and even some occasional life advice. Euro Pizza might be best known for their famous tzatziki sauce, which is made from a family recipe that has been passed down for generations.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

MELVIN FARMS: INNOVATOR AWD. RECIP. - RECOG.

LISA LACHANCE: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to congratulate Melvin Farms as the recipient of the 2023 Horticultural Nova Scotia's RBC Innovator Award. This annual

award recognizes those who have made an outstanding and innovative contribution to the agricultural industry.

Melvin Farms is a sixth-generation, family-owned farm located in Canning, specializing in the production of fresh vegetables for the Atlantic Canadian market. President and co-owner Richard Melvin has always led innovative efforts. In 1983 he was awarded a Nuffield Farming Scholarship, which allowed him to study vegetable production and marketing, as well as policy, in Europe. He has been actively involved in dozens of community agricultural organizations, too many to mention here, but I'll just throw out some highlights: Feed Nova Scotia, Horticulture Nova Scotia, and is the current chair of the Annapolis Valley Farmland Trust Society. Allan Melvin, also co-owner, continues this tradition as current president of the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture.

I ask all members to join me in recognizing Melvin Farms for their commitment to ethical and sustainable agricultural production.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sackville-Cobequid.

NASH, GERRY & SHARON: RETIREMENT - CONGRATS.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to congratulate Gerry and Sharon Nash of Lower Sackville. Gerry and Sharon Nash are the former owners of National Jewellery, which was one of the last old-fashioned jewellery stores that completed work on site.

Recently they closed their doors and the couple retired after serving the community for 39 years. Throughout those years, Gerry successfully trained staff members who have gone on to open their own businesses or have continued working in the industry, carrying on Gerry's legacy.

I would ask that all members of the House of Assembly join me in congratulating and thanking Gerry and Sharon Nash for the many years of commitment and passion for their community and craft, and wish them all the best in this new chapter of their lives.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hammonds Plains-Lucasville.

RAMADAN: MUSLIM CELEBRATION - RECOG.

HON. BEN JESSOME: Mr. Speaker, in this season it's my pleasure to recognize that here in Nova Scotia and abroad, we are celebrating Ramadan. Hammonds Plains-Lucasville, and Nova Scotia more broadly, is a proud home to a wonderful Muslim community.

I know that a number of my colleagues have recognized it in this House. I hope that more people continue to recognize the celebration. On behalf of my constituency, Hammonds Plains-Lucasville, and our Liberal caucus, I want to wish all Muslims a happy and wonderful and family-filled Ramadan Mubarak.

[9:45 a.m.]

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

LOCAL RESIDENTS: QPJ MEDAL RECIPS. - RECOG.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Mr. Speaker, on December 19, 2022, I was honoured to recognize 15 exceptional Dartmouth North residents with the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medal.

For our very own Dartmouth North ceremony, we gathered at the North Grove and enjoyed music by a young local violinist, Ella Rogerson, and had desserts from both Delectable Desserts and New Leaf Catering. Photography was done by Dartmouth North resident Nicola Davison.

The stars of the night were the deserving recipients, and the audience was filled with their adoring fans, family, friends, colleagues, and community members. The Dartmouth North recipients of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medal were Geoff Bennett, Elizabeth Blanchette, Josephine Downey, Angus Duncan, Cheyanne Gordon, Shianne Hardy, Arthur Hood, Guyleigh Johnson, Elizabeth MacPherson, Margaret Ann McHugh, Anthony Scoggins, Mary Rigby, Vicky Samuels-Stewart, Fatema Sidat, and Beth Vallis.

I am proud to be in community with these people and was so pleased to celebrate all that they have contributed to our beloved community. Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth East.

SHAW, TRISTAN: NEW CONSTITUENCY ASSISTANT - RECOG.

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: Mr. Speaker, it's Day 4 of this Legislature's sitting. I think we should all acknowledge the tremendous work that our constituent assistants are doing in our communities throughout Nova Scotia, so a shout-out to our constituent assistants.

I want to take this opportunity to welcome Tristan Shaw, the constituency assistant for Dartmouth East. Tristan's been in the job for the past two months and has been doing a phenomenal job supporting the residents of Dartmouth East.

Tristan is a former student of mine. I recall Tristan being the Prime Minister in the Woodlawn High School Model Parliament almost a decade ago. Tristan's been doing a fantastic job over the past couple of months, so I want to welcome him to the community.

I also want to send a shout-out to Lucy Richard, our community outreach coordinator. Lucy does phenomenal work. Tonight, she and the team will be at the Fairbanks Centre supporting the Square Roots program.

Mr. Speaker, a shout-out to all our constituent assistants in Nova Scotia.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

NEW DEAL DEVT.: HOUSING FOR SENIORS - RECOG.

FRED TILLEY: Mr. Speaker, today I rise to thank and congratulate New Deal Development in Sydney Mines led by Dave Julian.

They have an amazing board of volunteers who work very hard providing housing in our community for seniors. Just recently an announcement was made to build another facility behind the original facility of 22 affordable housing units for seniors in Sydney Mines.

I would like to thank Dave and his team for the hard work and dedication that they have to our community and, in particular, to the seniors of our community. They work hard for them every single day. Thank you, Dave and team.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

CA, AISHA HUM - BIRTHDAY WISHES

SUZY HANSEN: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to show my appreciation for my constituency assistant, Aisha Hum.

Aisha has been working in my office for about a year and has been, and continues to be, a huge asset to the work that we do in the office. Her connection to community and her communication skills are absolutely amazing. Aisha is very meticulous when it comes to case management, and her care and knowledge of community and the issues faced by folks as felt by our clients and service providers alike.

Today is a very special day as it is Aisha's birthday. She is celebrating - I will not say her age - but she is not someone who does things for praise. She is very humble. The work that she does is because she truly cares for people and is a true advocate for her community and the people in it.

I would like all members to join me in thanking my CA for holding down the office while we do business here in this House. As well, I'd like to wish Aisha Hum a very happy birthday and a wonderful year to come.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

HURR. FIONA DAMAGE: NEED FOR SUPPORT - RECOG.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I rise today to draw attention to the number of Cumberland North residents who are still struggling to have their homes and properties repaired after the devastation of Hurricane Fiona.

The overwhelming number of claims to insurance companies has meant they are still trying to confirm damages and approve claims, and unfortunately, once that part of the process is addressed, then begins the job of trying to find a qualified contractor who can complete the work in a timely manner. My office continues to hear from concerned residents who have been told they will be lucky if they have their repairs finished before this Fall, when hurricane season arrives again.

Mother Nature dealt a major blow to many in my constituency, and today I ask my colleagues to join me in offering encouragement and support to those who are still trying to ensure their roof or basement does not leak the next time a hurricane arrives on our shores.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Argyle.

WE CARE RADIOTHON: HOSPITAL FUNDRAISER - THANKS

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: I rise today to recognize all the donors, sponsors, volunteers, and supporters of the 2023 Yarmouth Hospital Foundation's We Care Radiothon.

This year, the Yarmouth We Care Radiothon, held on March 2nd, brought in an amazing \$157,658 that will go towards the purchase of three vital pieces of equipment for the Yarmouth Regional Hospital's Emergency Department: a portable ultrasound, a bladder scanner, and an electrocardiogram machine. This equipment will make it easier for staff to respond to patients' needs more quickly and precisely.

In southwestern Nova Scotia, community support is incredibly strong, and citizens always ensure these types of events are a great success.

I ask all members of this House to join me in thanking the Yarmouth Hospital Foundation and all those who came together in making this year's Yarmouth Hospital Foundation's We Care Radiothon another incredible success.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clare.

PEACH, LARRY: SONGS RELEASE - RECOG.

RONNIE LEBLANC: During the pandemic, Larry Peach, the general manager of Clare Tourism, decided to focus on music and write his own compositions. This was a natural progression for Larry, who had played the keyboard and synthesizer in his youth.

Under the name Peach on the Beach, Larry has released two songs so far, both of which provide a nostalgic look back in time in Dartmouth. The first song is about his experience in the city's video arcades, while the second recounts the late-night stops at Halifax's Pizza Corner. Larry's musical influences come from the soundtrack of his youth and includes new wave and hip hop.

I ask all members to join me in congratulating Larry, also known as Peach on the Beach, on the release of his first album and for having his song "Beeping and Bleeping" voted Number 1 on CIOE East Coast Top 30 Countdown.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

ORGANIZERS: SYDNEY SANTA PARADE - THANKS

KENDRA COOMBES: I rise to recognize Michael Vickers, Whitney Green, and Marie Green, for their efforts to ensure the Sydney Santa Parade came to Whitney Pier.

People were upset when the community heard Whitney Pier would no longer be part of the traditional and historical parade route. These community-minded individuals sprung into action following a community meeting to meet with the Sydney organizers. Together they devised a plan for the parade route to include the Pier.

The parade was a success. The community showed up. Not an inch of sidewalk or snowbank was left to stand on. I walked the parade as a participant, and the most common thing I heard while I was walking was, thank you for coming to Whitney Pier. It was a truly joyful day.

I want to thank Mike, Whitney, Marie, and the Sydney organizers for putting smiles on everyone's faces.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton East.

MACKINLEY, BRADLEY W.: HOCKEY VOL. WORK - RECOG.

HON. BRIAN COMER: I rise today to commend Bradley MacKinley of Marion Bridge. To say he is a dedicated volunteer in his community is an understatement.

Brad has been a hockey volunteer for over 35 years around the Cape Breton region, from coaching teams, even when he has no children of his own on the team, to volunteering for over 27 years with Hockey Nova Scotia, giving him the title of the volunteer with the most years with the organization.

Brad is well known in the hockey community for his cheerful attitude, support, and volunteering for the goodness of the players. During the pandemic, Brad was in the forefront with Hockey Nova Scotia, working with Public Health to ensure players got back to the game safely.

I stand here today, Mr. Speaker, to applaud Bradley on his commitment to the sport of hockey and his volunteerism.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

SAXON, DR. MICHELE: QPJ MEDAL RECIP. - CONGRATS.

CARMAN KERR: One of the personal highlights, as I mentioned, as MLA so far was having the honour of presenting constituents with the Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medal. This medal recognized exceptional Nova Scotians who make their communities even better places to live, work, and play.

One of the constituents I had the honour of presenting this medal to was Dr. Michele Saxon. Michele is a family physician who is heavily engaged in efforts to recruit new health care professionals to underserved rural Nova Scotia communities. She also serves as the PRAP clinical field assessor for internationally trained medical grads.

She is certainly a very deserving recipient of this award. She is an excellent physician and a wonderful person.

Mr. Speaker, I invite all members of the House of Assembly to join me in congratulating Dr. Michele Saxon on receiving the Nova Scotia Platinum Jubilee Medal, and I thank her for all her years of service.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Lunenburg West.

FRALIC, HEATHER: COM. SERV. - THANKS

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize Heather Fralic, a volunteer with the United Way of Lunenburg County. Heather was Chair of the Allocations Committee for 10 years, a demanding position with a significant workload. The last two years she has been a member of the board.

Vice-Chair Mark Winfield says that “Heather is a committed community supporter with significant knowledge of those in need. She has a pragmatic view, helping the organization achieve high effectiveness and accountability.”

In addition to her work with United Way, Heather has been a board member...

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. There’s a lot of chatter going on. Please respect the person making the statement.

The honourable member for Lunenburg West.

BECKY DRUHAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In addition to her work with the United Way, Heather has been a board member of the Lunenburg County Lifestyle Centre and a committee member of the Lunenburg-Queens Business Excellence Awards.

I ask all members of this House to join me in extending our gratitude and thanks to Heather Fralic, who works hard for our community, creating meaningful change.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Preston.

GRANDSON, AMARI ANTONIO - BIRTHDAY WISHES

ANGELA SIMMONDS: Mr. Speaker, I rise today in the House acknowledge, just past on March 12th, my little grandson Amari Antonio turned five. Very excited for him. His little nanny was there to celebrate, and I’m excited to say that my second grandson will be one year old on May 3rd.

I just want to say how extremely happy I am to be your little nanny, how much I love you, and how much fun it was to celebrate with you.

I’d ask this House to celebrate and clap for my little grandsons, Amari Antonio and Adonis. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hants East.

HANTS CRAFT CO-OP: 40TH ANNIV. - CONGRATS.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Mr. Speaker, this year the In Hants Craft Co-op will be celebrating their 40th anniversary at their annual craft fair in November.

In Hants Craft Co-op holds their annual Christmas craft fair in Milford with around 50 vendors selling their handmade Christmas items as well as delicious baked goods.

This craft fair is well organized by a number of volunteers who generously donate their time to help put together an amazing event.

I would like to thank the organizers and volunteers who help bring the Christmas craft fair to Hants East every year and congratulate them on 40 years of showcasing our fantastic local products.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

GOMES, KELLY: CA WORK - RECOG.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Mr. Speaker, I don't think I've ever done this, but after being here for 10 years, I'd like to thank and congratulate my constituency assistant, Kelly Gomes. Kelly has been by my side for 11 years now. She actually started working on campaigns in - wait for it - John Buchanan's first campaign. So she's been around for quite a long time. She's experienced. She knows the constituency like the back of her hand. And quite frankly, she might be one of the most patient CAs this province has.

I want to thank Kelly for everything she does. She's amazing at her job. I don't think there's a single issue that comes into the office that she can't solve. Her personality is the exact opposite of mine, where she's extremely organized and extremely patient. We work well together.

Kelly - I know that she's got about a year left before retirement. I don't want you to retire. Please stay forever.

I thank you for everything you do, and I just want you to know that this has been an amazing partnership.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The time for Statements by Members has expired. We will now move into Oral Questions put by Members to Ministers. The time is 10:00 a.m. and we will go until 10:50 a.m.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM.: INFLATION STRATEGY - EXPLAIN

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, as Nova Scotians deal with an inflationary crisis, a cost of living crisis, and a housing crisis, we do have deep concerns about the budget and what is not in it. There is nothing in the Premier's budget to help those

struggling to pay their grocery bill. There is nothing new to address the housing crisis. We can certainly say that the government's promise for a guaranteed better paycheque is not in this budget. There is no increase to income assistance supporting our most vulnerable. There is no new investment for new public housing, and inflationary pressures are going to continue to hurt everyday Nova Scotians and working families and we are not seeing the right supports to protect them.

[10:00 a.m.]

There are some one-time investments, which have been helpful, but we need a strategy. Can the Premier please tell us what his strategy is to deal with this inflationary period to support individuals in our economy?

HON. TIM HOUSTON (The Premier): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for this important issue. We tabled a budget yesterday of \$14 billion in spending. We are doing what we can to support Nova Scotians, specifically in the affordability crisis. In the Fall, I think we allocated over \$150 million to support Nova Scotians through these difficult times and I just don't agree with the statement that there is nothing in the budget. We do what we can but we always wish we could do more. That's what brings us to the Chamber; to do more.

We always wish we could, but in terms of the rent supplements, there will be 1,000 more rent supplements. That's up to 8,000 rent supplements that we have. That number was 5,000 when we took office. There is always more to do. We will always look for more we can do, but we are there to support Nova Scotians where we can.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, there are more rent supplements but we don't have more housing units to put people in to use those rent supplements. It's not going to work.

We also know that financial and food insecurity are some of the largest factors that impact overall health of people and the well-being of Nova Scotians. We know that health care is about more than treating illnesses. It is also about preventing it and helping people stay healthy. Half of adults who are food insecure skip out on their medication because they cannot afford it. I can table those numbers. Having a difficult time affording food causes as much as a six-fold increase in depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. I can table that as well.

People who cannot afford food end up costing the health care system more than twice the health care resources than those who can, and that is also tabled.

THE SPEAKER: Question, please.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, not being able to afford rent, being food insecure ...

THE SPEAKER: Question, please.

ZACH CHURCHILL: ... is going to make more Nova Scotians sick. I would like to ask the Premier: When will the Premier start actually addressing the root causes of people's health in Nova Scotia?

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, these are indeed very serious issues facing many Nova Scotians. Look, I just want to be clear on the budget that we have tabled, with the spending that we have allocated - record spending in this province, record spending that we are able to table in a budget because of things that are happening in the economy because the province is moving forward. We have challenges in this province, absolutely, but we have incredible opportunities. Just on the housing issue I'd be happy to table the budget for the member's review.

Fifteen million more for public housing repairs and we know we need to bring that stock up; \$13 million more to address the wait-list for home repair and adaptation programs, helping over 800 additional home owners; and incentives to accelerate housing development. We are doing what we can. There is always more to do but we are doing what we can today.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, it is concerning that the only thing that this government can lean on and brag about is how much more money they are spending. They are also going to be spending a lot more money to service our debt, and on debt, but what they are not doing is investing in areas where we are actually going to see a major return for Nova Scotians and investing in people's health is actually key to that. That is one of areas where we can invest money. It's going to take resources off of our health care system, help people be healthier and live longer, and stay out of our hospitals.

One in six Nova Scotia households is now becoming food insecure. That's been tabled as well, and yet this government is not focused on making food more affordable or making sure local produce is more available for even students in our schools. I would like to ask the Premier: Why is helping Nova Scotians put food on the table and helping them stay healthier not a part of this budget?

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, there are significant investments being made in food security and supporting Nova Scotians. I'd go through the list but the member doesn't like to hear about the list when we go about the list. We are doing what we can and in terms of growing more of our own food - food sustainability - this is the exact premise behind Nova Scotia Loyal. I am so pleased to hear today that the members are finally going to get behind an innovative program like that to support food security in this province.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the New Democratic Party.

PREM.: STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH - INVEST

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Mr. Speaker, following the events at Charles P. Allen High School earlier this week, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development went on the radio to assure Nova Scotians that rates of violence in schools have remained steady and to suggest that these incidents are simple schoolyard spats. But department data shows that there were over 13,000 reported incidents last school year alone - a 23 per cent increase over the year before, and I'll table that. In the Halifax area, police have been called to schools for such incidents 424 times since 2018, and I'll table that.

Despite the minister's assertions, incidents of school violence are on the rise, and they need government attention. What is the Premier going to do?

THE PREMIER: Obviously, the events at C.P. Allen this week have left us all in shock. We're definitely concerned about that, for sure. I've had a chance to speak to some of the people working at Charles P. Allen. We're all concerned about that. Our thoughts are with everyone there. This is a serious issue. It's an issue where the community - there's a lot that many of us can do, and we'll certainly, as a government, do what we can to focus on that issue.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Students themselves have been calling for funding to improve student access to mental health supports. Charles P. Allen Grade 12 student Brady Moore said: "You hear stories on the news and online about people that aren't ... able to access mental health supports, not only in schools, but in our province and health-care system as well. I think that comes down to funding and staffing, and I think we have people that want to be able to help, and we just need the funding to be able to provide more services in school, more staffing for students to get one-on-one support that we need."

This government tabled a budget yesterday that included nothing to address mental health in schools and has continuously failed to invest in these needed supports. Mr. Speaker, when will the Premier demonstrate that his government cares about school safety and student well-being and invest in students' mental health?

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, for the member to imply that I don't care, that the government doesn't care, about the safety of students is completely out of line. For the member to imply that the minister would characterize a very serious incident at C.P.A. as a schoolyard spat - that didn't happen. It's completely unfair. This government cares. We're not on this side of the House because we don't care. We're on this side of the House because we do care. In this government, we invest significantly in addictions and mental health.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Mr. Speaker, I'm not implying anything. I'm asking a question. I'm asking the question of what this government is going to do to prevent the rising violence in schools.

Nova Scotia teachers have been warning for years about the impact of staffing shortages and cuts to unassigned instructional time on students' safety and well-being. In the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development's own words, the connections that are built between students and educators and staff prevent escalation and provide students with channels of communication. Teachers have been clear with this government about what they need to prevent a repeat of the terrible events of last week. They need more staff resources to enhance supervision and support, and they need a reversal of the cuts made under the previous Liberal government.

Schools are not okay. How is this government going to ensure the safety of our children and youth without supporting them or their teachers properly?

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, as a government, we feel that obligation to keep our students safe and to keep Nova Scotians safe. I can assure the member that the minister and the minister's team are working closely with those working in our schools. We will do what we can to support them.

We know that there are challenges with access to health care. This budget speaks to that. We know there are challenges with access to addictions and mental health care. That's why we have in this province, for the first time in this province's history, a Minister Responsible for the Office of Addictions and Mental Health supporting Nova Scotians. I want to assure the member that the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Minister Responsible for the Office of Mental Health and Addictions, and the entire government team are working to support Nova Scotians in every way possible. We just ask the members opposite to join us in that quest.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

FTB - ECONOMIC COMMITMENTS - UPDATE

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, we are seeing a pattern of this Premier and government not following through on their promises and commitments to Nova Scotians, nor the timelines they even set for themselves. We've seen the government miss the mark again in this budget.

The economic platform that this government campaigned on was made up of two key programs - a better paycheque guarantee for the private sector in Nova Scotia and a Nova Scotia Loyal program that would incentivize purchasing of local goods. This is what was committed to Nova Scotians, and it was actually promised on Day 1.

What we do know is that this government has not given Nova Scotians a better paycheque guarantee in the private sector, as promised, and we have not seen the Nova Scotia Loyal program actually produce any results.

Could the Premier please inform this House why he has missed the timeline on these two key economic commitments and is this something he is actually going to be following through on?

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: As I said yesterday, our government is focused on fixing health care. There's a significant cost to the other item the member has mentioned. We are focused on fixing health care. We're still tabling deficit budgets, Mr. Speaker, in an effort to fix health care.

I will also say this - our numbers show that wages have increased in the province. We see that in our personal income tax numbers. We have the lowest unemployment numbers since the early 1970s. The marketplace is a marketplace for workers right now. Employers are struggling to find them; they are being more competitive in their efforts to find them and that is helping wages to rise on its own.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, the government is spending more on health care but we have actually seen some of the key outcomes getting worse in the province, from the number of people who need a family doctor to ER closures, to vacancies as well.

Also in this budget, this government is planning on gaining \$156 million in revenues from the Nova Scotia Loyal program. All we see in the Nova Scotia Loyal program is a bunch of wrapped trucks that are going around with Tories in parades and people collecting cell phone numbers at events.

This Nova Scotia Loyal program is not incentivizing at all any purchasing of local goods. It's just a PR stunt. They are budgeting it at \$1.5 million more this year, probably to wrap more trucks and be in more parades, and they've also indicated that there is supposed to be a revenue of \$156 million coming from this program. Where are those revenues going to come from?

HON. SUSAN GREEK-CORKUM: To hit that question straight-on, it's going to come from increased spending in support of the products that are grown and made right here in Nova Scotia.

Nova Scotia Loyal, as we have always said, is both the incentive program but a bigger commitment by this government to look at where we, ourselves, as a major purchaser, can do better to support our manufacturers and our growers. That is taking place already, looking at foodstuffs in and around schools and certainly nursing homes, where a pilot has been rolled out - and at Michelin. Just the other week I had somebody say, isn't this Nova Scotia Loyal?

[10:15 a.m.]

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clare.

DCS: INCOME ASSISTANCE - INCREASE

RONNIE LEBLANC: Mr. Speaker, this province is facing a cost of living crisis and Nova Scotians are struggling right here at home, including those on income assistance. Current payments are not going far enough.

This government did not increase income assistance payments in this budget, even when all basic amenities have gone up. Isn't it the government's duty to protect our most vulnerable?

My question to the minister is simple: Can she explain why this government has not increased either the amount or the threshold for income assistance?

HON. KARLA MACFARLANE: We know that everybody wants to live in dignity. We know that everyone wants to be able to support themselves. That's why this government has worked collectively across all departments to come up with various solutions to help people who are living in poverty, whether that be increasing the Seniors Care Grant, whether that be creating \$10 a day child care, whether that is increasing the Child Tax Benefit by \$600, or whether that is increasing rent supplements. We have done a collage of different things that will help people.

RONNIE LEBLANC: In all due fairness, not everybody can qualify for those programs and some people are struggling.

Mr. Speaker, one way to address the impacts of the cost of living has on those on income assistance is to index it. This government is missing the mark and continuing to leave Nova Scotians who need more support behind.

Yesterday in this House, the Minister of Community Services said that there was no limit on the amount of income assistance it can provide Nova Scotians. Why won't this government index income assistance if there's no limit? (Applause)

KARLA MACFARLANE: Mr. Speaker, actually under this government, we have fewer people on income assistance because we were able to find a number of individuals to go back out into the workforce. We increased that by 25 per cent. (Applause) We should be very proud of those people who can go back out.

As I explained yesterday, and maybe I have to repeat it again: No one will be refused if they need income assistance - no one. We don't know if we're going to spend \$20 million. We don't know if we're going to spend \$50 million or \$100 million. What I

can assure Nova Scotians is that if they need help, this government will be there for them. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. Order, please. I know that the minister has already taken her seat, but please. There's a lot of chatter going back and forth and it's just getting louder and louder all the time. Please respect the person asking the question and the minister who answers it.

The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

NRR - HEAT PUMP REBATES: DELAY - UPDATE

FRED TILLEY: Mr. Speaker, Nova Scotians were excited to finally learn of the government's plan to disperse federal money for home heating. We know that as many as 40 per cent of Nova Scotians are experiencing energy poverty. I will table that.

We have been pushing for heat pumps as an effective solution to lower Nova Scotians' heating bills for some time now, but Nova Scotians are waiting a long time for the rebates to come in.

Could the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables update us on what his department is doing to improve these wait times?

HON. TORY RUSHTON: I'm very pleased to speak about the \$140 million that we've invested for the heat pump program and retrofits for middle income people. This program is going to help thousands of households in Nova Scotia over the next number of years.

We were also encouraged when I was joined by our federal colleagues just a few weeks ago when the federal government finally kicked in their funding. It wasn't necessarily a provincial thing. We knew that the federal funding was coming. They committed to it.

We made our announcement in December before the heating season really kicked off. The federal government joined in. Mr. Speaker, it was a joyous moment for all Nova Scotians. I hope that the member for Northside-Westmount can join in that joyous moment.

FRED TILLEY: Mr. Speaker, the temperature's really up here today. I thought that was my easiest question of the session. I thank the minister for that joyous response.

One issue that we've been hearing a lot about from our constituents relates to the home insurance. People are eager to switch over to this program, however they're reluctant to fully replace their oil furnaces because insurance companies are requiring that secondary source of heating.

Can the minister commit to making sure that people are able to take advantage of this program without losing their home insurance?

TORY RUSHTON: I thank the member for that question. It gives me an opportunity to set the record straight.

This is not necessarily to get away from oil. This is the first step to start getting off oil. You don't necessarily have to remove the oil appliances at this time as you move into these programs.

The money has been invested in Efficiency Nova Scotia to alleviate these programs from both the provincial and federal programs. That's actually one of the very first questions, when people call Efficiency Nova Scotia, that they are asked when they get approved. Have they spoken with their insurance company to ensure that these investments and these upgrades to their homes, whether they be the heat pump or the retrofits - will they apply and will their insurance company still cover them?

These are some of the conversations that are taking place from Efficiency Nova Scotia at that time.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

EECD: UNIVERSAL SCHOOL LUNCH PGM. - ADDRESS

SUZY HANSEN: My question is for the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Her department appeared at the Public Accounts Committee in October to talk about school food where staff said that they were actively working on the universal lunch program for Nova Scotia schools. They suggested that they would be bringing a request for funding for a school food program for this budget. I'll table that.

Mr. Speaker, did the minister submit a funding request for a universal lunch program for this budget?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: We know how important it is for students to be able to access healthy nutrition, not only for their educational needs, but also for their well-being. I can assure Nova Scotians that any student who needs food in school gets food. I can also assure the members opposite that we are continuing to work with the federal government to explore what may be available for universal food programming.

We do have a breakfast program, an excellent breakfast program, in Nova Scotia. We've also started pilots across the province in areas to look at lunchtime options, and those include salad bars and fruit bowl programs and other programs.

So we are actively working to expand access to food in schools because we know it's important to families and students.

SUZY HANSEN: I said universal lunch program for Nova Scotia, so I'll take that as a no, because we know that in schools, staff provide that food.

The Auditor General said when the report was released last year that Nova Scotia needs to do a better job serving healthy food in its 366 public schools or risk spending billions of dollars in future health care costs, and I'll table that. Let me tell you how much new money for school food is in this budget: zero.

Mr. Speaker, can the minister explain to parents, students, teachers, and staff what happened to all the work at her department on a universal lunch program?

BECKY DRUHAN: As I indicated, we are working to expand access to food in schools. We have introduced pilot programs in Nova Scotia that include lunch programming, salad bar programming, accessing local-grown nutritious food, that are community-based and that support our students' food needs.

What I would also encourage the members opposite to do, though - we've been working closely with the federal government to encourage them to follow through on their commitment to support a universal food program. My conversations with the minister continue. Those are positive conversations. Our departments are working together. Nova Scotia is poised to act when the federal government steps up, and we encourage the members opposite to encourage the federal government to support us in those actions.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

DHW: FAMILY PRACTICE WAIT-LIST GROWING - ADDRESS

HON. KELLY REGAN: During the 2021 election campaign, when the doctor wait-list for the entire province stood at 69,000, this Premier said: It's not bad luck that Nova Scotia's health care system has continued to worsen over the last eight years, it's weak leadership. I'll table that.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the Central Zone today - basically Halifax Regional Municipality - alone has over 61,000 people on the Need a Family Practice Registry wait-list. With practices closing in Spryfield and the South End, that number is only going to continue to rise. We're also the only Atlantic province without a family doctor incentive in its capital region but, for some reason, if you live in HRM and you don't have a family doctor, you're not a priority for this government.

THE SPEAKER: Question, please.

KELLY REGAN: That was underlined yesterday. Mr. Speaker, could the Premier please tell us, is it still weak leadership that this government has virtually doubled the family doctor wait-list since taking office?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Certainly, I think it's strong leadership, actually, that's increased the population of this province and has created access and pathways to care throughout this province. (Applause) What's fascinating, Mr. Speaker, is when it's bad, it's our fault; when it's great, it's theirs. I find it fascinating, the perspective from the other side of the room.

We are constantly working with physicians in this province to understand how best to support their practice. We have a responsibility to provide equitable care. Over 50 per cent of the incentives prior to us forming government were coming to Central Zone and we knew that there was a huge gap in our rural communities. We continue to look at equitable access to care. We will continue to do so, and we will continue to navigate this situation as best we can.

KELLY REGAN: Mr. Speaker, we appreciate that doctor incentives are needed in rural areas of the province; they're important. However, we are less competitive than our neighbouring provinces when we are attracting new family doctors to our capital region. Every zone needs family doctors - every zone.

We know at least 8,000 more Nova Scotians will join the wait-list in the coming months due to this government's refusal to work with family practices and help them remain open in the capital region. They should be doing more to recruit family doctors in the HRM. The wait-list has doubled under this government's leadership, and in HRM the wait-list has tripled. Why has this government not put additional supports into recruiting and retaining family doctors in the Central Zone?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: We have been investing very heavily in primary care, and this budget actually is a budget that will show folks that we continue to invest in primary care. We have exciting things that are coming up.

I am not concerned about our primary care environment in terms of our recruitment. I know that the people who are supporting us and leading the health care across this province have innovative ideas. They've been working very hard, and I know that we will see big changes in the coming year. I'll be happy to speak for a number of hours about how this is going to happen in the coming days.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

DHW: DOCTOR RETENTION - PENSION PLAN

FRED TILLEY: One thing we know for certain is that the government continues to spend without seeing results. Under this government, the doctor wait-list has doubled. While this budget has a flashy price tag attached to health care spending, no metric has proven this government is making any progress on the ground, and that's especially true with the doctor wait-list.

We know that numbers are not doubled simply because people are moving to a new area. We know that this government made a promise for retention of doctors, and that was to bring in a pension plan. We're wondering, where is this pension plan to retain doctors in Nova Scotia?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Certainly, that program is under review with the department and any subsequent departments that are helping with that program, and there will be more to say in the coming months and years about that. We're working with Doctors Nova Scotia with that program.

FRED TILLEY: Unfortunately, Nova Scotians can't wait months and years to get on that doctor list. We need some retention items now. This was an election promise of this government, to include a pension plan for doctors. In months and years, will that come just before the next election, similar to the OR wait times, et cetera?

Mr. Speaker, how bad will it have to get before this government will actually follow through on this promise and make that pension available?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: We have already recruited 113 doctors to the province this year. The physician incentive budget has increased by \$10 million in the past year because of those recruitment efforts. We are working with the Nova Scotia College of Physicians and Surgeons to open up registration in order to attract physicians from across this country, as well as the United States.

We've increased the residency seats, all things that could have been done prior to us forming government. However, there was no foresight to do so. I'm very confident our recruitment efforts will continue to yield results, and I look forward to the reduction of that list.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

MAH: PUBLIC HOUSING SPENDING - ACT

BRAEDON CLARK: Yesterday I read the government's news release announcing the budget with great interest. Eighty-four bullet points, lots of investments. A grand total of three of those points related to housing, which the Premier and others have recognized is in a crisis.

As we know, this budget has no new money for new public housing units. We have a wait-list for public housing that has over 6,500 people and growing. We have seen the number of people experiencing homelessness double under this government. I'll table that as well. We have municipalities across the province reaching out and saying they need the province's help on housing. I'll table that as well.

[10:30 a.m.]

Mr. Speaker, with more and more Nova Scotians joining the wait-list for public housing every month, how can this government justify not spending a single cent on new public housing units?

HON. TORY RUSHTON: On behalf of the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, I'd just like to correct for the record: a \$153 million increase in this budget for this department, 34 per cent over last year. An almost \$200 million investment in increasing and preserving housing supply. I don't think that there's no new money in this. We're increasing the budget and we're investing. They're talking about investment and I look forward to their support of the budget.

BRAEDON CLARK: We'll double-check the numbers on that, but I think the key number is zero, as I said in my first question. The key number is zero new public housing units in this province, which I think is unconscionable.

We've also heard about the increased number of rental supplements going up 1,000, to 8,000. Okay. However, the vacancy rate in the province is at 1 per cent and in many parts of the province it is less than 1 per cent. I'll table that.

There are about 63,000 private apartments in this province, so 1 per cent of that is about 630. Mr. Speaker, the problem I see is what is the point of new rental supplements if there's no place to rent?

TORY RUSHTON: If there's zero investment, Mr. Speaker, why were there three bullet points?

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

FTB: LACK OF OVERSIGHT - EXPLAIN

LISA LACHANCE: My question is for the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board. This government has introduced another budget with an enormous amount of additional appropriations - a total of almost \$1.6 billion. This is money that the government spends with no accountability and no democratic oversight. It is also money that came largely from ballooning income tax and HST revenue.

It would not be unreasonable for Nova Scotians to feel that this government has raked in revenues while they have paid more and more at the supermarket and on their tax bills. Yet, Mr. Speaker, the minister does not seem to think he owes the public the simple decency of providing democratic oversight of this spending - why?

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, this might be embarrassing for the member, but it was her own party that set up the rules that are in place in this Legislature right now. That happened back in 2010, under NDP Finance Minister Graham Steele.

Mr. Speaker, we are playing by the same rules that the NDP created and we're creating . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. I'll let it go so far, but it's getting louder. The honourable Minister of Finance and Treasury Board has the floor.

ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, we're playing by the same rules as the Liberal governments have had over the last eight years, going back 18 months ago, so we are playing by the same rules. It is certainly a matter for elected members to decide. The \$1.6 million that we spent was on housing, health, Hurricane Fiona, and affordability - all things they have been asking us to spend money on.

LISA LACHANCE: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate very much the history lesson, but a lot has changed since 2010. I had toddlers in 2010 and I have teenagers, so I can tell you that I have watched the passage of time. We now are the only jurisdiction in this country where we don't have to table additional appropriations.

It is reasonable - it is expected - that we would update our Acts and our processes and how we manage our finances over time. This government is so opposed to providing oversight that they even took the unprecedented step of using their government majority on the Public Accounts Committee to reject the recommendation from the Auditor General that the Department of Finance and Treasury Board even take a look at this issue.

Why is this minister so opposed to simple, democratic oversight of the government's spending decisions?

ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, I don't have a problem with it at all. I know things change. I have six more people in my house since 2010, so I can relate to the member.

The reality is that it could be debated but it's going to be debated after the fact by the time it gets to the Legislature, in most cases. We are very transparent: We released the information to the media, we have a press conference, the Opposition is invited to it, we answer questions. There is full transparency; we're not trying to hide anything. We are

spending money to help Nova Scotians. We're just shocked that the Opposition says to do it and then says not to do it.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

OMHA: UNIVERSAL MENTAL HEALTH CARE - ACTION

BRAEDON CLARK: Mr. Speaker, this government continues to fall short on its promise for universal mental health care. We've just heard about \$17.7 million that was announced for new mental health initiatives that claim to be working towards that goal of universal program access. That's an inadequate number for a government that claims that "money is no object when it comes to health care."

Mr. Speaker, why does this government continue to fall short on one of its signature promises to Nova Scotians - that they will have access to universal mental health care?

HON. BRIAN COMER: Since forming government, Mr. Speaker, we've increased the budget for addictions and mental health care by over \$65 million. This year alone there has been an increase of over 14 per cent, the largest increase in the history of the province. There have been over 1,000 Nova Scotians who have used the recovery support centres across the province thus far. Over 950 Nova Scotians are signed up for Tranquility and we've had over 1,500 visits to the acute mental health day hospital here in the Central Zone.

We do have a plan. Things are getting better. They'll continue to get better.

BRAEDON CLARK: We're also missing sufficient recruitment and retention initiatives for clinical mental health professionals in this budget. Now this government claims that they will be creating a pilot using clinical psychology students.

We're losing mental health specialists, from psychiatrists in rural Nova Scotia to counselling therapists and social workers throughout the NSHA. Without additional incentives and retention strategies, we're going to continue to lose mental health care professionals like we've seen with family doctors in the Central Zone.

Mr. Speaker, how will this government ensure that those clinical psychology students will stay in our public system?

BRIAN COMER: We have a very collaborative partnership with psychologists in the province. There are certainly some ongoing conversations with those billing codes.

It's the first time in the history of the province that we'll be embarking on this journey, so I'm very excited for that. This will be an innovative pilot that will be doing some evaluations of the outcomes, for sure. There's also going to be a great program for the

nursing program for graduate studies at Dalhousie. It will be an advanced clinical nurse specialty program in advanced mental health and addictions as well.

These will be partnerships across the health care field with multidisciplinary collaboration. I look forward to this as it rolls out.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hammonds Plains-Lucasville.

DCS: MEALS ON WHEELS - FUNDING

HON. BEN JESSOME: The Meals on Wheels program plays a vital service across our province. They provide many with meals at an affordable price.

We know food prices have drastically increased and programs like Meals on Wheels are not immune to increased costs. Other provinces such as Ontario and Alberta subsidize these programs to ensure that people are getting good meals and that they stay at an affordable price.

Can the Minister of Community Services tell us why more funding for vital programs like Meals on Wheels was not included in this budget? Did the minister make this ask to the Premier and Cabinet?

HON. KARLA MACFARLANE: What I can assure the member is that this government here has made significant investments with Feed Nova Scotia, as well as private organizations across the province, ensuring that no one goes without food.

We'll keep making those investments as long as we see the need. That's something that we firmly believe in. That's why we're having discussions with the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development as well, and the Minister of Agriculture. We know that food is a necessity, and we will certainly keep working together.

BEN JESSOME: Mr. Speaker, I know that the government's spending a lot of time toeing lines on fixing health care, but we should all know what the Meals on Wheels program is in this House. I'm happy to sit down with the minister and introduce her to the program if that's helpful.

Programs like this help to ensure that people get checked on and they have access to these good meals, which we know is important not only to their home stability, but to their health care.

My question to the minister before the budget is approved in this House: Will the department take some of the funds that are allocated and move them to programs like the Meals on Wheels program?

HON. BARBARA ADAMS: One of the things that we have talked about in the past is that some of the home care that's provided in this province isn't necessarily needing to be health care.

One of the pilots that we did in the province is we looked at how much the VON care was going towards health care versus something like Meals on Wheels. There was a pilot program that was done and what it did was save hundreds and hundreds of hours of CCA and VON care where we brought in Meals on Wheels in order to provide that care, so that the CCAs who were going into the home could actually provide the health care that was needed. We're making things far more efficient in the health care system and the home care system.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

DHW: CUMB. REG. HOSP. ER PROJ. - UPDATE

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Health and Wellness. After Allison Holthoff's death in our emergency department, I shared a 16-point plan to address the emergency health services in Cumberland County. Number two of that plan was to appoint personnel to urgently complete the renovations of the main emergency department at Cumberland Regional Hospital. This means ongoing, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, people working there until the ER is open.

After Allison's death, the Nova Scotia Health Authority gave a date of February 14th that the main ER would be open. Today, March 24th, it is still not open. We are close to 11 months.

Can the Minister of Health and Wellness please tell us who is managing this project and where is the accountability?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: After the tragedy in Amherst, I did have the opportunity to visit the hospital. I wanted to speak to the staff and see the emergency room myself. I did have an opportunity to spend some time with the contractor on the site, so I know that things have been delayed. Some of the things the contractor was able to talk to me about were things like medical gas and air - difficulty not only in supply chain, but also in the availability of that very subspecialist vendor - looking at call bell systems, things like that.

I do want to assure the member that I have been on site. I have had an opportunity to speak to the contractor. There were delays due to the team being unwell. We are continuing to watch that development very closely, to get the services that the residents there need.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: My question was: Who is responsible for the project? Is there a project lead? Who is actually holding that project lead accountable? There doesn't seem to be any local leadership.

Under the NDP government and the former PC government of John Hamm, the health care system had local decision-making. They had local leadership.

Will the Minister of Health and Wellness appoint an effective - someone who is accountable - project lead to get our emergency department back, reopened, after a flood that happened due to a patient conflict? Can they start communicating with local staff, doctors, nurses, who are working in the emergency department, communicate with the public? When is this emergency department going to be open? Will the minister re-institute, bring back local decision-making in health care?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: Certainly, that project is being actively managed through the Nova Scotia Health Authority. As I said, I was able to visit the site with the V.P. of Operations, the zone med. There certainly was an individual there who was looking at project management. The contractor was there. All those people feel the immense pressure to get that emergency room back open.

They also recognize that there have been a number of delays that have been outside of their control. There is no lack of commitment to this project. There has been a lack of supplies through supply chain management, and there has been some interruption related to illness.

I can assure the member and the constituents in that area that that project is moving forward and we expect it to be open very soon.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

DHW: CAPE BRETON REG. HOSP. ER CHANGES - UPDATE

KENDRA COOMBES: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Health and Wellness. Charlene Snow died suddenly on December 30th last year after she waited seven hours for help at the Cape Breton Regional Hospital.

In January, the government announced a list of changes to emergency rooms to prevent similar tragedies, but there were no timelines attached to the changes. The government promised teams led by doctors to get patients out of ambulances faster, and hiring physician assistants and nurse practitioners to work in emergency rooms. So far, it doesn't appear that either of these changes has taken place at the hospital.

How much longer are people in Cape Breton going to have to wait for changes at the Cape Breton Regional Hospital emergency department?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: Patient advocates are now in every emergency department throughout the province. Waiting room clinical care providers are expanding across the province, as well. They are clinical people who will support those folks in the emergency department.

[10:45 a.m.]

The Float MD program, which is a full lead and off-load assessment team, is in five out of the nine emergency rooms. Each emergency room is given an increased number in physician hours in order to have that program led. They are currently implementing that.

There has also been the implementation at the Yarmouth Regional Hospital and the Strait Richmond Hospital, around the virtual care emergency program. All of those things are rolling out. We are looking at our human resource issues, but certainly, there's a commitment to that.

KENDRA COOMBES: While I appreciate the answer, none of that is happening at the Cape Breton Regional Hospital - not in full-time especially.

Ruth Kalbhenn is an 80-year-old Sydney woman who fell down in a parking lot recently. She showed up at the Cape Breton Regional Hospital ER by ambulance covered in blood. She was forced to give up after hours of waiting and went home to try to care for her broken nose by herself. I'll table that.

Cape Bretoners deserve better than this. Will the minister give us a date by which every single one of the promises that this government made for emergency rooms will be in place at the Cape Breton Regional Hospital?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: What I can assure the member is that the teams there are working very hard to support the care of Nova Scotians. I don't think shaming them is going to be a helpful way to support attraction.

Certainly, we are adding all of these resources. We are working very closely with the leadership in Cape Breton and across this province to support recruitment and retention of staff. We don't want to see those people leaving the emergency room. We have implemented a number of programs in order to support people in the waiting room.

I know that our health care workers and the Nova Scotia Health Authority leadership are working at top speed in order to fill those roles, to make sure people are safe and well cared for in our emergency departments across this province.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

FTB: FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE - EXPLAIN

HON. KELLY REGAN: Mr. Speaker, we know that this government is focused on health care. In their own words, they have stated that it is their only focus and their top priority. I'll table that.

It's remarkable that this government does not have the financial health of Nova Scotians as a priority too. Nova Scotians are falling behind, and this government is showing the people of our province that they cannot walk and chew gum at the same time. They aren't even attempting to do it. There's no Better Pay Cheque Guarantee, which we predicted would not happen, even though it was - I will remind my colleagues - guaranteed on Day 1 by the Premier.

I'll ask the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board: When can the people of this province expect more money in their pockets, or will he finally admit that the government has abandoned its commitment on the Better Pay Cheque Guarantee?

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, I can assure the member I can walk and chew gum just fine. (Interruptions)

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The honourable Minister of Finance and Treasury Board has the floor.

ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, I believe the member started speaking about the fiscal capacity of the province. We have the capacity to make the investments we're making in health care. Yes, another deficit budget introduced this year, but we're focused on fixing health care. There's a significant cost to that, and that's what we need to get fixed first.

The marketplace has also changed. We have the lowest unemployment rate since the low 1970s. Wages are going up, and we see that in our provincial income tax receipts.

KELLY REGAN: For people who need new public housing, there was nothing. For young people trying to get into the housing market facing high mortgage rates and high housing costs, there's nothing. Rent supplements - good luck finding a place to rent. People are trying to buy food to feed their families - zilch. The Better Pay Cheque Guarantee - missing in action. It was promised on Day 1. There was no "if we have the fiscal capacity." It was promised on Day 1 by this Premier.

Where is the broad-based help for people who are hurting in this economy?

ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, I'll tell you who was missing in action. It was Nova Scotia Liberal MPs standing behind a carbon tax that's going to hit people in July, instead of standing behind Nova Scotians like we stood behind Nova Scotians, saying no to the carbon tax.

The member talks about housing. There is an increase of \$50 million for provincial housing stock, to fix it up. There are 1,000 more new rent supplements - in just 18 months with this investment - moving it from 5,000 rental supplements in the province to 8,000. I will say that is a marked improvement from the previous Liberal government.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The time allotted for Oral Questions Put by Members to Ministers has expired.

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, would you please call the order of business, Government Motions.

GOVERNMENT MOTIONS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, would you please call Resolution No. 581.

**Res. No. 581, re Estimates: CW on Supply: Referred - notice given Mar. 21/23.
(Hon. Allan MacMaster)**

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount, with 48 minutes remaining in the Official Opposition's response to the Budget Address.

FRED TILLEY: Mr. Speaker, I'm happy to come back today to give some further comments on the budget address, the budget that we have dubbed More Debt, Quicker.

The government indicates we're going to have more health care faster, but all this budget does for Nova Scotians is create more debt - and at a very rapid pace. This budget will grow the provincial debt by the end of the term of this government by \$5.6 billion. That is a huge number - one of the largest numbers that we've ever seen in this province. It equates to \$5,400 for every Nova Scotian of added debt to this province.

Over the remaining term of this government, they will add \$1.6 billion in deficits. As I mentioned yesterday, this includes a whopping \$610 million in the final year of their mandate - \$610 million over budget.

We've also seen, throughout the term of this government, the debt-to-GDP ratio is going to skyrocket. Under the previous government, this debt-to-GDP ratio was held in the low 30 per cent - a very healthy ratio, which allowed for lower borrowing costs for the

province. What is going to happen in the coming years as this ratio continues to climb? Nova Scotians will appreciate when their debt to their income ratio increases.

What does that mean for you as an individual? It means growth in your interest rates. It means paying more interest on the money that you borrow. It means putting yourself further and further behind. That's what this budget is going to do. It's doing to put this province further and further behind.

We've heard the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board say that this budget is going to empower Nova Scotians. In actual fact, it's going to burden Nova Scotians. We look at the cost of this burden to service this debt. The debt servicing costs over the period of this budget and this term are going to increase by 33 per cent. Can you imagine, as a Nova Scotian in your own household, your interest payments going up by 33 per cent? What does that mean? It means less money for programs. It means less money for initiatives to help Nova Scotians when they're struggling. It means less money for income assistance. It means less money for investment.

If you sum it all up, it means less. More money on interest means less money for Nova Scotians. Let's all remember where that money comes from. That money comes from Nova Scotians. Not only will our debt grow by a third to \$22.2 billion by the year 2025, but our servicing costs will increase by 33 per cent, \$159 million more per year than it is right now - \$159 million, which would have been more than enough to fund glucose monitoring. We didn't see that in the budget.

All we heard about when we talked about glucose monitoring systems was that people need to get healthier, people need to take walks on the beach, people need to be educated, but people with type 1 diabetes or type 2 diabetes, that exercise piece? They're already diagnosed. They need help with those costs.

There's no money in this budget for that, no money to help one-third of Nova Scotians. We've heard the member for Cumberland North say those with diabetes and pre-diabetes in this province is 33 per cent, I believe - 33 per cent. We need to help the 33 per cent of Nova Scotians who are struggling with diabetes and pre-diabetes.

We all know that we pay the highest income taxes in Atlantic Canada. No relief in sight for Nova Scotians with regard to income taxes despite, as my colleague from Halifax Citadel-Sable Island said, we've seen significant growth in provincial income tax revenues, significant growth in HST revenues on the backs of Nova Scotians who are forced to spend more money to buy daily necessities, buy their groceries, pay for their gas, put food on the table, send their kids - we saw nothing for kids' lunches in this budget.

Government will tell us, you know, Nova Scotians are going to be okay. Nova Scotians are going to be okay. We're helping them, kind of. They're going to figure this out. Well, Nova Scotians are seeing their spending power go down. If they get a raise, it

gets eaten up into bracket creep and the income taxes. It gets eaten up - no pun intended - at the grocery store. It gets eaten up at the gas pump. No relief for Nova Scotians in this budget. No relief for low-income Nova Scotians, no relief for middle-income Nova Scotians, no relief for any Nova Scotians when it comes to the struggling costs that we're all facing today.

[11:00 a.m.]

Government tells us that this is a health budget. Well, my colleague from Bedford South talked about the number of bullet points in this budget. This is a bullet point budget. I refer to it as a sound bite budget. This budget is designed so that our Premier can go out and say, we're spending \$6 billion per year on health care. We said we're going to fix health care, Madam Speaker. We're going to fix health care. We're spending \$6 billion.

Last budget, Madam Speaker, was an increase in health spending as well, and what were the outcomes? The outcomes were doubling of the doctor wait-list, more emergency room shutdowns, many more position vacancies, no universal mental health, poorly implemented programs like retention programs that we're seeing. Emails - I'm sure the government members are receiving all of the emails from the health care workers that we're receiving on this side. What about me?

Individuals who were out, for no trouble of their own, for a workplace injury in 2022, they're coming back. They're excluded. It makes no sense. It was not well thought out, it was not implemented. It was a sound bite and it is going to help some, but it is not designed properly to help those nurses and health care professionals.

Categorizing positions based on dollars - we have no rationale as to why some employees get \$10,000 and why some employees get \$5,000. It makes absolutely no sense. What about the individuals who are working in other occupations doing similar jobs who worked through COVID in the service industry, in our schools, adapted to online learning, did what they needed to do? There is no help for them. All we see are sound bites, Madam Speaker.

I am not really sure why we actually go through the process of doing a budget. Why do we do this? We just saw in this fiscal year \$1.6 billion in spending outside of the Legislature, and we can hear about, well, the rules are the rules and we are following the rules and the rules were set by somebody else and we are following them and we are just doing what everybody else did. I remember my mum telling me one time, if your friends decided to jump off a mountain, would you do it? She said it multiple times - I think she wanted me to jump. But at the end of the day, if everybody else is doing it, it doesn't mean it is right, and when you are in that position you have an opportunity to fix it.

Out of that \$1.6 billion, over half - half a billion, put that into context, that is a lot of zeros - half a billion dollars spent in the month of March. We just need that to sink in. Nova

Scotians need to understand that this government doled out half a billion dollars in the month of March. Why? Because they didn't realize where their budget was. There is no way, Madam Speaker, that they could show another surplus this year and be embarrassed the way it was last year. It is impossible. They didn't need to do that. They wanted to spend, spend, spend.

So, hastily, in the last weeks of the fiscal year, we make a quick decision we are pumping out \$330 million for a retention bonus or we are going to attract people back, but guess what? In order to get that, you have to be back in a seat by March 31st or accept a position by March 31st. I am not sure what interview processes the government has sat on in their day, but I have not seen an interview process that can be gone through in less than two weeks so that you can come in and get that extra bonus.

When we don't know what we are doing, or we are not sure what we are doing, or we don't realize things and we have to punch a bunch of money out at the last minute without a plan - we have all heard the term "March Madness" - what happens is when we have no plan this equals panic spending. Unfortunately, when we panic-spend, we don't always spend on the things that are going to make things better for Nova Scotians. We spend to get that money out the door so that we can show that deficit, show that we are spending money and we are going to fix health care, but everything that was spent in this budget, not everything that is proposed in the new budget is designed to improve health care. Things continue, the metrics continue to get worse, Madam Speaker.

After looking further into the budget, I saw that our equalization transfer payments are now estimated at \$2.8 billion. An increase of \$344.5 million. Equalization payments are paid by the federal government to provinces to ensure that like services for like taxes are being implemented.

Well, we've clearly stated we don't have like taxes. Our taxes in Nova Scotia are the highest in the country. Highest in all of the land in Atlantic Canada by a significant amount. But what about our services? Are we seeing services equivalent to the rest of this country? Absolutely not. We see doctor wait-lists astronomical. We see waits in the emergency room. We see vacancies. We see losing doctors on a daily basis.

The members of this Legislature will remember, in July/August of 2021, when the current Premier of this province recognized that there's a problem in the way municipal governments are funded in this province. The Premier promised to double that equalization payment to municipalities that needed it in Nova Scotia. As an example, in CBRM that was an extra \$15 million, Madam Speaker.

That doubling of that municipal amount came with another promise, and that promise was: We recognize there's a problem, we're going to put a temporary fix in here and double the payments. So recognizing that doubling the payments - that's a big

problem. Doubling those payments is a big problem. There's got to be a problem if we're going to double those payments.

You know what, municipalities? We're going to come back and we're going to negotiate. We're going to renegotiate the way that we disburse funds in this province to municipalities. The phone is not ringing. The municipal phones are not ringing, Madam Speaker. Nobody's indicating when this renegotiation is going to happen. We've seen nothing in this budget to indicate that the way we finance municipalities is going to change.

Again, sound bite, get elected, ignore. That seems to be the MO of this government. Sound bite, let's get people onside, tell them we're going to do something, and then they'll forget about it by 2025 when we overspend our budget by \$600 million.

It's time, Madam Speaker, that we renegotiate and update the Act in the way that these payments are allocated to municipalities. There's a lot of complication to the matter. I understand that. But it's time to put the resources in place to make sure that municipalities are getting their fair share of the money that's sent to us by the federal government.

What else did this budget do? In a time where Nova Scotians are struggling; in a time of high inflation; in a time of the highest income tax in all of Atlantic Canada, what does this government do? It grows the public service. It grows the public service by a significant amount. Yes, and we thought it was going to be cut. Usually under a Conservative government, we see cuts in government and we see cuts all around, but not now. This is high spending. This is growth within the ranks of the public service, Madam Speaker.

I'd like to take a moment to talk about what wasn't in this budget. The Department of Economic Development does not have a lot in this budget for it, Madam Speaker. As a matter of fact, the budget for the Department of Economic Development was slashed by 1.5 per cent. A reduction when we're trying to grow our economy.

Economic development in this province has been full of broken promises. Full of sound bites, once again, but light on delivery. As an example, a significant program announced during the "solutionist" election - tell Nova Scotians what they want to hear and they'll forget about it by 2025 - Nova Scotia Loyal.

We have not seen, as the leader of our party has mentioned, the revenue source. We've not seen the hundreds of millions of dollars that are expected from this program. Did we see a huge investment in Nova Scotia Loyal in this budget? There is \$1.5 million for continued development. This program, for intents and purposes, was ready to go on Day 1. We've got this. We're going to make Nova Scotia Loyal. We're going to help all our local producers. We're going to help Nova Scotians.

I'm not sure what's happening in that department with that program, but we must be trying to split the atom. Considering that after two years, this program is still in development. It didn't sound that difficult, Madam Speaker, when it was announced. It didn't sound that difficult when it was on the bus. It didn't sound that difficult, but apparently it's a struggle to try to figure this out.

[11:15 a.m.]

So, \$1.5 million. We must be going to purchase another couple of trucks and another couple of wraps for those trucks. Maybe some of the growth in the Public Service for drivers of these trucks to go around and collect Nova Scotians' phone numbers. It just baffles me as to the pace at which this program was developed.

Last Summer, we consulted with our trucks and Sobeys and all of the different grocery stores, gathering e-mails and phone numbers - for what purpose? I'm not sure. Maybe they could be used in 2025 to communicate. Listen, I'll be so pleased if we're able to pull something off here and help the local producers of Nova Scotia but my goodness, let's get a move on. Let's get a move on and get this program. We must have to rejig it from the previous feedback that we've received. It's time to move on or move off of Nova Scotia Loyal, Madam Speaker.

Some of my colleagues have referred to Day 1. Day 1; a better paycheque for Nova Scotians. Where is it? We've heard the minister say that Nova Scotians are making more money. It's a different time. It's not that different. Inflation has gone up is one of the things that's different, so the money that Nova Scotians are making is going out the door into the grocery store. It's going out the door into the gas tank. It's going out the door in bracket creep of provincial income taxes.

It was mentioned that Nova Scotia is a workers' market right now, Madam Speaker. It's a workers' market; however, it's not an employers' market. The guaranteed paycheque program was designed to help employers pay workers more money. Let's think about that for a second: pay workers more money. Wouldn't that make sense in a workers' environment? If this is a workers' market, employers need to pay more to attract those workers. To me, it would make sense that the better paycheque guarantee would be there to help those employers pay those workers what they deserve.

A workers' market, and we're still not paying living wages to Nova Scotians. Again, it's time to come clean with Nova Scotians, come clean with businesses, and just say, you know what? We're sorry. We said we were going to do it, but we're not. It's clear that we're not, unless we're saving it all up for 2025 and our \$610 million deficit. That's what it would appear to be.

The budget in 2023 had 40-odd sound bites. I'm assuming the one in 2025 will be a whole 30-page document of sound bites because they know they won't have to implement.

There's no help for Nova Scotians. No new money for housing developments, we saw that. Our colleague for Bedford South used the figure of zero - \$0 for new housing.

There's 1,000 more rent supplements. Look, in my office, every day, I remind constituents, if you're too far on the list of housing, take a look at the rent supplement. Without hesitation, they ask, "Fred, have you tried to find an apartment in Northside-Westmount, in the last 6 months?" There's nothing, and those that are there are way out of reach of any rent supplement. We need to do more, and we need to do better. (Interruption) Yes, let's even do more faster. Let's do more faster for Nova Scotians.

As a province, we need to look at the government programs that are available to Nova Scotians. We need to look at the senior care grant that's available to seniors. We need to look at the income limits for these programs. They are outdated, they're unrealistic, and they need to be changed now. We need to look at these limits objectively and look at the average incomes within our communities. We need to help people stay in their homes longer. We need to help people repair their homes faster.

We need people to be able to afford heat pump programs. If we're serious about protecting the environment, if we're serious about moving away from fossil fuels, raise the limits on the heat pump program. We haven't heard what the uptake has been in this program, but we do know that a lot of the programs - let us talk about the MOST program, a program where the sound bite said: no income tax on your first \$50,000 if you're under 30 and you're a tradesperson. What the sound bite didn't say is that you are going to have to apply for this. It's not going to be at source when you do your income taxes. It's going to be a process: pay the money out, file your taxes, wait for Revenue Canada to send you your Notice of Assessment, then put the documentation together from your employer that says you're an apprentice and then submit to some department and wait for that return to come.

We still haven't seen the details on how that will be implemented. So, heavy on promises, light on details; heavy on sound bites, heavy on broken promises. You see a theme developing.

There's a budget in there for the MOST program. People have to rely - and contrary to popular belief, not everybody is paying attention to what we do in here. Not everybody understands - even you guys are not paying attention to what we're doing here. Not everybody realizes that this program is available.

It's not an automatic program - people have to apply for it. You put a big, flashy number up and then we know that the uptake on that may be a lot less than what it was. What do we do? Instead of improving that program we expand it. We expand the program now and we're going to expand that to the nursing population for under 30.

I have no idea where this arbitrary number of 30 years of age came from. If we're about retention, if we're about growth - so, if I am 45, if I am 54 and I still have a lot of

work left in me and I am in Alberta working in the trades and I look at that MOST program and say, huh, what about me? They don't want workers that bad in Nova Scotia, they're not willing to expand that program. Maybe down the road, in 2025, we might expand that program out to other ages but, basically, we're discriminating based on age.

What about all the nurses who have been working through the pandemic, covering overtime shifts, covering double shifts? What about the schoolteachers, who have been working through the pandemic? What about the individuals who have been working in our service industry? What about people, like my wife, who work in a grocery store? What about people who have been there serving us through a pandemic, day in and day out without missing a beat? Where is their relief on income taxes?

Okay, maybe they don't get the \$30,000. Well, everybody is not going to get that \$50,000 exemption. Don't you think the least we could do is up the basic personal amount? Let's tie that to inflation. Perhaps we could update our antiquated income tax brackets, the lowest in the country.

What's wrong with us? It's basically greed. We want - not "we" - this government wants more money from more taxes so that they can have more sound bites. It's all about control and sound bites and maybe even pay a few friends along the way.

As I said, Nova Scotians are paying the highest income taxes in Atlantic Canada, the highest in Canada, and close to the highest in all of North America. For what? Our services are awful in most cases - not the actual service providers, but our ability to access those services. We can't help people in times when they need it; we can't improve our doctor wait-list; we can't improve our surgical wait times; and we can't improve ER closures. All we're doing is collecting, collecting, collecting, and not doing any giving on the other side.

I know that I had 48 minutes to complete the Budget Address from the Opposition. I could have used five days and it wouldn't make a difference, because this government has its mind made up. It's not interested in helping; it's not interested in improving. It's interested in being re-elected. Don't kid yourself, the election has begun with this budget. It's about sound bites, not about delivery and improvement.

I'm going to finish up. I just want to leave Nova Scotians with this - yesterday, the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board said that this budget empowered Nova Scotians, but he used the wrong term. This budget burdens Nova Scotians. It burdens Nova Scotians with more debt. It burdens Nova Scotians with less hope for the future. It burdens Nova Scotians with the realization that this government either doesn't want to help or doesn't know how to help. Most importantly, this budget burdens future generations of Nova Scotians with an enormous amount of debt that's forced on them, and they will be paying for a long, long time.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island to respond to the Budget Address on behalf of the NDP.

[11:30 a.m.]

LISA LACHANCE: It is my honour to rise today and offer input and reflections on the Nova Scotia provincial budget for 2023-24 that's been put before us in this House. In my comments, I will attempt to be faithful to the input, ideas, and struggles that people in my constituency and across Nova Scotia have shared with me and with all of us over this past year.

Nova Scotians are proud of our home, and rightly so, but too many Nova Scotians are worried. They wonder if their children, their parents, and their friends will be able to get the health care they need when they need it. They are stressed every time they go to the grocery store or the pharmacy or for other essential goods, and their household budget doesn't stretch as much as it used to as prices keep rising.

They worry about their community members who struggle to find a safe place to sleep, whether that's for a night in a long journey of homelessness, or for enough time to finish their NSCC program, or for their kids to finish Primary in their neighbourhood before they have to move. Of course, they wonder if we can act together in time for our collective future in the face of climate change.

Nova Scotians also want us to rise to the challenge of reconciliation as we seek to overcome a shared shameful past and ensuing legacies of colonization, genocide, racism, and exclusion. Nova Scotians want a provincial budget that builds today for a stronger tomorrow. They want a provincial budget where they see their future, where we all see our future. They want a provincial budget that eases the pressures we feel in our daily lives.

Nova Scotia is growing in terms of population, which is amazing and welcome, but we need to build a province together that ensures everyone is safe and healthy. Government budgets are raking it in, much more than anticipated, and March Madness spending has followed, but who is benefiting from this prosperity? Who is sharing in it and are we seeing the results that this government has promised? This government has collected massively large revenues, which makes this budget's gaping omissions all the more heartbreaking.

It seems like a tale of many Nova Scotias. On one hand, it's a time of growth, expansion, optimism, but if we don't buy into that, we are portrayed as negative or not getting our swagger back. There are too many people being left out. They want to be part of this new Nova Scotia, but people are having a hard time and they aren't feeling heard or seen. What changes will this budget bring? It will bring no change to the folks living on income assistance. In fact, with record inflation and no changes to rates, it will leave many people much worse off.

It will bring no change for families and school communities that stand to benefit from a school lunch program, and a granola bar is not a lunch. It will bring no change to the many pregnant people in this province who can't get a midwife's care. It will bring no advocacy from a promised child and youth advocate or commission. No extra support for families facing high prescription drug costs. No health care coverage for migrant workers, and no significant investments in building new, non-market housing, all during a time of enhanced challenges for Nova Scotia families.

Supports to individual communities and individuals in Nova Scotia are not what is driving inflation but rather corporations taking advantage of supply issues, pent-up demand, consolidated structures, and, of course, global conditions. The government may not feel it has a way into addressing price gouging and exploitation, but this government does have the means to help make the lives of people hanging on by their fingertips better.

Budgets are about choices. This Progressive Conservative government could have presented a budget that built better options for all Nova Scotians, but we think they missed out on some important chances to make the lives of Nova Scotians better now. If there is one thing we can all agree on, it's that Nova Scotia's health care system is in crisis. Every month, more and more Nova Scotians seek access to primary care. Our ER crisis has tragically resulted in two documented deaths in the past six months and we continue to call for an inquiry into ER deaths.

We all continue to lack access to paramedics and our surgery backlog persists. Virtual care can only be a stopgap measure. Virtual care through one-off appointments does not provide the type of ongoing primary care and health promotion that creates healthy communities.

I would invite the minister and the Premier to sit through a few calls from folks unaccustomed to working online and dealing with a complex health issue, or to ask doctors to recount their experiences working online for the public virtual health system. They are dealing with folks in rural areas with dementia who are trying to use iPhones for basically the first time, who have infections that require blood work, or who are isolated from health services within their communities. This is not going to build us healthy communities.

Our current system of commercial care isn't offering the type of primary care we want and the type of ongoing relationships people have with a primary care provider when you get to know them, they get to know you, your family, your context, and what is happening for you. The mobile primary health care clinics are, of course, welcome when there is literally nowhere else to go but, again, suffer from the lack of follow-up and connection to community. Simply put, this is not at all what we thought the Premier meant when he promised to fix health care. It's not the type of health care we want and it's not going to give us the outcomes we want in this province, either.

Family doctors have been signalling the disconnect between this type of community-based health care that they want to provide and what their experience is. We hear a lot about recruitment, but we haven't been hearing a lot about retention of primary health care capacity. In primary care practices, doctors regularly express their concern with their current administrative load. I have heard from many family doctors who do not work full-time seeing patients, although they would like to, because they need to guard days and hours during the week to complete administrative tasks. This is an important issue to consider when implementing the One Person One Record initiative, as family doctors have reported that their administrative load actually increases with this type of program. The South End Family Practice was an obvious choice to maintain a huge, well-loved practice, but the opportunity was missed and now there are 4,100 people without a doctor, and our community is definitely poorer for it.

Since the government does not seem to put much stock in the legislative budget process, I feel quite able to also address additional appropriations from the last fiscal year. We remain very curious about the much-heralded retention bonuses for nurses and other health professionals. I hope that these bonuses help hard-working Nova Scotians, but I am worried that as a hefty, time-limited investment, it doesn't do enough. The bonuses don't address working conditions that so many health professionals find demoralizing and stressful.

I also wonder what we even understand about the use of limited-time bonuses and the retention of health professionals. As with so many of the government's initiatives, it's not clear if there's an evidence base. We don't know if anybody else has tried this and what the results are. We don't have a goal. How many nurses are they trying to retain and where? Without all that, how will we measure success or failure?

The new medical school in Cape Breton is a major undertaking. At Dalhousie University, the Faculty of Medicine works closely with the Faculty of Health. How will interprofessional development and collaboration be supported?

The Premier keeps talking about this initiative creating opportunities for more Nova Scotians to enter medical school. Is that part of the proposed model that hasn't been shared with us, that spots will be reserved for Nova Scotian students? How many doctors in Nova Scotia will be created in a decade? What retention incentives will there be?

Cape Breton doctors have expressed doubts to us that this can be done in a sustainable way, noting that they don't have extra time to dedicate to additional teaching and additional residency supervision. It is indeed a national problem, but as we're making these huge investments, we need to consider how they're going to impact here.

On March 22nd - two days ago - the Canadian Resident Matching Service, which is how people get matched for their medical residencies, whether it's family practice or specialties, had 268 unfilled family physician spots in Canada. That's the highest ever.

Folks are not being attracted to the practice of family medicine. What does this mean for this major investment in a Cape Breton medical school? The other health post-secondary education investments are likewise long-term investments, not answers for now.

Of course, there are other essential health care workers. Paramedics need a pay increase and better support. They have been left out of the MOST incentive and continue to be sidelined by this government. The stress faced by first responders is enormous, with increased interactions for mental health and people waiting a long time in terrible conditions. Of course, this deeply impacts professionals, resulting in moral distress.

In health care, we need a systematic approach to a systematic problem, and we need to use the resources that we have here now in Nova Scotia. This budget misses out on many opportunities to do this. There is a small increased commitment to gynecological care, including assessing and treating endometriosis. At the same time, there is a huge missed opportunity to fund a provincial midwifery program to get these professionals to be part of the system now.

We have called for access to free contraception. We have called for increased funding for sustainability of community health centres, such as the North End Community Health Centre and the Halifax Sexual Health Centre. We have also called to provide universal access to PrEP to prevent new HIV cases. The NDP has consistently put forward real solutions to the health care crisis. A couple of others I want to mention are integrating physician assistants into the health system - we will have lots of room to go there - and pausing Pharmacare fees.

In addictions and mental health, there have been many good initiatives that have been undertaken, including the walk-in substance use support centres, the day treatment program, and a number of community investments for mental health programming with community-based organizations that were recently announced. However, the PCs ran on a platform of providing universal mental health care.

At that point, the promise was to open MSI billing to private clinicians. We haven't been apprised of the details in this decision-making, but this budget only allocates \$250,000 to a limited pilot that will explore how to have private practitioners bill the public system for psychological assessments. This is not universal health care and it falls short of the promise that was made during the last campaign.

We need to hold government to account for promises made as part of the electoral contract. Maybe with all of the various pilot initiatives and different initiatives, we're reaching everyone, but it doesn't seem like it.

In last year's budget, there was an emphasis on increasing data collection and enhanced use of evaluation in mental health and addictions, which are key steps in making

improvements, but this data hasn't been shared. We all need to know what the mental health status of Nova Scotians is, and whether programs and services are improving lives.

The minister recounts numbers in terms of numbers of people through a program, but that doesn't talk about outcomes. Even if we've had 1,000-plus people through the day hospital program, we have no idea if they're better or worse off for that treatment or if it achieved the therapeutic goals that were set out.

With limited public information available to understand how the mental health system is working, it is necessary to rely on wait times data. In Halifax Regional Municipality, 50 per cent of youth 18 and under had their first non-urgent assessment within 104 days, and 90 per cent of these youth had their non-urgent assessment within 119 days from July to September 2022.

I mean, the numbers actually are less relevant because it's just too long. These all exceed the Canadian Psychiatric Association's 2006 recommendation that people receive mental health treatment within 30 days of presenting at a health care provider.

For those over 18, the Nova Scotia Health wait-time site notes a range of wait times across the province, from 50 per cent waiting 124 days for their first non-urgent assessment in HRM to 90 per cent of adults waiting 139 days. These have all been increasing since August 2021.

I just double-checked the numbers from October to December, and for instance, in CBRM for non-urgent assessment in child and youth mental health, 90 per cent of children who are waiting for an assessment have that assessment completed within 211 days, which is basically a lifetime for a child or a youth. It is a school year. It is a massive - it's like 200 missed opportunities. And it's 153 days for adults.

We need to make sure the system is robust at all levels of need. Currently, my perception is that there is a huge gap between being absolutely critical when a patient has hurt themselves or others and being in crisis. How do the current services provide the mental health safety net needed?

We can move beyond the numbers to heartbreaking stories of Nova Scotians who need mental health services, and the tragic outcomes when they do not get them. Last month - "Yuliya Andriychuk was an expressive young woman who entered the world through her passion for writing, painting, music and sports," as her parents recounted. "She left the world on a cold November night last year amid a mental health crisis." She was 32 when she died on November 15, 2022, "from exposure on a Dartmouth walking trail. In a recent interview, her parents Mike and Irina said her death could have been prevented if she had received proper mental health support. 'She needed treatment and help,' Irina said. 'She didn't get it.'"

As well, last month in HRM, a man died of exposure after a mental health crisis. His stepdaughter talked about their family's experience. He was able to get some appointments, but "I think if he was taken seriously, this wouldn't have happened," she said. "This was a tragic and likely preventable death. I believe he acted out of fear that he would get in trouble with the law because of how he was feeling inside." "I want people to know what a good man he was, and that we will miss him very much."

[11:45 a.m.]

I will table both of those CBC stories.

In January I heard from Liz LeClair, who was concerned about the mental health of her brother. He had returned to Nova Scotia in the Fall to help care for a family member recovering from surgery. He needed access to mental health care when he was here. He didn't get it. He didn't get access to primary health care, and he didn't get access to mental health care, and he declined into crisis. He ended up leaving the province without any remedy or support.

I'm just going to table these couple of documents. There we go.

New announcements such as the one-time sessions provided through the private for-profit TELUS Health also leave us asking many questions. Brief therapeutic interventions are appropriate in some cases, but it's hard to see how these sessions will result in a plan as promised by the branding for this program. Also, best practice for this type of intervention is that more complex situations are, in fact, not limited to one session. Again, it's not clear how we can see behind the branding to see what Nova Scotians can really expect in terms of mental health outcomes.

I'm also concerned about what's buried in the \$17.7 million allocated for universal mental health care. I will resist the urge to go through line by line because it's a number of bullet point items, as my colleague from Northside-Westmount talked about. There are a couple that I want to draw to people's attention. First of all, there is \$1.5 million allocated for a police pilot in mental health response. I am concerned by this description from the department of police pilot. What I hope this is, in fact, is non-police led community mental emergency mental health services, such as those being implemented across Canada and around the world and for which we in the Nova Scotia NDP have been advocating.

I am also concerned that we only see a line item of \$1.9 million for integrated youth services. We will truly be the last jurisdiction in Canada to implement this new model of supporting young people and I think we are poorer for it.

In housing, our caucus has again been sorely disappointed by lack of investment in this budget in truly affordable non-market housing. The minister continues to suggest that if they simply increase housing supply that somehow affordable housing will miraculously

appear. This kind of trickle-down thinking has been debunked and yet the government continues to repeat it. We saw public housing repairs announced, reannounced, and 1,000 new rent supplements which may prove to be some help to a small number of people, but are not nearly enough.

In our current public housing, a recent AG report outlined some of the issues like we hear from folks in our own ridings. There are two public seniors' manors in my riding. I hear regularly, almost daily, from residents who are scared and stressed in their own homes. They report a lack of security, ongoing concerns about serious maintenance issues that affect health, responsiveness, and the slow turnover of units.

Current public housing issues are not enough and we need to see things get better quickly. At the same time this housing is also all that some of these residents can afford. On fixed incomes seniors also struggle for their food access and express desire to be able to eat more regularly and healthier. Without having public housing these folks would be struggling even more.

There are 7,000 people on the wait-list for public housing and 800-plus people sleeping outdoors in this province and yet there are zero new investments in housing in this Capital Plan during a once-in-a-lifetime housing emergency. The current rate cap is barely working, with renter fees subjected to fixed-term leases, renovations, and rising rent increases despite the rent cap, yet this government remains opposed to a rent control regime.

The PC government argument is to build out the market. We can learn from other jurisdictions about how increased population and demand from housing does not actually result in increased affordable housing. For instance, in Ontario population growth since 2015 is correlated - and I'm not saying it's causative, but it's correlated - with rising house prices above the rate of the Canadian average growth. I have that from Statistics Canada.

I just have to think that we all know that trickle-down economics has been disproven and for that I want to quote from Rebekah Young, who is a resident of Halifax Citadel-Sable Island and is also a Scotiabank vice president with a focus on inclusion and resilience economics. I will read directly from one of her reports from January of this year:

“Mark-priced housing will likely never be affordable for a serious share of households - and easily those in the lowest income quintile - based on current trajectories. The infrastructure to support these most vulnerable Canadians is stark: Canada's stock of social housing represents just 3.5% (655k) of its total housing stock . . . The moral case to urgently build out Canada's anemic stock of social housing has never been stronger.”

She continues: “The economic case is equally compelling. Governments are attempting to alleviate the strain on lower-income households with a host of transfers, but the cost to do so will continue to escalate as shelter costs rise, market income provides little

offset, and policy failures persist. A modest start would be doubling Canada's stock of social housing to bring it in line with peers in the context of a coherent and well-resourced strategy. . . . Such an approach may be more responsive to the needs of Canada's most vulnerable households and more cost-efficient for governments in the long run."

I will table that as well. The government had the chance with this budget with incredible revenues to make real investments in housing that could have been creative and effective, but they have not.

I want to turn for a few minutes around advanced education. Nova Scotians value our post-secondary sector. A 2022 public opinion report commissioned by CONSUP - the Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents - confirms that Nova Scotians feel that universities make a significant contribution to the social and cultural development of Nova Scotia, are powerful contributors to the economic prosperity, productivity and competitiveness, and a primary source of innovation and research in Nova Scotia. I will table that.

We need to make sustainability an accessible goal for the province, and we need all Nova Scotians who want to be students to be able to access any program in any location, and thus we need predictable operating funds for universities. Universities are on the front lines of both sustainability and accessibility, and with the current 1 per cent operating grant increase in the post-secondary MOU, there is no hope of universities meeting the need for 2030 accessibility. Again, there is a need for indexed annual operating grants, and we didn't see that in this budget.

Universities are stepping up and initiating collaborations to enhance the student experience, such as creating a single application portal. Everyone in post-secondary - faculty, staff, students - is looking for a continuation of the Atlantic Open Educational Resources pilot. This program has saved students more than \$350,000 over two years, but the government seemed to miss the opportunity to continue this effort.

There is some mention of micro-credentialing, which is a fairly new component of post-secondary education, but no new funding for improvement programs, including Graduate to Opportunity, a concern highlighted by Students Nova Scotia. And I will table that report later.

In short, there was very little for students in this budget. We see operational funding to universities stagnate, and with inflation, this means a cut, forcing universities to continue to rely on tuition from international students, who will pay triple and then struggle once they arrive to access housing, health care, to get around, and earn enough to live on.

At CBU, NSCAD, SMU, Dalhousie, and I'm sure other universities, the campus food banks cannot keep up with the demand from students. We could have done more for students, and the government chose not to. There is one key way to support student success

in Nova Scotia, and that is moving us away from being the costliest jurisdiction in Canada to go to university. Stop tuition increases, lower tuition rates, increase bursaries and debt forgiveness.

There were some increases in the Nova Scotia Student Assistance program that will hopefully help keep pace with inflation going forward, but there needs to be an end to one-off, unpredictable cash bonuses as part of year-end March Madness spending in this province.

Some of the most considerable disappointments in the budget fall under the Community Services umbrella. At a time of unprecedented growth, this spendthrift government will not add a single dollar to the bottom line of the most vulnerable people in this province, who are being walloped by a cost of living crisis.

This is tragic. We see no new funding for the promised Child and Youth Commission, a promised advocate for people who desperately need advocacy and our undivided attention. We see a tiny bump for families in the Child Benefit, about \$250 a year, which, if you go monthly, is really not very much. It's not enough.

Food access - and the government likes to talk about their support to Feed Nova Scotia, for instance - is only part of the issue. Declining real incomes, volunteers who are rising to the challenge every day to try and provide food, service providers offering access to snacks - we're not even starting the conversation about food security in this province. We're only dealing with food access and we're only dealing with it in an ad hoc and unpredictable way that doesn't afford people the dignity that they have the right to.

There are a handful of references in the budget about reducing child poverty. For instance, when referring to the \$3.9 million to expand supports to former youth in care, it's not clear how that computes to reducing child poverty, as former youth in care are, in fact, young adults. There is also a very easy way to reduce child poverty, and that is to increase family incomes.

We learned from COVID-19 supports that, in fact, relatively limited and reasonable supports result almost automatically into better lives, such as a reduction in child poverty in Nova Scotia. If we were actually able to commit ourselves to addressing child poverty, think about the year-over-year cumulative improvement we would see in health outcomes, educational success, and long-term prosperity. It's actually one of the easiest ways to make things better for everyone.

There has not been an increase in the past two years in income support, despite record and complex inflation. The Minister of Finance and Treasury Board seems to have heard the governor of the Bank of Canada say that targeted supports are the only acceptable approach, but there are a number of flaws with this brief bit of policy advice that's stuck in his mind.

Firstly, if the minister wants a targeted support, there is arguably no more targeted support to the most vulnerable people in Nova Scotia than income assistance and disability supports.

I also take great issue with the current government's constant refrain about all the various supports they are funding - this collage that the Minister of Community Services has referred to. Who wants to try to build a life from a collage? I think about things like the food calendars that community organizations produce for Halifax and Dartmouth, telling people where they can go find food or a hot meal, which day, and where. That is a hard way to live. People have a right to food. People have a right to dignity.

I also think about where this is all happening during the day. It leaves very few resources for families to access hot meals for children, and they can't find that consistently in schools. Add to this the onerous task of keeping on top of what little bits of support are here, there, and everywhere, and making applications. It's not an acceptable way to live. It is not going to make the changes that we all want.

An explicit commitment to realizing children's rights could provide a comprehensive framework from the right to a family, to shelter, to education, and could guide our assessment about how we are supporting our young people. A child youth commission or a similar independent advocate's office would be an important part of this approach. It would allow for research, advocacy, and a youth voice in our policy-making decisions. The creation of the commission was a key promise of this government, announced with much fanfare. There has been public consultation, expectations are high - and yet it is not in this budget.

Also, for children and youth, there was \$13.4 million to support youth complex needs. I have to say, I was pretty excited to see that bullet point and was excited to ask the department for clarification about what that was. I was, indeed, hoping that it was the system that we know we need to support complex young people in our province - but it is not actually the revolution. Instead, it's actually just shoring up our places of safety system that are, in fact, a result of inadequate support to families, communities, children, and youth themselves.

Investments in the foster care system need to be matched by investments in families. Feed Nova Scotia is on the front lines of trying to respond to the desperate need for food access in this province. In surveys with partner food bank users, the top three challenges in accessing food were lack of income, high cost of housing, and disability. Of 46 per cent of respondents receiving income assistance, 91 per cent said it was inadequate. The majority of respondents were women, and the largest percentage was in the 26-to-40-year-old age range.

In the Feed Nova Scotia public survey that reached 1,088 Nova Scotians, 82 per cent believed income assistance should be increased, and 86 per cent said it should be

adjusted for inflation. I look at these numbers and I look at the fact that the largest percentage of respondents are in the age group of 26 to 40, and yet we talk about supporting young people. It seems like a complete direct contradiction to the MOST program in terms of what's happening and what's working and not.

[12:00 p.m.]

I just want to spend a couple of minutes on arts and culture. Of course, where would Nova Scotia be without our arts and culture sector -the creativity that reflects the ocean, land, and people and captures it for generations to come? It is important now, as we grow our new collective and community identity. It's a sector built on flexibility, adaptation, and hard work. There are at least 14,000 culture workers as of 2020 and the number has probably grown post-COVID. We know the arts were amongst the sectors hardest hit by the effects of COVID-19, and still need support to regain the ground lost from the pandemic.

The operational support for cultural programs has not had a meaningful budget increase since 2006. Of course, organizations were struggling to respond to the costs of inflation, and they cannot make it up in ticket revenue and still get crowds in to see the important works they make. We are so glad to see an increase this year in operational funding for arts organizations. This is a victory long fought for by artists and advocates, and it is desperately needed.

I spoke at the beginning about one of the things that we need to see in this budget. It is the vision for the future where we are able to respond to climate change in a way that is sustainable, adaptive, and protects our communities and our people. It is clear this budget is missing a climate lens throughout that acknowledges how a fair transition will benefit communities, the economy, and health care.

The Ecology Action Centre talks about the clear link between health care and the environment, and that we're really missing the chances we had to make a difference with this budget. We saw Fiona drive home what climate change means to us. We also saw what it was like to pick up the pieces following that disaster. We also saw that brief deep freeze in the month of February that also has affected a lot of producers.

We know what the effects of climate change can be, and yet there's no new efficiency funding. There's nothing designated for a shift to net zero construction, or support for industry, or trades to move forward towards this. There's limited investment in infrastructure to get our province off coal. There's a missing funding commitment to the Atlantic Loop. There's nothing to address energy poverty. There's missing funding commitments for most of the promises made in the climate change plan. Of the \$41.4 million in direct funding for the climate plan, the vast majority, \$34 million, was already earmarked for environmental initiatives through the Green Fund.

We're not moving fast enough. This budget comes on the heels of the release of the IPCC report this month, which found that globally, we have 10 fewer years to meet these targets than expected. We are running out of time, and this government's funding priorities don't meet the sense of urgency. If we're not making these investments now - a year when the government is seeing unprecedented revenues and when we saw unprecedented effects of climate change - when will we make them?

I want to turn now to the topic of economic development. In the face of massive economic upheaval during the pandemic, many provinces mapped out economic recovery plans. We still haven't got an economic rural development plan. When Nova Scotians ask for something similar, they are told that this government's direction can be found in the election platform, rather than providing a blueprint with clear actions.

I was going to say it's still not too late to map out a plan, but I'm not sure. It might be too late to map out a plan that includes what sectors we should grow, how programs contribute to targeted sectors, and how we are going to get there together. We need an economic plan that includes a Green Plan, creates economic opportunity for everyone, addresses energy efficiency, and fosters climate adaptation.

We need to make sure the plan helps people and businesses in rural and remote areas, and make sure that African Nova Scotians, 2SLBGTQ+ folks, Mi'kmaq, and women are included in the path forward. In short, we need accountability for the government's choices.

We know what's not happening. We don't hear anything about the Better Pay Cheque Guarantee in this budget. The minister has said that it costs money. I would be very interested to review the analysis and work that has been done to date on these issues, so we can understand what choices have been made. (Interruption) I know it's too expensive, but we don't even know, right?

What we also don't know is around Nova Scotia Loyal. We have a major revenue line in this budget that we're spending. We have \$1.5 million dollars in investment. I would also invite the Minister of Economic Development to talk about how that \$1.5 million will be used, and how it will truly launch this program to see revenues in this fiscal year.

We talked a lot in the Fall session about the decision to reorganize five Crown corporations into two new ones - but put more power in the hands of the minister and the Premier. I think we had an early picture of what that type of close relationship between spending money on economic development to a minister's office can look like with the Lunenburg shipyard. We'd loved to hear more about that decision-making process because it wasn't clear at the time how that change would help Nova Scotians, and what decisions were made to back away from it.

There's supposed to be a new food and beverage strategy being developed. I'm not sure I saw that in the budget. There's a new Nova Scotia food and beverage export strategy. I'm not sure I saw funding for that in the budget. Overall, how does it fit into a plan? I know I keep asking this, but I will say that from the minister, I've heard three different themes. From the deputy minister, I've heard about seven different themes in committee. It's really hard for us to know if what we're doing in economic development is going to bear fruit.

It's clear that a shortage of labour is a persistent challenge across all sectors, and it's holding us back. It's holding businesses and institutions back. I know people talked about it being an employees' market, but it's not. People are unable to seek out many of the job opportunities that exist because wages and salaries offered are not adequate to afford housing, if any is available.

The government's own budget documents say that over the medium term, the economic outlook assumes that productivity growth will be driven by rising population and labour supply - except that we're not seeing this. I think we have some complex blockages in our labour market that none of us have a plan to address yet. We need to start looking at that.

As well, the budget documents talk about Nova Scotians' employment participation rate falling from 62.3 per cent in 2021 to 61.7 per cent in 2022, with lower participation across the broad cohort of 30- to 55-year-olds. Again, I think earlier in the House we had a conversation about, for instance, what is the rationale behind the MOST program targeting up to 30s. What's the evidence? How have these programs worked in other jurisdictions? What's our goal with this? If we have a labour problem and we have fewer people working in the age cohort above the MOST program, are we misfiring this major program that the government is resting on?

We will soon start to see the results of the first year of the MOST initiative, and we need to start tracking. We need to understand who has accessed the program - by gender, age, education, race, and in what sectors. We need to start tracking for retention past the age of eligibility - so once folks turn 30, are they still in Nova Scotia? The government stands tall in this program, but now is the time to demonstrate how it's working.

I know there are some small investments in apprenticeship and in retooling of people's work skills, but we really need to see this come together in a coherent strategy.

Likewise for immigration. We have a goal - we don't have a plan. If this is the answer to the labour shortage, we need to understand how that is being understood and mapped - how our immigration targets match our labour needs and contribute to our economic development. If we're not talking about that, we really don't know what we're doing.

I am also concerned about support for immigrant settlement and retention. One of my family members, for instance, stepped forward and hosted a Ukrainian family. Of course, that family was appalled to figure out that they couldn't find housing in this small Nova Scotian town that they could afford. There were no other supports provided. Whereas my family members' folks in Newfoundland and Labrador had access to a social worker from the moment they arrived. They had set programs that were supporting them.

Immigration settlement and retention is not a magic process where people arrive and immediately feel connected and integrated into the community. We need to be providing adequate services and shelter. We need to be making sure that there are opportunities for work and housing, and we need to ensure access to MSI.

I have been involved in refugee resettlement. I know how complicated and important it is. If we don't do it well, we actually lose those people to other centres in Canada.

In education, as we've mentioned before, we're very disappointed to not see a school food program that the department had suggested was coming. Families, teachers, students, and school staff need our support, and yet there's no significant commitment to this in the budget. I have to say that I take great exception - having been a long-time parent volunteer, on the PTA and on the school advisory committee - that people have access to food when they need it in schools. That's not true. If they do, it's a granola bar or an apple, and that's not enough.

Some school communities are able to rally together to support kitchens and support hot meals at lunch, but it's very much reliant on volunteer-led initiatives and volunteer-led fundraising. That's just not good enough for Nova Scotian students. We can have better school communities and better school outcomes if we provide a real school food program in Nova Scotia.

We were disappointed to see in the budget that spending for inclusive education student supports actually fell below targets in this past year. It seems to be both underspent and at the same time not available for those who need it.

I am deeply concerned from this budget for the state of efforts around diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in our province. The budget is all but silent on the task of reconciliation, which like climate change, should cut across everything we do - and I don't see it in this budget. I don't see it in the spending commitments. (Interruption) No, I don't see it. What I'm talking about is the cross-cutting commitment to reconciliation that actually changes the way government works, and the way that we live together in this province.

Once again, we have a major Progressive Conservative government document that is all but silent on 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals and communities in the House. There is \$1.7

million for gender affirming care and we look forward, through the Estimates process, to understanding what this actually is.

The province-wide expansion of prideHealth is buried with two other equity items under a number of \$1.9 million. How we could expand a program province-wide - and I think it's also to work on Indigenous health and on African Nova Scotian health - it's not clear to me, that \$1.9 million. The math doesn't match for me, to be quite blunt.

A number of critical equity projects - ones that the government pats itself on the back - are relegated without funding commitments to the last paragraph of the last page of the Government Business Plan and I'll quote: "Work in 2023-24 includes a supportive housing model, preparation of Indigenous and African Nova Scotian justice action strategies, prevention of human trafficking and domestic and sexual violence, advancement toward an accessible province by 2030, and an equity and anti-racism strategy," which I am pretty sure we are supposed to see funded in this budget and we haven't.

Also, we do have a serious commitment to accessibility in this province. It's essential. Again, if you look at the labour market and workforce participation rates, it is clear that the single best intervention, the single best support you can provide for someone who identifies as living with a disability, is actually employment and that their income from employment is usually three times what they would receive from government sources.

We need accessibility in our schools, in our post-secondary education system, in our health care, and yet we don't see the investments that are needed to make the road map to 2030 a reality.

I do want to talk a bit about the issues around governance, accountability, and transparency. We talked a lot in the Fall session about our concerns about the elimination of independent organizations that were governed by diverse and expert boards into, basically, decisions that were being made in ministers' offices. I think it's important to maybe map a little bit about how we got to where we are now and why we're concerned when we see things, in our perception, sliding backwards in the way that we manage public administration in this province.

Once upon a time, the current approach to public administration, where there was a minister and departments and the separation between the executive and the bureaucracy was built through equity-seeking movements, through the growth of human rights. There was also a real concern that the amount of taxes that were being collected for services was not being used efficiently and, of course, there were a few government spending scandals thrown in. That's where new public management comes from, from an emphasis on accountability and transparency and effectiveness.

Adhering to a common and shared set of values about what constitutes accountability and transparency is not simply a matter for us here in the House. It provides a common framework that can be at the heart of a relationship between government and the public. We need to concern ourselves with this relationship in the face of rising misinformation, decreasing levels of trust in government. We all need to be combatting this by being the best public servants that we can be.

[12:15 p.m.]

In December 2022, the Auditor General released their most recent financial report for the province. This is an important step in the process of accountability and transparency in our provincial processes. In the report, they recalled that the Finance Act provides for the appropriations process through the Legislature, where the majority of financial resources needed - and I stress majority - by government departments and organizations is presented, discussed, and approved by this Legislature.

Of course, there are times when government needs to act with urgency or respond to emergent issues. However, this government seems to be taking this managerial flexibility to extremes. In fiscal year 2022-23, \$1.6 billion has been spent without legislative oversight. Of course, there was Hurricane Fiona. Of course, there was the deep freeze in February and other unseen issues, but \$1.6 billion seems to reflect a really inadequate approach to planning for government actions. Perhaps there is perceived expediency by bringing forward and announcing appropriations throughout the whole year that don't have to come before this Legislature. Is it a lack of respect for the democratic process? I think it's really important that we have these conversations.

The truth is, as well, that lots and lots of the \$1.6 billion was actually sent outside government, not for expenses in fiscal year 2022-23, in fact, but for future expenses. That means that external institutions will be holding significant amounts of public funds over the coming years, and I think this raises significant control issues.

There are, in fact, examples from all provincial governments and the federal government where governments can still function and respond to emergencies, opportunities, and unforeseen circumstances quickly and efficiently, and still come back to their respective Legislatures to ensure continued oversight. This government has refused even to consider bringing Nova Scotia in line with the rest of Canada and, more importantly, refuses to bring routine spending matters - not emergency matters - before the elected officials of Nova Scotia.

More practically looking forward, there are still enormous risks in our economic and fiscal outlook. Since 2021, this government has actually benefited from the volatility in the world economy in terms of increased tax revenue. The best-case scenario - and I think it's really important that we all absorb this - predicted by this government in real GDP growth, the GDP growth that's the most reliant to understand how we're doing, is 0.6 per

cent in 2023, and 1.1 per cent in 2024. This is razor close to not having economic growth. Our soft landing post-COVID-19 could easily be jiggled off course by numerous ongoing risks, and we can't be continuing to spend in the manner that this government has been doing.

We have reviewed the proposed Budget for 2023-24, and we look forward to the ongoing and in-depth review of the budget proposals in the Estimates process. We will also be listening to stakeholders and will strive to represent their ideas and views here in this House, the people's House.

The government talked about this budget being about empowerment. Empowerment means people having power and control over their own lives, people getting the support that they need that is right for them. It means that people are all equal citizens. They are respected and competent in their communities. You can't empower someone else or make someone empowered.

It is a critical time for Nova Scotia, and we need to make certain that this budget meets the needs of Nova Scotians. The current government was elected on a lot of promises: the Better Pay Cheque Guarantee, Nova Scotia Loyal, and fixing health care. This is at a critical point. Too many Nova Scotians have nowhere to go and no one to see when they need primary health care, which in turn leads to greater health issues, including mental health needs.

Nova Scotians want health care they can count on. Nova Scotians want everyone to have a fair shot at safe, affordable and accessible housing. Nova Scotians want help with everyday costs in an economy that is clean and strong. This is the budget we needed. This isn't the budget we got, but it will be the budget New Democrats fight for.

THE SPEAKER: With the end of the responses to the budget address, the Estimates are now referred to the Committee of the Whole House on Supply.

GOVERNMENT MOTIONS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, I move that you do now leave the Chair and the House resolve itself into Committee of the Whole House on Supply.

MR. SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: Mr. Speaker, a singular feature of the budget presented yesterday is - as my friend the member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island has explained in depth - that in the midst of the most intense price inflation pressure that has been experienced in several decades, the budget looks to those who are carrying the heaviest

burden of financial suffering in Nova Scotia, those who are receiving income assistance, and it offers to them not one cent.

This means that this is the case for, now, a second year in a row. It means that this Progressive Conservative government is now in the second half of their second year and is a government that does not know what it means, has no experience of offering any increase whatsoever in Employment Support and Income Assistance rates. So there has been an outcry across the province, later yesterday and today, about what is often referred to as this second year in a row income assistance freeze, but in fact, really the situation is much worse than a freeze. A freeze means zero, but the budget is offered in an inflationary context of an expectation of inflation of 3.7 per cent. No increase in the rates means, in fact - and I think it is important that the budget debate proceed on a clear understanding of this - no increase means a 3.7 per cent cut, and this is true in all of the major categories of those who are receiving income assistance from the province.

I want to look at some of the particular categories and think of the detailed impact that the budget decision of a 3.7 per cent cut is going to have on people. We think about the important category of those receiving income assistance: single adults who don't have disabilities. Coming into the budget, their provincial benefits were \$748.92. It is held at zero, we factor in the 3.7 per cent inflationary cut, and that means that for everyone in this category, there will be a monthly deduction in their income of \$27.71. That means, practically speaking, when we think about the real impact in real households and real families, that when a person makes the decision, if they make the decision to vote for this budget, they are voting for a reduction in the income of single adults without disabilities of \$27.71 a month.

We can think of the very important category in the income assistance world of single adults who do have disabilities. When we think about the income - the standard household rate - and we add in the Affordable Living Tax Credit, and the Poverty Reduction Credit, all of this means that coming into the budget, such a person's income is, from provincial benefits, \$1,012.92 a month. This is unchanged by the budget, which has no increase, but in an inflationary situation of 3.7 per cent, that means that single adults with disabilities are going to have a 3.7 per cent cut in their income, which means they will have \$37.48 less a month. That means that a vote in favour of this budget means that the spending power of disabled single people in Nova Scotia will decline by \$37.48 a month. I think it is very important that all members understand exactly the practical, financial implication of this vote.

We can think about the category of single parents. Here, the situation is a little different because we need to factor in the fact that there are, in this budget, improvements in the Nova Scotia Child Benefit. We take the standard household rate and then we understand that we will be moving, for a single parent with a single child, from \$106 and something to \$127 and something, by means of the Nova Scotia Child Benefit.

If we add in the Affordable Living Tax Credit, we see that that person is going to move from \$1,094 a month to \$1,115 a month, but when we factor in the core underlying financial assumption of the budget that there is inflation of 3.7 per cent, that means that a single parent with a single child, as a result of this budget, is going to have a 1.8 per cent reduction, because the increase in the Nova Scotia Child Benefit is not as great as the inflationary impact. That single parent with that single child is going to confront the expenses of their household every month as a result of this deduction. They are going to have \$19.70 less each month.

I want to think about the situation of a couple with two children. Again, we need to factor in that there are improvements being made to the Nova Scotia Child Benefit but again, the improvements in the Nova Scotia Child Benefit are not 3.7 per cent. They are not as great as the reduction in that family's income that is going to come about as a result of inflation, and so we do see that that family's income is going to increase through this budget, from \$1,636 a month to \$1,678. That again is an increase of less than 3.7 per cent. That means that if you are reliant for your income, in your household, on income assistance, as many two-parent, two-child families are, that even factoring in the changes in the Nova Scotia Child Benefit, your spending power, your actual income for the month, is going to decline as a result of this budget by 1.2 per cent, or \$19.64 a month.

Again I think it is important for us not to think about these things in terms of general statements or simply abstractions. The truth is that with the budget that is in front of us, if we support it, if the House supports it and sustains it, and it becomes the budget for 2023-24, families dependent on income assistance who have two parents and two children will have \$19.64 less spending power every single month, because of the decision to freeze income assistance in a highly inflationary environment.

The CBC's coverage of reaction across the province to this today contains the headline - I'll table it - "N.S. budget doesn't raise income assistance rates, shocks anti-poverty advocates." I think shock is a fair word to use. This is evidence to decrease the real incomes of the people who are carrying the heaviest burden of financial suffering in our province, those whose income comes from income assistance is, I think it is fair to say, a scandalous and a shocking moral failure.

It's also shocking when we think about what is happening in other provinces in Canada, many of them with Conservative administrations, who are doing so much better by their vulnerable populations. We can think about the government in New Brunswick, which has faced the present situation with indexing income assistance to inflation. We can think about the government of Manitoba which has made major increases in the absolute amount of income assistance that's available in that province, or changes that have been made recently in Ontario, by which people who are receiving income assistance can now receive a great deal more from market income than they've been able to do before.

I think that this bringing forward of a budget in these hyperinflationary times with no increase in income assistance, having, as it has, these very difficult effects for so many thousands of households and families in Nova Scotia, I think it is sad and I think it tells us something about the character of the government that we are dealing with, that in fact we are dealing with a government that, in the face of the great suffering of those who have the greatest need, has looked them square in the eye with this budget and said, not one cent.

THE SPEAKER: The motion to resolve into the Committee of the Whole on Supply is carried.

[12:39 p.m. The House resolved itself into a CW on Supply with Deputy Speaker Nolan Young in the Chair.]

[4:50 p.m. CW on Supply rose and the House reconvened. Deputy Speaker, Angela Simmonds took the Chair.]

THE SPEAKER: Order. The Chair of the Committee of the Whole on Supply reports:

THE CLERK: That the Committee of the Whole on Supply has met and has made some progress and begs leave to sit again.

THE SPEAKER: Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, that concludes Government Business for the day. I move that the House do now rise to meet again on Tuesday, March 28th between the hours of 1:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. Following Daily Routine and Question Period, we will be moving into Committee of the Whole on Supply to deal with Budget Estimates. Then we will be looking at second reading of Bill Nos. 273 and 262 if time permits. Just to note that the Law Amendments Committee will also be held on Monday, March 27th at 10:00 a.m.

Have a wonderful weekend and drive safely going home.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is that the House rise to meet again on March 28th between the hours of 1:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m.

All in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We stand adjourned until March 28th.

[The House rose at 4:55 p.m.]

NOTICES OF MOTION UNDER RULE 32(3)

RESOLUTION NO. 587

By: Ronnie LeBlanc (Clare)

I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas Special Olympics Nova Scotia's 2022 Provincial Summer Games were held in Antigonish this past July: and

Whereas Patricia Stewart has been a committed member of the Clare Special Olympics team, training with her fellow team; and

Whereas the hard work and dedication Patricia has displayed were rewarded with a gold medal in Bocce;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly join me in congratulating Patricia Stewart and wish her continued success in the future.