



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

DEBATES AND PROCEEDINGS

Speaker: Honourable Keith Bain

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First Session

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29, 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS	PAGE
TABLING REPORTS, REGULATIONS AND OTHER PAPERS:	
“Black educators Inspiring youth in Cape Breton and Nova Scotia,”	
K. Coombes.....	5259
GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION:	
Res. 589, Christmas, Dan: Public Service - Thanks,	
Hon. K. MacFarlane.....	5260
Vote - Affirmative.....	5261
INTRODUCTION OF BILLS:	
No. 282, An Act to Create an Autism Strategy,	
L. Lachance.....	5261
No. 283, An Act to Establish a Food Recovery Program,	
Hon. K. Irving.....	5261
No. 284, An Act to Establish a Provincial School Lunch Program,	
Hon. P. Arab	5261
No. 285, An Act to Provide Protection for Victims Who Disclose Sexual	
Assault,	
E. Smith-McCrossin.....	5261

No. 286, An Act to Amend Chapter 12 of the Acts of 2011, the Public Procurement Act, E. Smith-McCrossin.....	5261
STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS:	
Henwood, Karen: Death of - Tribute, Hon. T. Rushton.....	5262
HMCS <i>Montreal</i> Members & Families: Deployment - Recog., Hon. Z. Churchill.....	5263
<i>Contested Waters</i> Book: Contrib. to Fishery - Recog., G. Burrill.....	5263
CA's Son, William Currie - Birthday Wishes, J. White.....	5264
Square Roots Fairview-Clayton Park: 3 rd Anniv. - Congrats., Hon. P. Arab.....	5264
Son, Shadan - Birthday Wishes, S. Hansen.....	5265
Lancaster, Lori: Jack Pelech Awd. Recip. - Congrats., Hon. P. Dunn.....	5266
Ahmed, Nora: Constituency Office Work - Thanks, R. DiCostanzo.....	5266
Educ. Supp. Staff: Need for Wage Hike - Recog., K. Coombes.....	5267
Crossman, Debbie: Com. Serv. - Thanks, Hon. K. MacFarlane.....	5267
Davey Young, Carol: Death of - Tribute, Hon. K. Regan.....	5268
Housing Supp. Workers: Help During Cold Snap - Recog., S. Leblanc.....	5268
StFX Bask. Team: Silver Medal Win - Congrats., Hon. M. Thompson.....	5269
Pinsky, Dr. Norm: Virtual Care Work - Thanks, Hon. I. Rankin.....	5269
Gorsebrook School Students: <i>Matilda</i> Musical - Congrats., L. Lachance.....	5270
Burgess, Karlee: Tourn. of Hearts Perf. - Congrats., L. Harrison.....	5270
Emera Ctr. Brd.: 13 Yrs. of Oper. - Thanks, F. Tilley.....	5271
McCormack, George: QPJ Medal Recip. - Congrats., S. Hansen.....	5271
Haughian, Myra: Com. Serv. - Thanks, Hon. B. Adams.....	5272
Paul, Daniel: Battling Illness - Best Wishes, Hon. B. Maguire.....	5272
Black Educators in C.B.: Work Importance - Recog., K. Coombes.....	5272

Lewis, Maud: Contrib. to Arts - Recog., Hon. J. Balsler.....	5273
Good Air Ventilation Systems: Reliable Serv. - Recog., A. Duale	5273
Chapman, Ann: Death of - Tribute, S. Leblanc	5273
ER Reopening Delay: Problems Caused - Recog., E. Smith-McCrossin.....	5274
Encounter Church: Study Café Opening - Thanks, Hon. S. Craig.....	5275
Reid, Mike: QPJ Medal Recip. - Congrats., Hon. K. Irving.....	5275
Spontaneity Improv Co.: New Bus. - Recog., L. Lachance.....	5275
Jones, Dr. Leah: New Acad. Dir. of Black Health - Congrats., Hon. T. Halman.....	5276
Arsenault, Bernice: QPJ Medal Recip. - Recog., Hon. T. Ince	5276
d'Entremont, Lucien: Stair Heroes Perf. - Congrats., Hon. C. LeBlanc	5277
Cdn. Orthopaedic Care Day: Incr. Educ. - Recog., R. DiCostanzo.....	5277
Cape Breton Univ.: New Medical Campus - Congrats., Hon. B. Comer	5278
Thibodeau, Brian: Retirement - Congrats., R. LeBlanc	5278
Hirtle, James: Sharing Bird Knowledge - Thanks, Hon. B. Druhan.....	5279
Boileau, John: Order of N.S. Recip. - Congrats., B. Clark.....	5279
Glasgow, Michelle: 1st Female Sipekne'katik Chief - Congrats., John A. MacDonald	5280
W. Kings Girls Vol. Team: Ch'ship Win - Congrats., C. Palmer.....	5280
Robinson-Dexter, Jean: Serv. to Astor Theatre - Thanks, Hon. K. Masland.....	5280
Ryan, Debra: QPJ Medal Recip. - Congrats., C. Kerr.....	5281
Melvin Farms: Innovator of Yr. Awd. - Congrats., Hon. J. Lohr	5281
Garrison, Doug: Com. Serv. - Thanks, Hon. B. Maguire	5282
ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS:	
No. 972, Prem.: Non-Disclosure Agreement Legislation - Commit, Hon. Z. Churchill	5283
No. 973, Prem.: Child Care Spaces - Increase,	

C. Chender	5284
No. 974, Agric.: Dike Strengthening - Fund, Hon. K. Irving.....	5286
No. 975, FTB: Cost of Living Relief - Commit, Hon. K. Regan.....	5287
No. 976, Agric.: Food Recovery Program - Implement, Hon. K. Regan.....	5288
No. 977, DHW: Family Doctor Exodus - Stop, S. Leblanc	5289
No. 978, DCS: Income Assistance Rates - Increase, B. Clark.....	5290
No. 979, EECD: Child Food Security - Commit, Hon. P. Arab	5291
No. 980, LSI: Food Bank Demand Increase - Explain, R. DiCostanzo.....	5292
No. 981, DHW: Hospital Fees - Defend, G. Burrill.....	5293
No. 982, DCS: Food-Insecure Adults - Help, B. Clark.....	5294
No. 983, DAE: Food Bank Capacity - Increase, F. Tilley.....	5296
No. 984, SLTC: Acute Care Patients - Move, E. Smith-McCrossin.....	5296
No. 985, DCS: Food Insecurity - Acknowledge, Hon. T. Ince	5297
No. 986, DCS: Food Insecurity - Address, Hon. B. Jessome.....	5299
OPPOSITION MEMBERS' BUSINESS:	
PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BILLS FOR SECOND READING:	
No. 278, Non-disclosure Agreement Prohibition Act, E. Smith-McCrossin.....	5300
Hon. K. Regan.....	5305
C. Chender	5309
D. Barkhouse.....	5311
Hon. P. Arab	5314
No. 268, Primary Care Physician Incentive Pgm. Ext. Act, Hon. B. Maguire	5315
S. Leblanc	5319
T. Taggart.....	5322
B. Clark.....	5325
Hon. B. Adams.....	5327
GOVERNMENT BUSINESS:	
GOVERNMENT MOTIONS:	
ON MOTION FOR SUPPLY:	
K. Coombes.....	5332
Hon. K. Regan.....	5335

S. Leblanc	5338
HOUSE RESOLVED INTO CW ON SUPPLY AT 5:36 P.M.	5342
HOUSE RECONVENED AT 9:51 P.M.....	5342
ADJOURNMENT, House rose to meet again on Thurs., Mar. 30 th at 1:00 p.m.....	5343



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29, 2023

Sixty-fourth General Assembly

First Session

1:00 P.M.

SPEAKER

Hon. Keith Bain

DEPUTY SPEAKERS

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

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. We'll begin with the daily routine.

PRESENTING AND READING PETITIONS

PRESENTING REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

TABLING REPORTS, REGULATIONS AND OTHER PAPERS

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

KENDRA COOMBES: Mr. Speaker, I beg leave to table a document with regard to a member's statement I will be making later, entitled "Black educators: Inspiring youth in Cape Breton and Nova Scotia."

THE SPEAKER: The report is tabled.

STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS**GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION**

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister for L'nu Affairs.

HON. KARLA MACFARLANE: Mr. Speaker, before I read my notice of motion, I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

KARLA MACFARLANE: Visiting us today in the Speaker's Gallery, I am delighted to introduce Senator Dan Christmas of Membertou. In 2016, Senator Christmas became the first Mi'kmaw senator to be appointed to the Senate of Canada.

During his time in the Senate, Senator Christmas chaired the Indigenous People's Committee and helped move forward the legislation on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. He has received honorary degrees from Dalhousie University, Saint Mary's University, and Cape Breton University, an honorary diploma from the Nova Scotia Community College, and a national Excellence in Aboriginal Leadership Award from the Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of Canada.

Senator Christmas officially retired from his Senate duties on January 31st of this year to spend more time with his daughter Gail, who joins him here today. I ask them both to rise and accept the warm welcome of this House. (Standing ovation)

THE SPEAKER: A very warm welcome to you, Senator Christmas, and Gail as well. I hope you enjoy your stay here at Province House.

The honourable Minister of L'nu Affairs.

RESOLUTION NO. 589

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

Whereas Dan Christmas of Membertou First Nation was appointed to the Senate in 2016, and is recognized as Canada's first Mi'kmaw Senator; and

Whereas he has brought an L'nu perspective to the Upper House, and shared his experience and knowledge as a Mi'kmaw leader to the benefit of parliamentarians and all Canadians; and

Whereas he was the Chair of the Standing Committee on Indigenous Peoples, and also served on the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans prior to announcing he would retire on January 31, 2023;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly join me in thanking Senator Dan Christmas for his public service and wishing him well as he spends more time with his daughter Gail and being involved in the Mi'kmaw community.

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.

The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition on an introduction.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: I'd like to bring the members' attention to the West Gallery, where we're joined by two of our health care professionals who work in our system in Public Health. One is a friend of mine from Yarmouth, Debbie Muise - if Debbie Muise could stand up and be recognized - and the other is a friend of Debbie, Vanessa Nickelo, who is here as well. I'd like to thank both the individuals for their service to our health care system and to patients in their jurisdictions.

THE SPEAKER: Once again, we welcome all visitors to the Legislature this afternoon and every day.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill No. 282 - Entitled an Act to Create an Autism Strategy. (Lisa Lachance)

Bill No. 283 - Entitled an Act to Establish a Food Recovery Program. (Hon. Keith Irving)

Bill No. 284 - Entitled an Act to Establish a Provincial School Lunch Program. (Hon. Patricia Arab)

Bill No. 285 - Entitled an Act to Provide Protection for Victims Who Disclose Sexual Assault. (Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin)

Bill No. 286 - Entitled an Act to Amend Chapter 12 of the Acts of 2011, the Public Procurement Act. (Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin)

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

[1:15 p.m.]

NOTICES OF MOTION

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland South.

HENWOOD, KAREN: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Mr. Speaker, following my statement, I would ask for a moment of silence.

I rise today to celebrate the life of Karen Henwood of Springhill. She fought a short but determined battle with cancer. It was only a few short months ago that we said goodbye to her husband Ken. This afternoon, family and friends are gathered to say goodbye to Karen, and I wish I could be there with them.

They were married for 57 years, and both Karen and Ken were dedicated members of their church and, in true blue style and pure dedicated style, to the Cumberland South PC Association. Karen and Ken both worked on many, many campaigns over decades by putting signs up - house signs over the years, making meals, and specifically Karen was one of our "call girls," as we would joke in the office. She was one of the fabulous ladies who made thousands of calls each campaign, often running out of the room to share a hilarious story that she heard from one of the constituents.

When her husband passed away in late December just before Christmas, the Premier called to give condolences and sympathies. Karen was sick at the time and she was in the washroom. She yelled out to her kids, "Who is that on the phone?" "It's the Premier of Nova Scotia." "Well, the Premier's just going to have to wait," Karen yelled out.

Karen and Ken will both be missed dearly by their daughter Kim, sons Troy and Bill, and her brother Bill and their extended families. Our PC family will forever be grateful for all the dedication they gave to not just our constituency, but the PC family throughout the whole province. Our thoughts are with you all today and the days to come.

Mr. Speaker, I ask for a moment of silence.

[A moment of silence was observed.]

THE SPEAKER: Please be seated.

The honourable member for Yarmouth.

HMCS *MONTREAL* MEMBERS & FAMILIES: DEPLOYMENT - RECOG.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize the Canadian Armed Forces personnel on the HMCS *Montreal* who deployed earlier this week on Operation Projection to the Indo-Pacific region. I also want to acknowledge the dedication and support of the friends, families, and loved ones of these members. Deployments affect many in different ways. While you may not be in uniform, you are critical in each person's success, particularly those folks who are waiting for them at home.

We are fortunate in Nova Scotia to have such a strong military connection and presence. Military families and those supporting them help bolster the communities that they live in and are fundamental in ensuring that our forces can actually serve when they are called to. We stand with those members, their families, and the crewmembers for the upcoming six months as they're deployed. I also want to recognize organizations like the Military Family Resource Centre and the Together We Stand Foundation for their work supporting families during these challenging times.

On behalf of our caucus, I'd like to wish the crew of the HMCS *Montreal* a safe sail. I want to share our appreciation for their service. To their families, I'd also like to thank them for standing strong. All of them are sincerely appreciated.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

***CONTESTED WATERS* BOOK: CONTRIB. TO FISHERY - RECOG.**

GARY BURRILL: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to draw the attention of the House to an important new book to which Senator Christmas has made a significant contribution: a book on the critical issue of the moderate livelihood fishery and the development of a lobster fishery that accords with Aboriginal and treaty rights in Nova Scotia.

The book is called *Contested Waters: The Struggle for Rights and Reconciliation in the Atlantic Fishery*. It's edited by Fred Wien and Rick Williams and published by Nimbus. The book brings together some two dozen interviews and essays which, taken together, provide a striking level of clarity on an issue where this kind of clarity has often been very hard to come by.

In the process, the book works its way to a constructive sketching out of elements of potential pathways forward from the importance of establishing trust in enforcement systems to addressing the realities of racism in Nova Scotia. *Contested Waters* points towards a future where a new form of conservation can encompass a rights-based fishery, not necessarily circumscribed by DFO. It's a significant contribution.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Glace Bay-Dominion.

CA's SON, WILLIAM CURRIE - BIRTHDAY WISHES

JOHN WHITE: Mr. Speaker, our constituency assistants work very closely with us, so they become like family. Heidi is my amazing constituency assistant and I couldn't see me doing this job without her. I've known her husband Willie since he was a kid and his loyalty is absolutely incredible. Suffice it to say, their family is our family.

It is with this family pride that I announce the birth of their son, William Alexander Currie, on January 24, 2023, weighing 6 lbs., 10 oz. and measuring 20.5 inches long. His 16-year-old sister Caileigh and his grandfather Naish are right there chipping in to help look after him.

I'll tell you, it's hard to wait your turn to hold this little guy, but he's an amazing baby so it's worth your wait. To better my chances, I've learned to visit when Winnie and Darryl, her grandparents, are not there because you're just not getting him from Winnie's arms. Heidi has refused to take time off so we had a deal that she was going to look after the business out front while I look after Willie in the back. She hasn't kept that part of the deal, so I'm going to have to talk to her, I think.

Little Willie is an amazing baby. He's only two months old. He's stolen the heart of all of us. I want to congratulate Heidi and Willie, Caileigh and Naish, and Winnie and Darryl and the rest of the family.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Fairview-Clayton Park.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: I beg leave for an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

PATRICIA ARAB: I'd like to draw the members' attention to the West Gallery, where today we are joined by four amazing individuals from Fairview-Clayton Park. As I say your name, if you could rise, the first being Yvonne Noel, who is the community manager of Square Roots Fairview-Clayton Park, Beth Power, Mary Atwater, and Allison Covert, all long-time volunteers. Receive the warm welcome of the House. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Fairview-Clayton Park.

SQUARE ROOTS FAIRVIEW-CLAYTON PARK: 3RD ANNIV. - CONGRATS

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: Food insecurity is a sad reality for many Nova Scotians, including those who live in Fairview-Clayton Park. For the last three years, Square Roots

Fairview-Clayton Park has been working to address food insecurity for our residents and has made a huge impact on our community.

During this time, Square Roots has purchased oddly-shaped vegetables from local Valley farmers that otherwise would have gone to waste and gave away upwards of 3,500 pounds of produce twice a week at the height of COVID-19. These days, you can find the volunteers at Square Roots partnering with organizations like Chebucto Links and Santas for Seniors, delivering free fresh produce to over 400 local seniors on Valentine's Day.

With a volunteer team of over 100, they continue to operate twice a month, serving over 200 families, as well as the community at large. You can also purchase produce at just \$1 per pound. This is a significant saving from the grocery store and helps to offset the cost of giving away produce to those in need.

I'm so proud to have this amazing group operating in Fairview-Clayton Park and know that our community is better because of their efforts. I ask all the members in the House to join me in congratulating Square Roots Fairview-Clayton Park on their third anniversary. I can't wait to see what happens next.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SON, SHADAN - BIRTHDAY WISHES

SUZY HANSEN: I rise today to celebrate my oldest son, Shadan Hansen, who celebrated his 18th birthday at the beginning of March. Shadan is kind and gentle, and he's a giant who is a brilliant mind with a phenomenal athletic ability.

Shadan arrived into this world quick and hungry. Labouring with him for only 57 minutes, Shadan arrived before the doctor could get her jacket off, just before dinnertime. He only weighed six pounds, 10 ounces. Shadan has always been a content child growing up - easy to please, always happy, and never asking for much, unless it's food.

I'm extremely proud of my son, who will be graduating high school this year and moving on to some future endeavours. Whatever that is, I know he will be great at it. I just want to say that I'm super-proud of my son, and I'm always impressed at how he handles things in life, which in turn reassures me that he'll be okay in this world. I love this kid.

I'd love to ask all members of this House to join me in wishing Shadan Hansen a happy 18th birthday and hoping for many more celebrations to come.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Pictou Centre.

LANCASTER, LORI: JACK PELECH AWD. RECIP. - CONGRATS.

HON. PAT DUNN: Nova Scotia's participation at the Canada Winter Games in Prince Edward Island proved to be a very successful showing.

Lori Lancaster, the Chef de Mission for Team Nova Scotia, accepted the Centennial Cup and the Jack Pelech Award on behalf of Team Nova Scotia. The Centennial Cup is presented to the provincial or territorial team that shows the greatest improvement from one Winter Games to the next.

The Jack Pelech Award is presented to a provincial or territorial team whose athletes, coaches, managers, and mission staff best combine competitive performance, good sportsmanship, and a spirit of fair play, co-operation, and friendship.

Congratulations to all our athletes, coaches, staff, and parents for representing our province so well during the two weeks of competition.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: With us here in the Gallery, we have Nora Ahmed, a young woman from Egypt originally. She's been here for three years. She is in her last year of political science at Dalhousie, and she's working in my office through a program with Dalhousie, the Political Networking Initiative, and I'm so delighted to have her. She's been an amazing help since February, and she will be with us until the end of April. I would like her to stand up to receive the welcome of the House. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

AHMED, NORA: CONSTITUENCY OFFICE WORK - THANKS

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Today I rise to recognize Nora Ahmed, who is here with us today. Recently, I have had the pleasure of having Nora work as our student in my constituency office a few days a week.

Nora is from Fredericton, New Brunswick, and is a hard-working student with a passion for foreign policy. She is currently taking her Bachelor of Arts, majoring in political science, at Dalhousie University. She will be graduating in May, and hopefully will have her dream of getting into law school soon. Nora worked as a Page for the Legislative Assembly in New Brunswick and is an intern at the Nova Scotia Executive Office of the Judiciary here in Halifax.

I want to thank Nora for her hard work and congratulate her on her upcoming graduation. Shukran, Nora, for all your help and marhaban bik fi Canada.

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

EDUC. SUPP. STAFF: NEED FOR WAGE HIKE - RECOG.

KENDRA COOMBES: At a time when we are seeing an increase in the cost of rent, mortgages, fuel, groceries, and fees for service, it seems education support staff need to be valued more and be compensated fairly. Instead, many are making poverty wages, as low as \$17,000 annually. Education support staff will continue to lead the sector without a living wage and meaningful increases. The services and support students rely on are already depleted and will continue if support staff do not receive a wage that will bring them out of poverty.

Mr. Speaker, I stand in solidarity with the 5,400 members of CUPE's educational support staff, their families, and their students. Without them, schools do not run.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Pictou West.

CROSSMAN, DEBBIE: COM. SERV. - THANKS

HON. KARLA MACFARLANE: Mr. Speaker, Debbie Crossman of Lyons Brook is a well-known community volunteer.

Debbie is very involved with Lyons Brook United Church, having served as the chair of the board of stewards, assisting with fundraisers, creating and displaying banners and appropriate seasonal decor. Debbie is always on hand to provide leadership and support.

Debbie is also involved with the Lyons Brook Hall Society and was recognized as the society's volunteer of the year. For over 50 years, Debbie has been creating tickets, gathering money, contacting previous members and recruiting new ones, and enlisting volunteers, and for several years she has co-led the annual candlelight dinner held in the hall.

Mr. Speaker, Debbie is an example of stewardship at its finest. I congratulate Debbie on her well-deserved recognition and thank her for all the volunteer hours she has put in to making her community a better place to live.

THE SPEAKER: I apologize to the member for Bedford Basin. I skipped over her name, so I'll recognize her now.

The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

DAVEY YOUNG, CAROL: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

HON. KELLY REGAN: Mr. Speaker, I know it was just an oversight.

Nova Scotia lost a special person back on March 21st. Carol Davey Young was a volunteer without equal in this province. She was an ardent Liberal who met her husband when they were first working in Ottawa. She was actually the first female special assistant to a cabinet minister in the country.

John brought her back to Nova Scotia. Her impact here on this province and on countless organizations cannot be overestimated. For a woman whose mantra was “How can I help?,” there are a whole lot of organizations that she impacted. And I’ll just mention a couple because there’s not a lot of time here. Carol was instrumental in the creation of the IWK Telethon for Children, which, of course, impacts us still to this day. She served on many boards, including Dalhousie University, Neptune Theatre, the Pier 21 Society, and the Life Sciences Development Association. She was honoured with many awards, including an Order of Canada back in 2005.

No honour was greater to Carol than the child that she and John adopted, Michael, who was a little baby at the IWK. They asked her to look after him a bit because he needed some cuddling, and in fact they went on to adopt him, and he survived for a further 12 years in a home that was filled with love.

Thank you for your indulgence. I know I’m going over time, but I do want to say that I draw some comfort from the fact that Carol is reunited with her boys.

THE SPEAKER: With that length of time, I guess we’re even.

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

HOUSING SUPP. WORKERS: HELP DURING COLD SNAP - RECOG.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Mr. Speaker, last month, as temperatures in Nova Scotia plummeted to near-minus 40 degrees, there was a mass effort to get folks who were staying outside inside.

I rise today to thank the housing support workers, street outreach workers, street navigators, and government employees who made that happen. My office supports several folks who are unhoused. That weekend, my office alone put at least five folks in touch with the shelter diversion program and with housing support and outreach workers, and to our great relief, they were all sheltered in hotels.

I want to single out staff at Welcome Housing & Support Services, Adsum for Women and Children, Out of the Cold, Shelter Nova Scotia, the street outreach navigators,

and the Department of Community Services. Many of those workers are long past burnt out and put in over-overtime hours to ensure people didn't, quite literally, freeze to death. Welcome Housing also organized wraparound supports in the hotel with Mobile Outreach Street Health, the North End Community Health Centre, the Community Health Team, Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services, the Department of Community Services, and libraries.

[1:30 p.m.]

Hotels, of course, are not long-term solutions to the housing crisis. This government needs to build more deeply affordable housing and do whatever is necessary to get folks inside permanently.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Antigonish.

StFX BASK. TEAM: SILVER MEDAL WIN - CONGRATS.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: I rise today to congratulate the St. Francis Xavier X-Men's basketball team on their terrific season. The X-Men were the 2023 AUS conference champions after a decisive 104-54 win over the UPEI Panthers. This marked their first AUS championship in 17 years. The AUS tournament MVP was the X-Men's David Muenkat.

The X-Men advanced to the U Sports Final 8, which was held the weekend of March 10th. The team, coached by Tyrell Vernon, made it to the final game against the defending champions, Carleton Ravens. Unfortunately, the X-Men lost in double overtime, a 109-104 heartbreaking loss. The team played with heart and determination and the entire Antigonish and Xaverian communities are celebrating their national silver medal.

Mr. Speaker, I ask all members of this house to congratulate Coach Vernon and the entire X-Men basketball team on their performance and their national silver medal.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect.

PINSKY, DR. NORM: VIRTUAL CARE WORK - THANKS

HON. IAIN RANKIN: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize Dr. Norm Pinsky of Hubley. Two and a half years into his retirement after 40 years of practising medicine, Dr. Pinsky saw an advertisement in the newspaper looking for Nova Scotia doctors to come out of retirement to provide virtual health care. Dr. Pinsky not only thought this would be a great opportunity for him, but also recognized the stress on our health care system and the need for people to have access to primary health care.

VirtualCareNS was launched in May of 2021 and started as a way to increase access to Nova Scotians. When our government created this initiative, it included physicians as well as nurse practitioners. As a member of the roster, Dr. Pinsky gets up every weekday, pours himself a coffee, heads to his home office, logs into the virtual platform, and begins seeing patients. In two months, he has seen nearly 700 patients who all have one thing in common: They have no family doctor.

Dr. Pinsky's work has significantly helped reduce the number of patients from visiting a walk-in clinic or an emergency room. I'd like the members of the House of Assembly to join me in thanking Dr. Pinsky for coming out of retirement to help others with their health care needs in this difficult and challenging time when so many people are on the waiting list for a primary health provider, especially in Central Zone.

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

GORSEBROOK SCHOOL STUDENTS: *MATILDA JR.* MUSICAL - CONGRATS.

LISA LACHANCE: Mr. Speaker, this year has been an exciting one for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island schools and the arts. I want to take a moment today to recognize the Gorsebrook Junior High School community for a successful run of the *Matilda Jr.* musical this past February.

This was a very special production that let all students demonstrate their performing skills with an apt storyline for the times we're living in: that it's okay to be different, the importance of owning and pursuing your own learning, and that we all have unique skills to bring to the table.

I ask that my fellow members offer their congratulations to the Gorsebrook students, staff, and parent volunteers who helped make this musical happen. As *Matilda* herself would say: Somewhere inside all of us is the power to change the world.

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

BURGESS, KARLEE: TOURN. OF HEARTS PERF. - CONGRATS.

LARRY HARRISON: I rise to congratulate a local athlete now proudly representing her current province, which is Manitoba. Karlee Burgess, originally from Hilden, is a multi-champion curler, including being a gold medalist at the Women's 2018 World Junior Curling Championships in Scotland.

Most recently, Karlee made a strong showing in the 2023 Scotties Tournament of Hearts as part of Jennifer Jones's Manitoba rink. Team Manitoba, including Jones as skip, Burgess as third, Mackenzie Zacharias as second, and Emily Zacharias as lead, won seven

matches, but lost in the finals to now four-time Scotties winner, Kerri Einarson and her rink.

I wish to congratulate Karlee and her teammates on their outstanding performance at the Tournament of Hearts. Your province is very proud of you, Karlee.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

EMERA CTR. BRD.: 13 YRS. OF OPER. - THANKS

FRED TILLEY: Today I would like to rise and recognize the Board of the Emera Centre Northside in North Sydney. This dedicated group of people has operated this facility for approximately 13 years, but it began many years before that with the vision, and the hard work, the fundraising. I am not going to name all of the members - they know who they are, the community knows who they are.

On behalf of all the citizens of Northside-Westmount I would like to thank this dedicated group of people for everything they've done for the residents of the Northside and surrounding areas over the years.

As the facility transitions to the CBRM, rest assured that you all did amazing things for your community, so I would like to thank them, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

MCCORMACK, GEORGE: QPJ MEDAL RECIP. - CONGRATS

SUZY HANSEN: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize Mr. George McCormack. Mr. McCormack received the Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee Medal in Halifax Needham in December 2022. Mr. McCormack was awarded the Queen's Jubilee Medal because he has dedicated himself to the pursuit of the primary principle of charity to those in need. He has dedicated his time, specifically thousands of volunteer hours in support of local food banks, providing meals to the homeless, fundraising support to women's shelters, youth scholarships, and so much more.

Mr. McCormack received his medal to recognize his significant contributions to our province and I was truly honoured to present him with that medal. I would like all members to join me in celebrating Mr. George McCormack for his public service and community.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Eastern Passage.

HAUGHIAN, MYRA: COM. SERV. - THANKS

HON. BARBARA ADAMS: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize local artist Myra Haughian. Myra generously gives back to our community in many ways. She offers beautifully done hand-drawn greeting cards with personal custom messages to community members with the proceeds going back to our local Buffalo Club, Eastern Lodge 8686. The Buffalo Club members then use these funds to give back to local families who have fallen on hard times.

I ask all members of the Nova Scotia Legislature to join me in recognizing and thanking Myra for all her hard work and dedication in giving back to the community she loves so much. We know that Myra will continue to inspire me and others through her wonderful artistic skills and unwavering kindness.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

PAUL, DANIEL: BATTLING ILLNESS - BEST WISHES

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to take a moment to recognize an outstanding Canadian, Daniel Paul. Mr. Paul is an Order of Canada and an Order of Nova Scotia recipient. Daniel Paul is a Mi'kmaw elder, author, columnist, human rights activist, and all-around great person.

Daniel authored a powerful and brilliant book called *We Were Not the Savages*. Daniel spent his whole life fighting for others. He is now battling an illness which he has been very open about. Mr. Paul, I wish you a speedy recovery. You have made our world a better place and I look forward to seeing what you will do next.

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

BLACK EDUCATORS IN C.B.: WORK IMPORTANCE - RECOG.

KENDRA COOMBES: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize the history of Black educators in Cape Breton. Over 68 years ago, Black educators could not teach in Nova Scotia classrooms. Until 1954, education in the province was segregated.

When segregation became illegal 68 years ago, Cape Breton became the first place in Nova Scotia to have a Black educator and the representation continues to grow. Phyllis Arthur was the first Black teacher in a non-segregated classroom in 1955, in a one-room schoolhouse in Sydney Forks, before teaching at Jameson Elementary School in Whitney Pier.

Representation matters. People need to see themselves reflected. Ms. Arthur knew this, and was dedicated to making education more inclusive. She was part of the provincial committee to bring more culturally inclusive books into schools.

In 2015, Phyllis Arthur received an award from the Black Educators Association of Nova Scotia for being a role model to African Nova Scotian students. Last month she was profiled in the *Cape Breton Post*.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Digby-Annapolis.

LEWIS, MAUD: CONTRIB. TO ARTS - RECOG.

HON. JILL BALSER: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to remember one of Canada's most prolific folk artists, Maud Lewis. Maud, born in 1901, grew up in Yarmouth County. After her parents passed and her older brother inherited the family home, she moved to Marshalltown in Digby County. Maud married Everett Lewis, a fish-peddler, and together they lived in a tiny home full of character.

Maud was born with rheumatoid arthritis, which worsened until her death in 1970. Her love for art began as a young girl, and Maud would go door to door selling homemade Christmas cards with her mother. Maud continued painting until she moved to Marshalltown, where she often painted the local scenery. Maud even painted her house - inside and out. Locals and Summer tourists stopped on the side of the road, buying her paintings for just \$2 to \$10 apiece. Her work is displayed at the Maud Lewis Exhibition at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in Halifax until April 23rd.

I ask all members of the Nova Scotia Legislature to join me in recognizing the lasting legacy of Maud Lewis and her exceptional contribution to the arts.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Armdale.

GOOD AIR VENTILATION SYSTEMS: RELIABLE SERV. - RECOG.

ALI DUALE: Mr. Speaker, today I would like to recognize Good Air Ventilation Systems. For over 50 years, Good Air has been providing Nova Scotians with top-quality heat pumps, range hoods, air exchangers, and more. Good Air always delivers consistent and reliable service, whether it is the hottest day of the Summer or the coldest day of the Winter and everything in between.

I would like to ask the House to join me in thanking Good Air Ventilation Systems for their service in Nova Scotia.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

CHAPMAN, ANN: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

SUSAN LEBLANC: Mr. Speaker, this past February, the community of Crichton Park lost a beloved community member, volunteer, nurse, friend, daughter, wife, mother,

and grandmother, Ann Chapman. Born in New Glasgow, Ann moved to Dartmouth when she was eight and lived there for over 50 years. She was a graduate of Dartmouth High School.

Ann was a well-respected nurse at the IWK, working in both infant medicine and oncology, her life's calling. She co-founded a support group called Brainchild to bring joy and connection to families in the oncology clinic. Remembered fondly as Guider Ann, she spent years volunteering as a leader with the Girl Guides of Canada. After retiring due to cancer, Ann was delighted to continue her work with young families in the community as an IWK volunteer.

To honour Ann's life, those attending her memorial in March sported her favourite colour, pink - a tribute to her beautiful smile and love of fun.

I would like to express my deep condolences to Ann's family, friends, community, and all who will miss her.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ER REOPENING DELAY: PROBLEMS CAUSED - RECOG.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Mr. Speaker, yesterday, after close to 11 long months, the main emergency department at the Cumberland Regional Health Centre finally reopened. (Applause) This is good news for the people of Cumberland County. I do thank Nova Scotia Health and the Department of Health and Wellness for finally completing this project.

However, the wait has been too long for everyone involved: staff, physicians, and most importantly, patients and families. The conditions under which the temporary department operated were terrible, and while, yes, the cause of the situation was an accident, the long wait for the renovations was no accident. One of the stated reasons for the delays was supply chain issues, which, granted, are a reality. However, it is my understanding that part of the reason why there were substantial delays is that many of the needed materials were not ordered in a timely manner.

I believe procurement for medical reasons - clinical procurement - should be an office of its own. I believe that this is a specialty. Like other provinces, we should make those changes.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sackville-Cobequid.

ENCOUNTER CHURCH: STUDY CAFÉ OPENING - THANKS

HON. STEVE CRAIG: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to thank the members of the Encounter Church of The Salvation Army.

Encounter Church recently opened their Study Café on Metropolitan Avenue, Lower Sackville, by Sackville High School. The Study Café offers a safe space for youth to receive extra help with subjects like calculus, pre-calculus, and physics from a tutor they provide on site. They are also welcome to enjoy a warm beverage during their stay. The café is open on Wednesdays and Thursdays from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and it's very simple to register.

I would like to ask all members of the House of Assembly to join me in thanking the members of the Salvation Army's Encounter Church for providing such an essential service to the youth of our community, who otherwise may not be able to obtain these resources in such a safe and supportive environment.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings South.

REID, MIKE: QPJ MEDAL RECIP. - CONGRATS.

HON. KEITH IRVING: Mr. Speaker, we are all inspired when we learn about Nova Scotians doing extraordinary things. Mike Reid of New Minas suffers from a rare hereditary lung disease, Alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency. As a recipient of a double lung transplant, Mike became an ambassador for the Valley Regional Hospital Foundation's Breathe Well campaign. The campaign raised \$250,000 to purchase two new pieces of pulmonary function test equipment and two portable spirometers for the Valley Regional Hospital. With this new equipment, patients can now have their lung function monitored, reducing the risk of complications.

Recently, Mike was presented with a Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee Medal for his charitable work. He now leads his own not-for-profit organization called the GLS Society for Health and Life, which has organized multiple fundraising events with proceeds going to support school breakfast and lunch programs.

I ask all members of the Legislative Assembly to join me in thanking Mike Reid for his dedication to making our communities healthier and stronger, and congratulating him on receiving the Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee Medal.

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

SPONTANEITY IMPROV CO.: NEW BUS. - RECOG.

LISA LACHANCE: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize a new business in my constituency, the Spontaneity Improv Company.

Located in the Lighthouse Arts Centre and operating around community, trust, connection, and inclusivity, Spontaneity provides participants opportunities to build confidence and have fun. Classes are offered for all experience levels and interests. If you're not sure where to start, or you don't consider yourself a shoo-in for *Whose Line*, you can still check it out at a low-pressure, drop-in class.

[1:45 p.m.]

Founded and led by Sophie Nadeau, Spontaneity is a safe place to socialize, grow, and expand one's comfort zone. Three cheers for a warm and welcoming place to try something new, because who couldn't use a little more spontaneity in their life?

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth East.

JONES, DR. LEAH: NEW ACAD. DIR. OF BLACK HEALTH - CONGRATS.

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize Dr. Leah Jones.

Dr. Jones - who is from Dartmouth and is a graduate of Woodlawn High School in one of the first cohorts of students that went through the International Baccalaureate program at Woodlawn - is the first Academic Director of Black Health at Dalhousie Medical School. She has been in the role since September 2022, and she is working to ensure that Black medical students are supported during their training.

As a young Black woman in medicine, Dr. Jones is a strong role model. She is breaking down barriers and ensuring that Black medical students can thrive in their field.

I ask that all members in the House join me in congratulating Dr. Leah Jones on her position at Dalhousie Medical School, and thank her for paving the way for a new generation of health care professionals.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour.

ARSENAULT, BERNICE: QPJ MEDAL RECIP. - CONGRATS.

HON. TONY INCE: Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to speak about Bernice Arsenault, who received a Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee Medal.

Bernice is a former resident of Africville. She is the co-founder and director of the Africville Genealogy Society and served on the board of the Africville Heritage Trust Museum as member and as president. She's also pictured on the Africville stamp released by Canada Post in 2014 for Black History Month.

Bernice worked hard for Bell for 30 years, and won their first Community Spirit Award in 2003. She has dedicated her time to organizations and causes such as Bell Let's Talk Day, Christmas Daddies, Baseball Canada, the Backpacks for Kids initiative, as well as hockey teams and bands.

A cancer survivor herself for 21 years, Bernice has raised over \$300,000 for the CIBC Run for the Cure for the last 21 years. Please join me in welcoming Bernice and thanking her for her dedication. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Argyle.

D'ENTREMONT, LUCIEN: STAIR HEROES PERF. - CONGRATS.

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize Lucien d'Entremont, a volunteer firefighter with the West Pubnico Volunteer Fire Department.

On February 9th, Lucien took part in the 2nd annual Stair Heroes challenge in support of the Lung Association of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Alongside other climbers, firefighters climb 36 flights of stairs wearing more than 75 pounds of equipment. This was his first time competing. While his goal was just to make it to the top, Lucien placed 60th out of 120 overall and 16th out of 25 in his division, while raising over \$900 in support of the Lung Association.

I ask all members of the Legislature to join me in congratulating Lucien and all participants in the Stair Heroes challenge.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

CDN. ORTHOPAEDIC CARE DAY: INCR. EDUC. - RECOG.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to acknowledge that March 29th is Canadian Orthopaedic Care Day. This day was developed to raise awareness surrounding issues and areas of development needed for orthopaedic care in Canada.

This year, Canadian Orthopaedic Care Day will focus on increased education to the public and various levels of government surrounding resource allocations, addressing surgery backlog concerns, specialist training needs, job creation, and the impact of health human resources shortages across this profession.

Whether you are in a community, small or large, and no matter your connection to this critical medical specialty, we hope you take a moment to celebrate or consider participating virtually, using the hashtags #OrthoCareCanada and #LiveLifePainFree. Your support would be greatly appreciated.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton East.

CAPE BRETON UNIV.: NEW MEDICAL CAMPUS - CONGRATS.

HON. BRIAN COMER: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to congratulate Cape Breton University on the announcement of its new medical campus.

The campus will include a new collaborative care clinic at the Nova Scotia Community College, Marconi Campus, and an expansion of the Cape Breton University's health and counselling centre. This is expected to open by Fall 2025, and will train 30 new doctors every year. Patients and families all across Cape Breton and rural Nova Scotia need more access to health care. The best way to do this is to recruit more health care workers here at home.

I stand here today to say I am always proud to be a Cape Bretoner, but even more proud with this recent announcement. I'm honoured to be a part of this announcement, especially with my experience in health care in Cape Breton. I'd like to congratulate CBU and all the health care clinicians in Cape Breton who put in so much work to make this happen.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clare.

THIBODEAU, BRIAN: RETIREMENT - CONGRATS.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Today, I rise to recognize Brian Thibodeau, who has retired from his 30-year career as a paramedic. Brian, born and raised in Meteghan Centre, began his career as a casual paramedic while also volunteering as a firefighter.

As a local Acadian, Brian was able to provide comfort to his neighbours, especially the elderly, while attending to their medical needs. In doing so, Brian found his true passion in helping people during their most vulnerable moments, and his job was a perfect fit. He considers himself fortunate to have had a career in which he could have a positive impact on the lives of others, and the community is better for it. Although retired, Brian will continue to serve as a volunteer member of the Meteghan Fire Department.

I ask all members to join me in congratulating Brian Thibodeau on his retirement and expressing our gratitude for his 30 years of dedicated service as a paramedic. We wish him all the best in his future endeavours.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Lunenburg West.

HIRTLE, JAMES: SHARING BIRD KNOWLEDGE - THANKS

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize avid birder James Hirtle of LaHave. Local bird watcher Cathy Ramey says: “James is well known in the region and among members of the Nova Scotia Bird Society for his insatiable interest in birds and for educating others through outings and a weekly column with LighthouseNOW.”

He eagerly shares his knowledge and his passion as a birder with others. He makes a special effort to teach young people, inspiring them to learn more about nature, appreciate different species, and better understand Nova Scotia’s beautiful birds.

James conducts owl surveys, shorebird surveys, Christmas Bird Counts, Project Feeder Watch, and the Maritimes Nest Record Scheme, as well as the Breeding Bird Survey. He was a Piping Plover Guardian Co-ordinator for 25 years, and a co-coordinator for the last breeding bird atlas for Lunenburg-Queens. He runs Nova Scotia Bird Society field trips, gives presentations throughout the year, takes traveling birders out with him, and gives advice on the best places for local tourists to go birding.

Please join me in thanking James Hirtle for sharing his knowledge and enthusiasm for Nova Scotia birds.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

BOILEAU, JOHN: ORDER OF N.S. RECIP. - CONGRATS.

BRAEDON CLARK: Today I want to recognize and congratulate retired Colonel John Boileau of Bedford South, who yesterday was one of five individuals invested into the Order of Nova Scotia. Boileau is a 37-year veteran of the Canadian Army, who was stationed in Cyprus, the United States, Germany, and finally as military attaché to the United Kingdom.

Notably, he has channeled his passion for Nova Scotia’s rich history into 15 books and more than 650 articles on a dizzying array of topics, including the Halifax Explosion, responsible government, and the Boer War. Colonel Boileau gives freely of his time as a speaker, advisor, and commentator, including as an expert advisor on the National Apology given to the descendants of No. 2 Construction Battalion.

Nova Scotia is blessed with a rich and dynamic history, and there has been no better chronicler of that history than John Boileau. I ask all members of the House to join me in congratulating retired colonel John Boileau on his investiture as a member of the Order of Nova Scotia.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hants East.

GLASGOW, MICHELLE: 1ST FEMALE SIPEKNE’KATIK CHIEF - CONGRATS.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to acknowledge a very important accomplishment by Michelle Glasgow. Michelle has become the first female chief of the First Nation Sipekne'katik since its official founding in 1820.

Michelle is now the fourth person in her family to serve as Chief of Sipekne'katik.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate Michelle on this accomplishment. I am looking forward to seeing her in this position and watching all she will accomplish over her term.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings West.

W. KINGS GIRLS VOL. TEAM: CH'SHIP WIN - CONGRATS.

CHRIS PALMER: Mr. Speaker, one of the most exciting and memorable times for a student athlete is winning a provincial championship at your home school in front of a hometown crowd.

This is what happened in December for the West Kings Girls Volleyball team as they won the School Sport Nova Scotia provincials in Division 2 volleyball right at West Kings in Auburn. Eight teams from around Nova Scotia took part in an amazing weekend of volleyball, with West Kings beating Par-en-Bas in the semi-final, and defeating SAERC from Port Hawkesbury in a thrilling gold medal match, a rematch of the 2021 final.

A great team needs great coaches, and I want to thank Madison Archibald, Shelley Peach, and Kyle Ward for all their commitment to the team and leadership. It truly was a fantastic ending to the year for Grade 12 players Brooke Jones, Keira Dimmel, Maddie Peach, Jessica Ramsay, Dana Avery, Hannah McDow, and the rest of the team, Amelia Blatch, Lilli MacDonald, Savannah Bezanson, Sophia Hennesey, Maisie Ward, Abigail Milne, and Hilde Avery - and last but not least, right side powerhouse Chloe "the Cannon" Palmer.

I would like to all members of the Legislature to join me in congratulating the West Kings Girls Volleyball team on all their success from this past year as provincial champions.

THE SPEAKER: Take a breath, member, take a breath.

The honourable member for Queens.

ROBINSON-DEXTER, JEAN: SERV. TO ASTOR THEATRE - THANKS

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize Jean Robinson-Dexter, the executive director of the Astor Theatre in Liverpool.

Jean, who runs her own consulting firm, stepped up to be the part-time executive director of the theatre almost three years ago. Under her leadership, this vital place of the arts and community has evolved and thrived during challenging times, and it is now even more inclusive, dynamic, welcoming, and appreciated.

At the end of this month, Jean will be stepping down as ED, but most certainly leaves it in a positive position.

Please join me in thanking Jean for her guidance and service to the Astor and our community and in wishing her all the best for the future.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

RYAN, DEBRA: QPJ MEDAL RECIPIENT - CONGRATS.

CARMAN KERR: Mr. Speaker, the Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee medal recognizes exceptional Nova Scotians who make their communities even better places to work, live, and play. One constituent to whom I have had the pleasure of presenting the medal to is Debra Ryan. As an employee with the County of the Municipality of Annapolis, Debra has worked a lifetime to promote the area as an outdoor recreation destination and to create opportunities for the people of Annapolis County to engage in an active and healthy lifestyle. She is certainly a very deserving recipient of the award.

I invite all members of the House of Assembly to join me in congratulating Debra Ryan on receiving the Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee medal.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings North.

MELVIN FARMS: INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR AWARD - CONGRATS.

HON. JOHN LOHR: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to congratulate Richard Melvin and Melvin Farms as the recipient of the 2023 RBC Horticultural Nova Scotia Innovator of the Year award. The award celebrates and honours outstanding individuals nominated by their peers in the agriculture sector for demonstrating resilience, leadership and innovation.

The award recognizes Nova Scotians who demonstrate exceptional qualities as operators of farms or other agricultural businesses, or innovators, promoters, or supporters of agriculture in other ways.

Mr. Melvin is a lifelong farmer who has supported his family and contributed to Nova Scotia's economy and community through farming.

Please join me today in congratulating Richard Melvin and Melvin Farms as the 2023 RBC Horticultural Nova Scotia Innovator of the Year - and my neighbour and long-time business partner.

[2:00 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

GARRISON, DOUG: COM. SERV. - THANKS

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Mr. Speaker, I would just like to take a moment to recognize Doug Garrison from Sambro, now Portuguese Cove. Doug has been a member of the community his whole life and one of the founding - I guess longest-serving - families in Sambro. Doug and his partner a long time ago started Sambro Fisheries. He has since sold it off and is enjoying what he likes to call "retirement." Doug has a truck now where he goes around to each and every person of the community whenever they need it.

Besides helping people in the community, Doug is also involved in the local church. He's involved with the cemetery in Pennant, and he was also involved in the Remembrance Day monument. Retirement, for Doug, is like three or four full-time jobs for any of us.

Thank you, Doug Garrison, and thank you, Jackie, for putting up with him.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The time for Statements by Members has expired.

The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic on an introduction.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'd just like to take a moment to recognize a good friend of mine who is in the West Gallery, Matt Conrad - a good friend, a confidant and a community leader. Matt always steps up when the community needs him. He does it with a smile. Sometimes he complains a little but not very often. The last time Matt and I did a fundraiser together, he ate the hottest chip and the hottest gummy bear to help raise money and he is still alive and here today. Thank you, Matt, for all you do.

THE SPEAKER: We have now reached the time for the order of business, Oral Questions Put by Members to Ministers. The time is 2:01 p.m. We'll go until 2:51 p.m.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM.: NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT LEGISLATION - COMMIT

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, yesterday in the House the Premier and the Minister of Justice fielded questions related to a proposed bill that would restrict the use of non-disclosure agreements in cases involving sexual harassment. I was surprised at first by the lack of empathy towards victims and the commentary from the government side and also the lack of commitment to actually move forward with such a piece of legislation that other jurisdictions are moving forward with. I do have to ask the Premier: Is the lack of commitment on this issue to restrict the use of NDAs in cases involving sexual harassment due to the fact that the PC caucus themselves used one of these in a case in 2018 involving a sexual harassment incident with one of their former staff members?

HON. TIM HOUSTON (The Premier): I am not sure that the member has his facts correct. What I would say, Mr. Speaker, is it is absolutely clear that this caucus has compassion for Nova Scotians. We agree that non-disclosure agreements should not be used as a means to silence victims. That is absolutely clear. We are moving forward. We are doing a jurisdictional scan. That's what's required to bring legislation to the floor of this House. We'll continue with that scan and we'll see what the results are and we'll take guidance from the department when the time comes.

ZACH CHURCHILL: We know we do not need a jurisdictional scan to determine what's wrong and right in this Chamber. We have multiple jurisdictions that are moving forward with such legislation. I am happy to hear the Premier commit to moving forward with this but we do wonder if there has been a conflict of interest on this issue that has impacted the government's approach to it and the slow nature to which they are doing the scan. I would ask the Minister responsible for the Advisory Council on the Status of Women Act, who was Interim Leader at the time in 2018, if she does feel that she herself is in a conflict of interest on this issue.

THE SPEAKER: I just want to warn the leader, just as a point of information, the question is going to be directed to the Premier and you should stick to the point of not past history but the present. I think that's what we should be looking at.

THE PREMIER: What I would say to the member is it's easy to come into this Chamber where you have privilege and throw these accusations around. I'd be interested to see if the member goes outside those doors and makes an accusation like that. What I want all Nova Scotians to know, Mr. Speaker, is we are doing a jurisdictional scan. We are taking this issue very seriously, much more seriously than the Leader of the Opposition, who is trying to score cheap political points.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, I feel that this line of questioning is fair. I believe the government caucus may be in a conflict of interest on this issue. I believe that that conflict of interest has potentially slowed down their work on this important file. I appreciate your comments on history and I certainly hope that you correct the Premier

when he stands up and throws shade at past governments as well in this House, if we're all going to be focused on the present context.

In the present moment, can the Premier please commit today to this House that his caucus is not in a conflict of interest on issues related to restricting NDAs related to sexual assault or sexual harassment and that his government is committed to passing this legislation at their earliest convenience?

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, what I'll confirm for Nova Scotians is that we're doing a jurisdictional scan. The department is looking at this. We will look for the department's guidance on this, and we will take this issue very, very seriously, as we always do with issues that come before us.

The safety of Nova Scotians, passing legislation that's good for Nova Scotians, something that we're focused on. Something that member could have done for the eight years he sat here and did nothing. We're moving this province forward in every way.

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

PREM.: CHILD CARE SPACES - INCREASE

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Mr. Speaker, I can't help but notice this government is faster and better except for when it's slower. (Laughter) Ask almost every parent in the province, for instance, and they will tell you that this government's boasting about new child care spots is far from reality. They have shifted target deadlines and played with numbers, but parents know that it is not enough.

In the funding agreement, the bilateral agreement with their federal counterparts, their stated plan is to open at least 4,000 new child care spaces by the 2022-23 fiscal year, and I'll table that. Instead, department data shows that the total number of spaces is less than a third - 1,245 spaces, not counting the ones that have since closed, and I'll table that.

I hope the Premier can explain how with millions of dollars in federal funding, and almost two years in government, they have failed so spectacularly to meet this target.

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, we know the importance of affordable child care. We're working with the federal government on the agreement to make sure that Nova Scotians have access to affordable child care. The minister at the department, the team working on that is moving forward to make sure Nova Scotians have access to affordable child care. That's the only thing that's guiding us on this file - affordable child care for Nova Scotians. That's our focus. That's our goal and we'll move forward as we can on that.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: The Premier, of all people, should know that the difference between knowing something is important and acting on it is very different.

Most of the new child care spaces created have been in before- and after-school care, not in daycares for infants and toddlers. In fact, infant and toddler spots have risen by - wait for it - 14. Fourteen is the number since 2021, and I'll table that. Parents of infants are reporting that they can't even find an open wait-list, let alone a daycare spot.

A Halifax-area mother recently reported calling 52 daycares without luck, and now has nowhere to turn. Another mother told the media that, "It's very stressful not knowing when I can return [to work]. My mental well-being, my financial well-being, my child's well-being, really, it's all dependent on finding proper care and going back to work."

THE SPEAKER: Question, please.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Families can't work if they don't have child care. What does the Premier suggest they do?

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, we know the importance of affordable child care. That's why we're working so hard to open up the spaces for families. We know what it means to families. We know what it means to our economy. We're focused on opening up those spaces. We're working just as hard as we can with the operators, and we'll get spots opened as soon as we can. It's a priority for us and it's a priority for Nova Scotians. That's why we're working so hard on this file.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Mr. Speaker, 14 spaces. We've heard from parents who are concerned that the government's failure to deliver spaces is resulting in huge fees, the exact opposite of the intent of the bilateral agreement.

Reese Clements put her child on a wait-list at a Halifax centre when she was eight months' pregnant and was asked to pay both a non-refundable deposit and a full month's fee in advance, without the promised reduction that would have been in effect, just to get on the wait-list. The upfront cost of getting on a wait-list was \$1,400 and came with no guarantee of a spot, and I'll table that.

Why is the government content to let families continue to pay the price of broken child care promises?

THE PREMIER: I just want to assure those Nova Scotians who are seeking child care, we understand. We're working hard on that. We're working with the federal government. The investments that are being made and those working in the sector, those are important. The spots that we can open, maybe it is only 14. Also important that it's - we're moving forward, Mr. Speaker. We'll do what we can. Nova Scotians know that we're working hard on this file. We'll continue to work on that file just as hard as we can.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings South.

DOA: DIKE STRENGTHENING - FUND

HON. KEITH IRVING: It's been clear for some time, as reported by our farmers, our scientists, and other Nova Scotians living near our dike infrastructure that urgent investments are needed to strengthen and stabilize our dikes to protect thousands of acres of prime agricultural land.

Hurricane Fiona reminded us how precarious our protections are in the face of extreme weather events. If that storm had been just a few hundred kilometres west from where it landed, it could have created an economic disaster for prime agricultural land or our link to the rest of Canada through the Chignecto Isthmus.

With this urgency in mind, can the minister inform the House why his department's capital budget was underspent by 30 per cent, a \$3.7 million underspend that could have been directed at our dikes?

HON. GREG MORROW: We certainly understand the importance of dikes to our farmland. It's a topic that is always on our minds when working with my colleague the Minister of Public Works and our federal counterparts. We'll continue to work on that with them.

KEITH IRVING: Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure that that answer adequately addresses the urgency of the situation. Nor do future budget projections for this department. This upcoming year, the capital budget for the Department of Agriculture is showing a cut of 30 per cent. To date, we've seen absolutely zero progress on protecting the vital economic link of the Chignecto Isthmus. In fact, there is no evidence in this budget that work is even planned in the next five years - an incredible risky gamble this government is taking. Can the minister assure Nova Scotians that we will see immediate action this summer in implementing a long-term plan to strengthen and protect the Chignecto Isthmus and advise Nova Scotians on the timing of these investments?

HON. KIM MASLAND: We certainly understand how important the Chignecto Isthmus is to our province and, quite frankly, to the rest of Canada. There's \$50 million worth of trade that goes through the isthmus every day. Recently, when I was at a minister's council meeting, Minister Carr, the Minister of Transportation in New Brunswick, and I had the opportunity to talk to federal ministers. We are working on this on a weekly basis. We have a team that has come together from the Province, the federal government, and New Brunswick and we are working to make sure that this project goes ahead. This is not a simple project. This is not slap a band-aid on it and make it better. This is going to take a lot of work and a lot of collaboration. I'm very confident in that collaboration.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

FTB: COST OF LIVING RELIEF - COMMIT

HON. KELLY REGAN: The government has failed to recognize the impact that the cost of living crisis has on everyday Nova Scotians. Their wallets are being hit where it most hurts, like at the grocery store. This government has done little to protect them from this harsh cost of living crisis. Mr. Speaker, it's incumbent on the government to shield lower- and middle-income Nova Scotians from high food prices. I'll ask the Premier: Will his government commit today to cost of living relief for the people of our province?

[2:15 p.m.]

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Yesterday, we saw the federal budget come down. We saw some measures for affordability, including an increased amount for GST coming for people in the month of July, I believe it is. Mr. Speaker, we were pleased to see that because we know that affordability is not just the responsibility of Nova Scotia's provincial government. It's also a responsibility of the federal government.

When we compare what we did in our budget in terms of targeted supports, if you look at seniors, seniors are actually getting about twice as much with the Seniors Care Grant than the amount being provided in the GST rebate. For parents with two children at lowest income levels, they're actually getting more than the amount offered through the federal government GST rebate.

KELLY REGAN: The words of the Deputy Premier are ringing hollow in the walls of this Chamber and in the ears of Nova Scotians. I want to draw attention to the budget highlights released by this government. In it, the Housing, Homelessness, and Affordability section does not contain the word "food." Not once. Zero. Zip. Nada. I'll table that. This government has not acted on making food more affordable for Nova Scotians. Mr. Speaker, actions speak louder than words, but here there aren't even words to follow up with it. Will the Deputy Premier be honest with Nova Scotians about the fact that the laser focus of the government has meant food insecurity increases?

ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, we have made significant investments in food security in this province. I will also say that what rings hollow to me is the silence of Nova Scotia Liberal MPs when people in this province are telling the federal government "no" to the carbon tax that's coming this Summer - a 14 cent per litre tax on gasoline, making everything people buy more expensive. They're not stopping there. By 2030, that's going to be 37 cents per litre. That is going to affect the cost of everything, including food. What rings hollow for me is that silence of Nova Scotia Liberal MPs.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin on a new question.

DOA: FOOD RECOVERY PROGRAM - IMPLEMENT

HON. KELLY REGAN: Mr. Speaker, I'm getting whiplash over here, I have to say. One minute he loves the feds, yes, and one minute they hate the feds. It's kind of hard to keep it straight.

The minister could at least bring reasonable and common-sense solutions to address food insecurity. Solutions like a food recovery program can be used as a simple common-sense solution to help alleviate food insecurity in this province. A food recovery program would partner with Nova Scotia farmers to buy their secondary products that can't be sold to grocery stores, but are just as healthy, and provide these products to those most in need. My question to the minister: Why are simple common-sense solutions like a food recovery program not being used to address food affordability in this province during this affordability crisis?

HON. GREG MORROW: Mr. Speaker, we're always looking at ways to help Nova Scotians, and our farmers as well. I would point to \$9.9 million in funding that was recently announced. That's \$5 million to address season extension in climate change, \$4 million for advancement of value-added food processing - \$2 million of that for large-scale food advance for an abattoir efficiency program and \$2 million for smaller-scale - and as well, \$900,000 to increase local foods in our Nova Scotian institutions.

We are always looking for ways to help Nova Scotians and help our farmers. The food recovery program landed on my desk one hour ago.

KELLY REGAN: I'm just hoping that it will be acted on with greater alacrity than, say, the NDA issue has been. That's been a jurisdictional scan that's gone on for how long? A year?

Mr. Speaker, people are struggling to buy groceries, especially our most vulnerable. The least this government could do is step up to help them with a food recovery program. It's a great idea. It just landed on the minister's desk, he says. He should take it. It wouldn't only help people afford food but would also help our local producers by buying products that don't meet the buyers' criteria.

This is a simple win-win: help producers and make food more affordable. Will the minister commit to implementing programs like a food recovery program immediately?

GREG MORROW: As Minister of Agriculture, I can't control the price of food in grocery stores. What I can do is help connect more Nova Scotians to healthy local food. Our goal is to have 20 per cent of money spent on food by Nova Scotians be locally grown and produced.

We started a Nova Scotia food and beverage strategy. We had great uptake in that in terms of responses. We'll use that going forward to help get more local food to Nova Scotians.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

DHW: FAMILY DOCTOR EXODUS - STOP

SUSAN LEBLANC: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Health and Wellness. Another doctor is winding up their clinic in Halifax. Jason Haslam received a letter last week informing him and his partner that they no longer have a family doctor as of May 31st. They have spent numerous stints on the family doctor list, but he says, “My real concern is for my fellow patients. There could well be patients recently diagnosed with cancer, for example, who may also be waiting on another long list for specialist treatment, or elderly patients like my own mother, who not only need regular checkups but also a family doctor to advocate for them with specialists, insurance, and so on. I live in real fear of what happens if she loses her doctor too.” Jason and the people he’s concerned about need a family health team. When will the government stop the exodus of family doctors from the Central Zone?

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Health and Wellness.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Certainly, there have been a number of things undertaken in order to support physicians in Central Zone and throughout the province. Most recently, there was a letter that was sent to physicians explaining that if they were winding up their practice or felt that they need practice support, they could reach out to this 1-800 number, and that the local medical services team through NSHA and the Department of Health and Wellness would reach out to support them to ensure that they had the practice supports that they required.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Jason also said, “Ironically, in the same building as our now-former doctor, a private, for-profit clinic has opened. I guess our current Premier thinks only those who can afford to pay are allowed the luxury of health. It’s infuriating that others who may not be so lucky can simply be sentenced to the list for the crime of not having enough money.” I can table that letter.

Does the minister think it’s fair that private clinics, where people have to pay to access primary care, are popping up at the same time as people are losing their family doctors?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: Certainly, our government has shown a strong commitment, 6.5 billion commitments, to make sure that our publicly funded health care system has the resources that it needs. We are working very hard in primary care. Attachment does not mean access. We are looking at a variety of modalities in which patients can access care as they wait for attachment, and I would encourage people, if they do need access, to get on the Need a Family Practice Registry. That allows them a variety of different ways to support their health care, and we are looking at ways of increasing primary care providers in the province.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

DCS: INCOME ASSISTANCE RATES - INCREASE

BRAEDON CLARK: My question is for the Minister of Community Services. In its 2022 report, Feed Nova Scotia stated that: “80% of households on social assistance in Nova Scotia are food insecure.” What we learned last week is that the government either didn’t know this or didn’t care. From February 2022 to February of this year, food prices increased nearly 11 per cent: chicken, 11 per cent; dairy products and eggs, 10 per cent; fresh vegetables, 13.4 per cent.

Increasing income assistance payments would have made an immediate and obvious impact on the ability of Nova Scotians to pay for food. I’d like to ask the Minister of Community Services: Why was that not done in this budget?

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Community Services.

HON. KARLA MACFARLANE: This government has definitely made investments in food security to ensure that 160 food banks across this province, as well as schools - a number of individuals have reached out to me. We have never denied anyone in giving assistance to help your schools, to help your local food banks. We will continue making investments and making sure that during these challenging times for families, no one goes hungry.

BRAEDON CLARK: During March break, I had the chance to go and visit Feed Nova Scotia’s warehouse in Dartmouth. I had a chance to do a tour there. I asked them, what would be the biggest impact on having fewer people coming through your doors looking for food? They told me, a poverty reduction strategy. The easiest way to reduce poverty for low-income Nova Scotians is to increase income assistance rates. That’s not my argument, that’s the argument of Feed Nova Scotia, which I heard just two weeks ago.

In November of last year, the member for Hammonds Plains-Lucasville asked: “Why did this government choose not to increase income assistance this last budget?” Here we go again. Déjà vu. I’d like to ask the Minister of Community Services once again: Why were income assistance rates not increased in this budget for the most vulnerable Nova Scotians?

KARLA MACFARLANE: I, too, have had a chance to go to Feed Nova Scotia and see the great work that they do. Certainly, they are a great service provider for us in Nova Scotia. What I will remind the member across the aisle is there have been significant investments made in this budget. Everyone knows that this was a health care budget, and when we have good health care in Nova Scotia, everyone benefits (Interruptions) even our most vulnerable.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The honourable Minister of Community Services has the floor.

KARLA MACFARLANE: Even our most vulnerable. I can start listing the investments that we made. We can start with the Child Tax Credit. Twice we made investments - \$600 a year, right?

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Fairview-Clayton Park.

EECD: CHILD FOOD SECURITY - COMMIT

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: All of us should know that a healthy population stems from food security, from health. So, instead of chasing tails and trying to fix an already broken system, being preventive and looking at some of these issues is all towards the betterment of health care as well.

Mr. Speaker, we've continued to ask along these lines. We've continued to ask the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development to commit to the implementation of a full universal lunch program for students in Nova Scotia. There should be no circumstances in which a child goes hungry.

Now we've seen that the government believes that money is no object on an issue like health care. I'd like to ask the minister: Will she commit to the handling of food security of our children with the same intensity?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: I will say at the outset that the member opposite and I are in complete agreement that no child should go hungry in school and I can assure the member opposite that no child does go hungry in school.

In Nova Scotia we understand the importance of having access to fresh, healthy, nutritious food in schools and we have excellent programming in place for that. We have a nationally appreciated and recognized breakfast program. We also are piloting lunch programs. We've introduced salad programs in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture. We have worked this year to increase access to fresh fruits in schools as well, and we are continuing our work to expand access to food in schools.

I can assure the member opposite that right now any child who needs food in schools gets food.

PATRICIA ARAB: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the teachers who are actually putting food in students' mouths to make sure that they don't go hungry.

I also would ask for a commitment today from the minister to not just rely on the handouts from the federal government or on programs from the federal government or pilot programs or any piecemeal. This is something that addresses the number one issue that has been a priority of this government, which is health care, and is a way to guarantee that our kids do not go hungry, and guarantee that it's not left to the devices of parents or community or teachers in order to do this.

Can we have a commitment from the minister within this session to have a full school lunch program implemented?

BECKY DRUHAN: We were so heartened to see that in the federal minister's mandate letters school food was referenced. I personally was very disappointed not to see any introduction in the budget on the federal level for food in schools, but I have already written to my federal colleague to talk about and to encourage her and to . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development has the floor.

BECKY DRUHAN: I have already written to my colleague at the federal level to continue our discussions about the federal support for a universal school food program.

I can assure the members opposite as well that we are continuing to expand access to food in schools. I will leave on the request that the members opposite call on their federal counterparts at the Liberal federal government to support food in schools as well.

THE SPEAKER: Before we begin, I just want to say something, because I've been keeping an eye on the clock, and somebody is giving direction as to when I should get people up. I am following the clock as best I can, and that's the way it's going to continue.

The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

LSI: FOOD BANK DEMAND INCREASE - EXPLAIN

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Mr. Speaker, we've heard the government boast about the increasing population in Nova Scotia, but now we're witnessing what transpires if government isn't ready to handle that influx of people. From 2021 to 2022, Nova Scotia's population grew by less than 3 per cent. In the same time span, the demand for food banks rose by 23 per cent. I will table that.

In being ill-prepared to support the new Nova Scotians, the government is actively driving them to the food banks. My question to the minister is: Does the minister want them to go to the food bank? Should we be depending on the food bank to support people?

HON. JILL BALSER: Our department has always been very clear: We're going to be strategic in how we prepare for population growth. Today, Mr. Speaker, my department has said that we have grown to the size of Bridgewater and Sydney already this year. But we also have invested in settlement organizations. I am incredibly proud that this government is continuing to do so to make sure that when newcomers do come to Nova Scotia, they have the resources they need to be successful. I know that the Minister of Community Services is also passionate to make sure that all Nova Scotians have access to the supports that they need, and we're going to continue to do that for anyone in this province.

[2:30 p.m.]

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Mr. Speaker, whoever has come to Halifax or Nova Scotia in the last couple of years are troubled with housing. We see a lot of them at the food banks. There is no doctor for them. But let's bring some more people without preparing infrastructure and services. This is how it's happening.

I would love the minister to tell me: How many of the 137,000 people on that list who are without a doctor are recent comers to Nova Scotia?

JILL BALSER: As I mentioned, we are strategic with our population growth. We have been very clear that people are part of the solution, Mr. Speaker. We are making sure that we are attracting doctors to this province so the people coming can work in our health care system. We also know that we are modernizing the apprenticeship agency so that we can bring Nova Scotians back home to work and build the infrastructure that we need.

Mr. Speaker, I am so incredibly proud of my department, because all eyes are on immigration for the first time ever, and we are now planning for that future growth. I know that the department is capable and competent, and we are going to make sure that any person who comes to this province has what they need to be successful.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

DHW: HOSPITAL FEES - DEFEND

GARY BURRILL: My question is for the Minister of Health and Wellness. As the minister knows, there are a great many patients in our province's hospitals, often referred to as alternate level of care patients, who are waiting for long-term placement. Often, these are older people. Many of them have been in hospital for a matter of months. What people are less aware of is that that group of patients, unlike other patients in our hospitals, pay a considerable daily fee for their hospital stay; in fact, they pay the full nursing home rate, often an average of about \$1,000 a month. In other words, they're paying nursing home rates, but they're not receiving full nursing home services.

Does the minister think this is a policy that can be defended?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Certainly, those folks who are in hospital waiting for a nursing home placement are considered to be an alternate level of care, and there has been a long-standing policy in this province where, at that time, those patients are charged the fee that they would be charged when they go into long-term care because, essentially, that is the care that they are receiving. There is no undertaking at this period of time for us to review that policy.

GARY BURRILL: The contention that I'm trying to make is that it is not the level of care they're receiving. I'm thinking particularly about an area like recreation. For example, our hospital patients in Nova Scotia, unlike nursing home residents, don't even have access to TV unless they pay for it by renting a TV weekly at about \$100 a week from the hospital, and they often don't have that money because they're paying out so much in the nursing home fee. Our provincial government is taking in nearly \$5 million a year from people who are in this situation.

Does the minister think it's fair that the government is taking in \$5 million a year in fees from people in hospital waiting for long-term care who don't even get so much of the services of long-term care as being able to watch TV?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: Certainly, in the alternate level of care units that are in the hospital, I know that hospital staff do have some supports in terms of recreation. I think what the member really speaks to is the necessity for us to have transition to care units across this province so that we can create environments where folks are cared for with the correct skill mix, and we do have a variety of different individuals to look after them. This is a pre-existing policy. We certainly recognize that the hospital is not the best place to be for people who are awaiting long-term care. We want to make sure that these transitions to community facilities will support our seniors.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

DCS: FOOD-INSECURE ADULTS - HELP

BRAEDON CLARK: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Community Services.

The previously mentioned report from Feed Nova Scotia that I tabled during my previous question tells us that half of adults - 50 per cent of adults - who are food-insecure are being forced to choose between eating and filling their prescriptions.

For a government that claims to be so focused on health care, they're missing an essential piece of the puzzle, which is that food and health are linked. To ignore one at the expense of the other is to miss the point entirely.

I would ask the minister: When will this government take action to ensure that our most vulnerable Nova Scotians, who are bearing the biggest brunt of the burden during this crisis, actually get some help?

HON. KARLA MACFARLANE: This government is making sincere, thoughtful, and caring investments in all Nova Scotians. That is including our most vulnerable.

I would like just to mention to the member that through many incentives we are providing for those who are vulnerable. They need all kinds of different resources. They need food, they need help with their heating. They may need clinical support or skills to get back into the workforce.

This government has made investments in all of those to ensure that we're reaching everyone and helping when they need help. We will continue making sure that we're there to help them.

BRAEDON CLARK: I agree with the minister that vulnerable Nova Scotians need a wide range of supports and resources to manage, but the most important resource they need is money to pay for their life and to live in a reasonable, dignified, and comfortable manner.

I realize now that we've been through two years where, halfway through this government, we have seen absolutely no action on the important issue of income assistance rates. I would ask the minister: For the thousands and thousands of Nova Scotians who rely on this to get through every single day, will this government offer some support at some point before the next election?

KARLA MACFARLANE: What we do know, Mr. Speaker, is that the Liberal carbon tax isn't going to help. (Interruptions)

THE SPEAKER: Order. Order, please. Order, please.

The honourable Minister of Community Services has the floor.

KARLA MACFARLANE: What we do know is that Nova Scotians know that this government is caring. It is in the budget. If you look closely enough, you will see that there are targeted incentives. We have rent supplements and homeowner repair programs, \$45 million; disability support programs, \$23 million; youth and complex needs, \$13 million; support for homeless and supporting housing, \$8.2 million.

We know that all Nova Scotians want to live a dignified life. I will make sure I can do everything possible to help them. This government will be behind me on that.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

DAE: FOOD BANK CAPACITY - INCREASE

FRED TILLEY: Mr. Speaker, post-secondary students are struggling because of the lack of action by this government. Just last week, the president of the Cape Breton University Students' Union told media on campus that the food bank cannot keep up with the demand. I'll table that. Half of the students requesting help at that food bank are turned away every day. I'll ask the Minister of Advanced Education: When will this government take steps to increase the capacity of on-campus food banks?

HON. BRIAN WONG: There's no doubt that students are at the forefront of everything that we do at the Department of Advanced Education. We look at student affordability. We look at student housing. We look at access to food, access to food banks. What we're looking at, Mr. Speaker, and we have upcoming soon, is our student housing strategy, which encompasses all of those things in order to look at student affordability to ensure that every Nova Scotia student who wants an education, or international student who comes to our province for an education, has access to that education. With our student housing strategy, we are looking at short-, medium-, and long-term solutions.

FRED TILLEY: Mr. Speaker, looking at, looking at, looking at, studying, environmental scans, national scans, provincial scans don't put food in the bellies of students.

There are many issues facing students. Housing is one of them. This government has a great opportunity to fund the CBU development at Ashby, which would put a lot of students out of their cars and into homes.

My question is: When can the CBU and other university college food banks expect immediate help from this government?

BRIAN WONG: With \$14.2 billion, there's lots of money there for everybody. Cape Breton University has been the recipient of a lot of international students. We've invested \$5 million into the Tartan Downs project to ensure that students are going to have a place in that mixed-use housing project.

We've also heard from Cape Breton University, which has certainly stepped up. They have a building that they're converting to student housing units that will open up housing units to the market as well. In addition to that, there is private . . .

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

SLTC: ACUTE CARE PATIENTS - MOVE

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: My question is for the Minister of Seniors and Long-term Care. One of the most frustrating aspects of acute care medicine is the fact

that there are very rarely enough beds for the acutely ill patients who are finding themselves in our emergency departments. It's causing a cascading effect of overcrowding in our emergency departments and offloading delays by our paramedics.

It's very frustrating for our health care workers, knowing that there are empty beds often - at least in our area - in the residential care facilities and in our long-term care facilities. In fact, recently I wrote to the minister and got a response - thank you - that there were 46 actual empty beds in Cumberland County alone.

Can the minister share with us what she is doing with continuing care to try to get people moved from the acute care hospitals into these empty beds?

HON. BARBARA ADAMS: One of the things that is a little hard for some people to understand is matching of needs between what needs to happen for someone to be appropriate for residential care. This means that if there was a fire alarm pulled, they have to be able to get up and walk out the door, down the stairs, and outside. That's a very different level of care, and matching the needs of those Nova Scotians is different than the level of frailty to get into long-term care.

What I can assure the member of is that we are aware of every single bed in the province. All of our beds are open. We have zero closed beds in the Province of Nova Scotia. Some of the residential care beds that are closed - we are actively working with all of those providers to ensure that they are . . .

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: The day that I wrote the minister, there were several empty long-term care beds, as well as residential care beds. I can certainly share the proof of that, if the minister would like.

Next door, in neighbouring New Brunswick, they actually don't pay for empty beds. If the bed is empty more than five days, the government doesn't pay. I'm wondering if the minister can tell us today if she is willing to take those same actions here in Nova Scotia.

BARBARA ADAMS: We've had an opportunity to discuss this many times. Our nursing homes are not paid if their beds are not open for those beds.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour.

DCS: FOOD INSECURITY - ACKNOWLEDGE

HON. TONY INCE: It's a different day, but the story remains the same: the government letting down the people of Nova Scotia and leaving the most vulnerable behind. In their response to the budget, Feed Nova Scotia highlighted that it doesn't once

mention food security, and it certainly doesn't meaningfully address the underlying factors of food insecurity, such as income poverty, high cost of living, and unaffordable housing.

[2:45 p.m.]

It isn't just us who are saying this. It's the people of the province who are noticing that they are being ignored by this government.

Mr. Speaker, seeing that things are so blatantly obvious as to how to fix food insecurity, why has the government ignored it?

HON. KARLA MACFARLANE: We know that putting more money in the hands of low-income families is the most immediate way to help reduce the challenges and experiences of poverty. That is why this government has added an additional \$2.5 million in funding to the Nova Scotia Child Tax Benefit.

This is why we continue to make investments in our food banks. Again, I will say if you know a food bank or a non-profit organization or a school, or a person, please, please come to me. I will make sure that no one goes hungry. In fact, last year . . .

TONY INCE: The government is smashing records of those that came before it. Feed Nova Scotia stated in their response that in February, they recorded the highest - 1,278 daily average visits to food banks. That's a new record by any wide margin. This makes it all the more remarkable that the government has ignored this issue. Food insecurity impacts the economy, health care system and our schools.

Will the government acknowledge that the sole focus on health care is coming at the expense of other pressing matters like food insecurity.

KARLA MACFARLANE: Absolutely not. When we have good health care - and we didn't shy away from telling everyone that this was going to be a health care budget. When we have everyone being looked after in health care, that looks after all Nova Scotians.

I want to reiterate here, if you know someone who needs food, call me. You all have my number. I'm serious. There has not been one organization that has come to DCS looking for help that has been denied. I want to make it clear to Nova Scotians, they will not be denied. If you need help to provide food at a non-profit organization, or Feed Nova Scotia, we will be there for you.

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

DCS: FOOD INSECURITY - ADDRESS

HON. BEN JESSOME: Mr. Speaker, where is the dignity in having to beg for food? How can people be confident when the minister says, just call me if you're going hungry? Where is the systemic approach that we've been asking for from this minister and this government? We've been calling for an increased income assistance so that people have the predictability and confidence to go out there and buy the food that they deserve. When will this government step up and address food insecurity in a meaningful way?

KARLA MACFARLANE: This government has made investments. I'm sorry that the Opposition didn't make investments in food security. We have introduced different packages in our 18 months - whether it be HARP, whether it be the increase in the Seniors Care Grant, whether it's been the Child Tax Benefit, whether it's been millions of dollars to Feed Nova Scotia. We will keep making those investments.

We know Nova Scotians are finding it hard. We realize that lots of these challenges are forces out of our control, but we remain to be there. Again, we have to work collectively together to protect our vulnerable. I ask you to come to me if you need help.

BEN JESSOME: I know that the minister does want to tackle these issues. I genuinely believe that it's important to her, but this whack-a-mole game of funding targeted places in different places makes it hard to chase. It doesn't give Nova Scotians the confidence that they require in their household budgets. We need something targeted like an increase to income assistance that is tied to the rising cost of inflation.

When will this government stop pointing fingers at the feds, look in the mirror and make these changes that need to be made?

KARLA MACFARLANE: I don't think we're pointing fingers at the federal government. I think Nova Scotians are pointing fingers at the federal government for the carbon tax - and shame on you guys. (Interruptions)

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The honourable Minister of Community Services has the floor.

The honourable Minister of Community Services.

KARLA MACFARLANE: Mr. Speaker, it's been clear - it's been visible that the provincial budget and provincial investments made by this government have done a heck of a lot more than what the federal government has done to help vulnerable Nova Scotians. We will continue to be here for vulnerable Nova Scotians.

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

OPPOSITION MEMBERS' BUSINESS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Deputy House Leader of the Official Opposition.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: Mr. Speaker, would you please call the order of business, Public Bills for Second Reading.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BILLS FOR SECOND READING

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Deputy House Leader of the Official Opposition.

PATRICIA ARAB: Mr. Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 278.

Bill No. 278 - Non-disclosure Agreement Prohibition Act.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Mr. Speaker, this morning a business coach named Debbie Lawrence put this on her business social media page, a quote by Regina King:

“Uncomfortable conversations are where solutions live. Uncomfortable conversations typically mean they’re also very important to you and the stakes are high. This, in turn, triggers heightened emotion so the feeling that there’s a lot on the line becomes real. It’s also why we absolutely need to have the conversation because, without that, there’s less possibility for a solution to be discovered . . .”

I will table that.

The conversations around the use of non-disclosure agreements, and especially involving sexual assault, are uncomfortable. They are uncomfortable for me, and they are uncomfortable for others. However, without these conversations, the harm that comes from silencing victims will continue, and that is simply wrong.

The intention of this bill that I presented to you yesterday, and that I am debating today, is to emphasize that change should start right here with us - in the Nova Scotia Legislature, within our political organizations, with our volunteers, and with our paid staff - with each one of us.

What is a non-disclosure agreement? It is an NDA - an agreement in contract law that certain information will remain confidential. As such, an NDA binds a person who has signed it and prevents them from discussing any information included in the contract with any non-authorized party.

Silencing people with an NDA is a form of oppression. There is a movement happening - many of you are likely aware - where victims of sexual assault are breaking their silence and are standing united, shoulder to shoulder, saying you cannot buy silence, you should not be able to buy silence. This means that no one should be able to buy their way out of being accountable to criminal activity, namely sexual assault, sexual violence, and sexual misconduct.

Many victims have been empowered through these movements to find their own voices. They are vocalizing that bullies, perpetrators, and persons involved in actions that harm others should not have power over them. There is a Me Too movement - a social movement against sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and rape culture in which people publicize their experiences of sexual abuse or sexual harassment. It was first started by Tarana Burke in 2006.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. I just wonder - to make it all legal, I'll ask the member to move second reading of the bill. That's my fault, not yours. I'll ask the member to move second reading and then she can continue.

The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Mr. Speaker, I move second reading of this bill.

THE SPEAKER: Thank you.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I can continue?

THE SPEAKER: Yes.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Thank you. There is also another movement called Time's Up movement. It was born when women said enough is enough - enough to sexual favours in exchange for work, enough to being paid less than we deserve, enough to feeling unsafe and disempowered where we were. Time's Up insists upon a world where work is safe, fair, and dignified for women of all kinds. Founded by more than 300 women in entertainment, there is a legal defence fund to help survivors of sexual harassment and retaliation, especially low-income women and people of colour. They have over 700 attorneys in the network taking on cases, and Ashley Judd is quoted: "The changes we are witnessing are being driven up by . . . a mighty chorus that is finally saying, 'Time's up.'"

Then we have the Can't Buy My Silence movement. The goal of this campaign is to stop the misuse of non-disclosure agreements so that they are only used for the purpose for which they were created, the protection of IP and trade secrets. They are determined to outlaw NDAs when used to buy the silence of victims in order to protect sexual predators, bullies, racists, and abusers. The co-founders are Zelda Perkins and Julie Macfarlane.

Mx. Speaker, I would like to share with you a little bit about Julie. She is a Canadian law professor, a member of the Order of Canada. She spoke out after a colleague, terminated following investigation for harassment and other misconduct, was protected by an NDA that had been negotiated before his departure from the University of Windsor and that he was able to move to another law school which knew nothing about his history.

Zelda was the first woman to break an NDA in 2017 and has been campaigning for change ever since. She brought systemic abuse of NDAs to the attention of the British government and the international press, giving evidence at a parliamentary inquiry which has uncovered an epidemic of misuse and pushing England and Wales solicitors regularly to take disciplinary action against the lawyer who created her NDA for Harvey Weinstein. Her NDA was with Harvey Weinstein, and most of us know what happened since.

Personally, I know of perpetrators who continue to harm people through sexual assault, who have continued to harm more victims after signing NDAs with women who tried to expose them. It infuriates me knowing that there are people in the area where I live who are continuing to victimize and harm many times young women, people with low self-esteem, meek and mild personalities. They're taking advantage of them, and our legal system, the laws that we have responsibility for here in this Legislature, are allowing that, Mx. Speaker - allowing that to continue.

Because of the shame that comes from the abuse and the protection of these perpetrators, sometimes when people you would never suspect, they continue to cause more harm and hurt more people.

Legislatures and political parties are no strangers to this. That is why Equal Voice was inspired to present a paper, which I tabled yesterday and will again today with this speech, called *Combating Sexual Harassment in Canada's Legislative Assemblies*. Equal Voice distributed an anonymous survey to elected officials, political staff, and non-partisan employees. They received 257 responses. Based on the responses, they have a number of key findings and associated recommendations. I'm going to highlight some of those recommendations today here for us to think about.

Before I do that, I want to make mention of a former employee that I had whom I have spoken about here in the House, and whom I had the pleasure of working with for a number of months. Kait actually reviewed this document for Equal Voice and provided feedback. I still have the document which she made her comments on. I want to share today some of the comments that she highlighted in this Equal Voice document. For me, it gives more power because it's giving her a voice here in this Legislature.

Some of the things that Kait highlighted were: Certain risks can increase the likelihood of sexual harassment in Canada's Legislative Assemblies, including inadequate gender and other forms of representation; the limited representation of women in Canada's Legislative Assemblies can mean women have restricted influence over the modernization

of anti-harassment policies, although there are exceptions to this where sometimes female leaders do introduce NDAs.

[3:00 p.m.]

Precarious working conditions, political staffers often have very little job security. They feel vulnerable to Chiefs of Staff and to the election cycle. Excessive alcohol consumption was highlighted. These realities are concerning because alcohol can be a contributing factor to sexual violence which can include harassment. This is one thing that Kait highlighted: A survivor-victim is never at fault for this behaviour and Kait wrote, “In theory, not practice.”

There is a hierarchal culture in politics linked to harassment. For example, the 2015 External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces, known as the Deschamps Report, notes that,

“The focus on obedience and conformity within the chain of command and the overall social and organizational hierarchy within the Canadian Armed Forces may therefore lead some junior (more likely female) members to feel that they have little choice but to go along with the sexual advances of more senior (more likely male) members.” Kait put five asterisks beside that quote.

I’m going to read it again: The focus on obedience and conformity within the chain of command and the overall social and organizational hierarchy may lead some junior members to feel that they have little choice but to go along with the sexual advances of more senior members.

That is a sobering comment. Many people who are victims have been put in that situation and that’s how they feel.

Many research participants felt that addressing an experience of sexual harassment in the Legislative Assembly would have ramifications on their career or mental health. One responded, and Kait highlighted this: I didn’t want to risk my job or take on the added stress and emotional weight of having to prove that it happened.

Policies can also provide a level of legitimacy to workplaces’ efforts to combine sexual harassment even though they may not actually effectively prevent, mitigate, or address behaviours they target. They can allow “public officials to proclaim a positive, feminist outcome” when in reality, very little has been done to help deal with the problem of violence against women in politics.

Mx. Speaker, this bill is personal. My employee was coerced into signing an NDA with the Progressive Conservative caucus. I introduced this bill yesterday to honour her.

Her parents were here for that very reason: because they want to see her honoured.
(Applause)

I will table a copy of this NDA. I'm going to highlight one of the things that this NDA says. It is between Kaitlin Saxton and the Progressive Conservative caucus. It says if she were to break this, it would be "harmful to her, both personally and legally."

Kait was not given a chance to receive the support that she deserved as a victim and that she needed. When she spoke to me of this, she used the words "under the veil of darkness" she was coerced to sign an NDA.

She was not given the opportunity to have a lawyer by her side. Her parents drove her. I think the one thing that would help them, as a family, to heal is if the Progressive Conservative caucus would publicly apologize to them for the way that their daughter was treated.

She went home after that. For three years, she did not work and then came to work for me as an Independent. I saw her confidence grow. I saw the light in her start to shine again. The light that was taken away from her when an NDA took away her voice and silenced her as a victim. It's not right. It's time for a change.

I want to note that the Leader and the chief of staff were both female.

After Kait passed away, I found this copy of the NDA between her and the PC caucus in my office. I want to make note for the caucus that's listening that the NDA was between her and the caucus. Now I was a member of that caucus when that happened. I had no idea that I was implicated in an NDA. No idea. It's something that every MLA should question. What is your Leader implicating you in, unbeknownst to yourself? Is your Leader signing documents and implicating the entire caucus?

We know that political parties are not alone in using NDAs. Our very own Human Rights Commission are using NDAs right now, but it's time to stop. It's time to stop, and I'm asking you all here today to start right here in our very own Legislature and do what is right.

The real power does not lie within a position or a title. The real power, Mx. Speaker, lies within the truth, and today it is time to shine a light on the truth and expose what non-disclosure agreements do, and that is nothing but silence victims of sexual assault.

THE SPEAKER: Just to clarify, I think that, actually, we'll go with NDP-PC-Liberal.

There has been a request for a two-minute recess.

Is it agreed?

I hear several Noes.

The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

HON. KELLY REGAN: I don't think it's any secret that political parties continue to be dominated by men. All we have to do is look around this room. We know we've never had a woman premier. We've never had a woman full Speaker.

Let me just be clear: I love men. I really do. But their experience is different than ours. Part of the effect of having men in major leadership positions, as this report, which I believe my colleague tabled again today - it does note that one of the reasons we continue to have this issue of sexual harassment, sexual assault, NDAs, et cetera, is that it does benefit the power structure. It benefits men. It does not benefit women and gender-diverse persons, who are primarily - but not always - the victims, the survivors of this kind of behaviour.

This report notes a number of different aspects that my colleague has referred to: inadequate gender and other forms of representation, excessive alcohol consumption, precarious working conditions. You have a 10-month contract. You need to be available almost 24/7. It's a hierarchical culture. We have leaders and we have whips and chairs, and within caucuses, there is a pecking order, most often dominated by men.

There's increasing consensus from legal experts that there is no place for the use of NDAs in a just society. This is our little microcosm of our society here. We're here to represent our society, and we're probably not as diverse as our society is, but we have been making some steps toward it. We definitely see more women in the House than when I was first elected. I was first elected the same year as the member for Halifax Chebucto, and I think we're the only survivors from that election, although there were a couple of members on the government side who were there and then not there after that election, then came back later. I think we're the only survivors from that particular election. The leader for our party followed the year after.

We're a microcosm of our society out there, and what happens in here is reflective of what's happening out there. If we are in fact concerned about a just society, that we are looking after those who are vulnerable - and let's be clear, when you're young, you're vulnerable. You haven't dealt with, thank God, some of the things you're going to have to deal with in your life. You haven't faced some of the things. The first time I went out with a group of colleagues and one of them hit on me, it never occurred to me that they would do that. I'm not talking about here, just to be clear.

I remember being just so shocked that someone would think that was an appropriate thing to do, given that I was married. I couldn't imagine why anybody would think that was

appropriate. As a woman, you learn to do things. You learn not to go out, be the lone woman in a group. You learn to leave before there's too much alcohol consumed. You don't walk down a dark street. There's a whole lot of things we internalize as we're going along. We shouldn't have to internalize it. We should just say to men, don't do this, but that's not what happens. We learn to protect ourselves.

When something happens, and a survivor is further victimized by being told, requested, asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement, they're twice victimized. Sometimes three and four times, because it could be somebody whom they trust who's asking them to sign an NDA. They could be denied the right to legal counsel during that. They may lose their job afterwards. They can be victimized over and over again as a result of that, and that's probably why the Canadian Bar Association voted overwhelmingly to reject their use as a profession.

The U.S. passed the Speak Out Act back in December as part of many initiatives on a federal level to promote equality and to stop gender-based violence and discrimination. The law is really straightforward. It allows you to speak out about harassment and sexual coercion, notwithstanding any NDAs signed with a former employer. New Jersey has a law like this. They brought it in in 2022 - New Jersey. Think of it, folks. If New Jersey can do this, good God, we can do this.

As the Equal Voice report on sexual harassment points out, which my colleague has already tabled:

“Sexual harassment is a real and persistent problem in Canada’s provincial and territorial legislatures. In the last year, there have been media reports of sexual harassment in multiple Legislative Assemblies. These reports and others show that sexual harassment impacts a wide range of individuals working in provincial and territorial legislatures, namely elected officials, political staff, and nonpartisan employees. It is also well-known that sexual harassment regularly goes under-reported in workplaces.”

In Nova Scotia, we have the Nova Scotia House of Assembly Policy on the Prevention and Resolution of Harassment in the Workplace. However, this policy does not prevent the use of NDAs in a political party. This bill would prevent those who experience assault or harassment from predominantly powerful men who utilize NDAs to prevent women from speaking out.

Both Opposition parties - although I never want to speak for my colleagues - and our independent member are on the same page. We need to prohibit NDAs from being used in cases of sexual harassment in this province. At the very least it should be in political parties. We could lead the way here. If the government needs to do a jurisdictional scan that

lasts for a year, we could at least just do it here in the House, and then they could do their jurisdictional scan that will take, you know, five minutes. Google it.

[3:15 p.m.]

HON. BARBARA ADAMS: Wow.

KELLY REGAN: Well, not wow. The Minister of Seniors and Long-term Care said “wow,” but really, honestly, it doesn’t take that long.

THE SPEAKER: Order. Please don’t refer to the presence of a member or not in the House.

The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

KELLY REGAN: So when a member interjects, and I want to point out that the member has said something, that is referring to them being in the House? I’ve heard of a rule about a member not being in the House. But the fact that a member has said something in response to what I said is not a rule that I’m aware of - unless we’re now making up new rules here in this House. If I had said that the member wasn’t here to respond, that’s a rule. This is a new rule.

THE SPEAKER: I’m sorry that you weren’t aware, but it is true that you are not allowed to refer to the presence or absence of a particular member. I think I have heard speakers, throughout my time in the House, be able to sort of allude to what’s going on in the House in a way that doesn’t point out the specific activity of an individual that would denote that they’re there at one point or another.

Would you like to continue speaking to the bill?

KELLY REGAN: So a member opposite decided to say “wow.”

THE SPEAKER: Okay.

KELLY REGAN: May I say that?

THE SPEAKER: The clock is on. Would you like to continue speaking to the bill or do you want to talk about this particular rule?

KELLY REGAN: I am speaking about the bill and the government’s response to what we are saying on this side.

I don’t want to be difficult for the Speaker. I understand that it’s a difficult job. But if we have people interjecting across the way, are we to pretend that it doesn’t happen? I

mean, I've been here since 2009, and I know you can't say that somebody isn't here. But to say that someone interjected and said a thing, is that . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order. I think in that case, if there's substantial disruption in the House, then yes, it is up to the person in the Chair to call order. There are ways in which you can get your point across that align with the rules.

The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

KELLY REGAN: While I do not want to speak for my colleagues, I think it's probably fair to acknowledge that the Opposition parties and our independent member are on the same page. We need to prohibit NDAs from being used in cases of sexual harassment in the province, and at the very least, in political parties.

The minister has said that this is not a priority for this government, and this Progressive Conservative government uses the excuse of a jurisdictional scan, without timelines or commitments, which is what I was speaking to. It doesn't take that long to do a jurisdictional scan. It could have been done by - this is not the first time this issue has been raised. We have discussed this before in this House, and if a government is actually moved to do something about an issue, they can do it really quickly. They can have staff on the phone to every jurisdiction in this country and have an answer back by the end of the day. But the fact that they are using the excuse of a jurisdictional scan, which could have been completed within a day of this first being raised a year ago, tells us that it's not a priority.

Other jurisdictions have done this, in the U.K. and Ireland, our neighbours in P.E.I., where the bill came from the Opposition and received support from their Progressive Conservative counterparts.

What I will say is we have heard a very powerful example of what happens when a young staffer is in a situation and asked to sign an NDA, and we know what the fallout was from that. This young person lost their job. They spent three years in the darkness - no job, no nothing.

I would think we would want to ensure that the young people we work with on a daily basis, the young women, the young men, the young gender-fluid persons we work with on a daily basis, I would think we would want to protect them. I would think we would want to make sure that they are treated fairly, that they are not constrained from speaking out about their abuse. To me it's kind of a no-brainer, but then again a lot of things come before us that I think are no-brainers and nothing happens with them.

With that I will just urge my colleagues on the other side to examine their conscience, ask what they would like for their children, how would they like their children treated in the workplace and act accordingly.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: As with many of the things we discuss in this Chamber today things have taken a turn for the real. We've heard a lot of abstraction these days I would say in Question Period and in debates in the Chamber, statistics and numbers and I think actually today is really helpful to remind us that we are talking about human beings, and we are talking about their trauma, and we are talking about how we can make that easier.

I think we can't lose sight of that, so when we talk about doing our due diligence, jurisdictional scans, all things that have come up, what we're actually talking about is delaying acting to stop the trauma that is being inflicted upon women in particular all the time. I want that to form the context for my comments today.

Just to kind of zoom back out for a moment, I think it's worth noting, having been in this Chamber for some time, that our Premier built his brand on transparency, quite literally. I have sat somewhere around this seat for probably longer than I would have liked to and while I have been here I had the opportunity to watch the Premier, as an Opposition member and then as an Opposition Leader and then as a candidate, talk about the need for transparency, talk about order-making powers for the Information and Privacy Commissioner. He sued the government over a \$1 million management contract, the same person who has spent \$1.4 billion in appropriations that have no oversight, but I digress.

We were talking about what is the opposite of transparency - opacity, this was the word that we came up with. It's kind of a mouthful - thank you, very astute thesaurus over here. What's another word for opacity? Secrecy is the opposite of transparency.

I think what we have seen, and I am leading up here, since this government has taken office is, given the context, a shocking commitment to secrecy. We've seen task forces that operate with no transparency. Nobody knows what happens or when it happens or who is there or what decisions get made. We've seen independent and public boards fired. We have seen partisans hired. We have seen arm's-length bodies that make transparent decisions systematically eliminated from the workings of government.

What we are hearing from the government around the use of NDAs is not surprising; it is part of a pattern. The pattern that this government has established is that it is easier, it is more expedient to operate in the dark.

I should say they are not wrong. It is easier, of course it's easier, it's much easier to do things when you are not subject to criticism all the time, when you are not tied up with pesky people and their opinions, and other orders of government, and what they might think about something. It's much easier, and it's easier to go faster. Of course, it's easier to go faster, but it's not democratic.

I think that what we're talking about today in the Chamber really brings us back to what we mean, why we talk about transparency, because as my colleague has often said, transparency is a bit of a technocratic term, we discuss this and lots of people in the public might tune out transparency, blah, blah, blah - am I getting what I need?

Today this topic reminds us of why transparency is important - because terrible things can happen in the dark. Those terrible things could be a bad development deal, they could be a waste of government money, or they could be the ruination of someone's life. Therefore, we tend to, in parliamentary democracy, adopt as a tenet, that transparency is better than secrecy. We've agreed on that generally, and yet we are not seeing that from this government.

Today and yesterday, as we talk about the inaction on legislating the misuse of non-disclosure agreements, we see the outer limit of how bad that is. Again I want to remind people that non-disclosure agreements were developed for trade secrets. They are now routinely used to cover up incidents of sometimes criminal wrongdoing, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, abuse. They are used all the time, so by definition, every day that this government chooses not to legislate, chooses to be behind the times, more people are being abused, more people are being violated, and more people are being doubly traumatized by then being unable to speak about it. For that the government should be truly ashamed.

My colleagues have gone through, at length, the jurisdictions that have legislated this. Our legislation - I know we are talking about my colleagues' legislation, and I will get to that - we introduced legislation in April 2022 and our legislation is model legislation. It was developed by Dr. Julie Macfarlane from the Can't Buy My Silence campaign, who was referenced earlier, who herself left her distinguished law professor position in disgust when she was going to be forced to sign something.

This is model legislation. It has been enforced in P.E.I. for quite some time. There are 17 states - even New Jersey, as my colleague said; Ireland. Almost every time where there has been action on this, it has come as a result of public outcry when abuse is discovered.

In Prince Edward Island, there were terrible things happening at the University of Prince Edward Island and they were protected by non-disclosure agreements, and people knew about them. When that hit the wires, so to speak, there was public appetite to do something about it, because they could see - it was transparent, it was in the light of day, they could see how egregious the behaviour was. In Ireland, it was about the homes for children who had been taken away from their mothers, when unwed mothers went - and they were all forced to sign non-disclosure agreements, and terrible things happened. When the Irish public discovered that, they were so disgusted that they said to their Parliament: Somebody should do something about this.

[3:30 p.m.]

We thought Hockey Canada was going to be it here. We thought Hockey Canada would be it. When it was discovered that the money that the government gives to Hockey Canada was being used to pay settlements for the wrongdoing of coaches to vulnerable players over years and years, that protected those coaches and that ruined the lives of so many of those players, we thought that would be it. Not yet. When the 2022 World Junior Hockey Championship came here, we thought: This is our moment. Surely the government will act, but they haven't.

My colleague introduced a bill today that deals with this specifically when it comes to political parties. We do things in this House in roughly the same way we did them about 200 years ago, but 200 years ago, there were no women here. Two hundred years ago, women couldn't elect the people who sat here, but, surely, 200 years ago, women experienced the same abuse, the same secrecy, the same silencing that they experience today, but now we can change that. Times have changed. It's been 200 years. We are more than able to do something about it.

To conclude, I want to put a very fine point on what is happening here. This government has the opportunity to quite literally do the right thing. It is simply not true that the delay is a jurisdictional scan. We filed a Freedom of Information request that showed that non-disclosure agreement legislation is not in the government's Legislative plan for 2023 to 2025. It is not there. The Minister of Justice has said it's not a priority, the documents that we discovered show that it's not a priority, and we have yet to hear a single compelling argument about why. Or the truth. The truth may or may not be compelling, but we haven't heard anything.

There have been some serious accusations levelled in the Chamber today. I don't have a comment on those other than to say with or without these allegations, the only appropriate course of action for this government is to pass legislation immediately banning the misuse of non-disclosure agreements. Anything else is something that surely every member of the government will have to live with and explain for the rest of their lives.

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

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Thank you, Mx. Speaker. It's nice to see you in this room instead of across the road.

I asked to speak on this bill because I know this bill personally. I'm not going to go into details, but in some cases - and I know how some people seem to feel that it protects the abuser, but in some cases, it does protect the victim, and I think we lose sight of this.

As a woman in politics, I take this very seriously. I'm here to help all my constituents, and this is including women and men who have faced harassment or abuse.

This is why I want to make sure we complete the research and get it right. I understand that the role of Opposition is to push us to act faster. I respect that. Our job is to do the research and get it right. I hope that members across the floor respect that as well.

Taking our time does not mean that we don't care. It's actually the opposite. We do care. Again, we want to make sure it's right. Doing it right is paramount. This is why the Department of Justice is reviewing the experience with non-disclosure agreements across Canada and all of North America.

You'll have to excuse me because I wrote this today. I committed to speaking on this this morning. I heard members opposite state that P.E.I. has been doing this for years. In all reality, currently P.E.I. is the only jurisdiction in Canada that has enacted legislation limiting the use of non-disclosure agreements broadly. Prince Edward Island's Act came into effect May 2022. It hasn't been going on forever in P.E.I. I just want to make that statement.

I'd hope that my colleagues across the floor, in regard to my earlier statement that we are reviewing across Canada and North America, would support a thorough research of this multi-faceted issue. We owe it to the victims to not be rushed.

I don't think that this is appropriate to be hissing and booing from over in the corner. I'm just saying.

I know that you can find a lot of information on the internet. I know you can, but it does not replace the responsibility and the importance of government being thorough with our research. We actually owe it to the victims to be thorough. We actually owe it to the victims to take our time and look at what is actually going on with this.

I notice here today that a lot of blame is being put on the NDAs and not on the actual crime. I also notice here that it's also put on women. It's also men who sometimes feel the pain of that tragic event.

A little history: I thought I'd throw this in for anyone watching. Non-disclosure agreements were originally designed for commercial purposes. The member opposite was correct. They were mostly for protection of trade secrets. We don't really know what else they are used for because of their very nature.

For example, they're often used as a settlement tool for civil matters. I know that this is specific, but the reality is that there are about five basic things to an NDA: participants to the agreement: definition of confidentiality, information, exclusion of confidentiality, time period, and appropriate use of information. There are a lot of different things used in an NDA.

We have heard from the Opposition, and we have heard from people who say they are being used inappropriately in harassment cases. We are listening; we truly are listening. This is a government that cares. Just as one member standing here, I feel the need to get this right. Again, I apologize for being emotional. I do understand the need for these, and I do understand the complexities of these, and I do understand how they can be used. To just throw one bill at us and expect us to make a decision within a few days and dredging whatever is dredged into it is a little unfair to Nova Scotia. It's a little unfair to everybody sitting in this room who's not actually sitting and not looking at all variables.

I'm going to try to suck it up and get back my composure because we need to state some facts here. I do feel the need to state this. You are not forced to sign a non-disclosure agreement. Can you be bullied? Can you be harassed? Yes. But anyone going through this situation - sorry, I have a couple of members over here crying. I think women and men need to realize how strong they truly are. It's terrible. It's tragic to go through any of those things. It really is. But you are not forced. As a matter of fact, Mx. Speaker, the fact that you're still standing there after something like that happens shows how strong you truly are. (Applause) I'm sorry; I'm mushy.

I also want to say a few other things. There is a big difference between correcting wrongs from the past and removing the confidentiality option. In some cases, this NDA protects victims. (Interruption) You can hiss all you want to, but I know it does. We all know truly voluntary NDAs can be critical to victims receiving compensation and closure to a horrible, horrible experience in some cases. In some cases, NDAs provide autonomy and protection after a very traumatic assault. A non-disclosure agreement is designed to create a confidential relationship where two parties agree to share certain information. It's not intended to harass or bully. I'm not saying that it doesn't, but I am saying the basis of an NDA.

I have to say over here - I'm getting back into action here - we agree that non-disclosure agreements should not be used as a means to silence victims; we agree with that. There are no ifs, ands, or buts. Again, this is why - and I have full faith in our Minister of Justice, and of this government, and the Premier and everybody standing around here today, including the members opposite. I have full faith that the Department of Justice is doing a thorough job reviewing this.

You know, another statement - and I have to give a little props to a minister who introduced the bill, there was - and you'll probably find out, there was never anything about ATVs when I was first elected, or off-road vehicles. But here we introduced that today. So, you can FOIPOP all you want, but the reality is this government is constantly doing things to try to make the province better for the people that live here.

Our priority in the justice system is to support survivors of sexual harassment and discrimination with sensitivity and respect. Man or woman, it doesn't matter who you are, you deserve that respect. You deserve that sensitivity. We are looking at what other

provinces are doing. We have expanded the review to include other jurisdictions, the United States and internationally. Also, I might add, the department continues to watch what is happening with P.E.I. legislation. The only jurisdiction in the country that has enacted legislation. Sorry, I'm a little shaky.

[3:45 p.m.]

Again, I just want to state, I do, I understand the Opposition's job. I understand that it's to push us, to make us act on what they feel is a priority. And I get that. I respect it. But our job is to do it once, and to do it right. Sometimes that takes longer than - how long have we been elected - 16, 18 months? We don't want any unintended consequences, because this is multi-faceted. This is a big deal for our province. For our women, for our men, for our children, for all genders. This is a big deal.

As an MLA, and as five years as a councillor, and as a lifetime in a community, I have seen situations where I had to step up to the plate. And I get it, I do. Well, we want to do it right, Mx. Speaker. We want to make sure it's done right. We want to make sure it's done right, not in two or three days or two or three weeks during Supply. And while we're in Supply, because let's face it, the budget is big.

So, I just want to say, Mx. Speaker, my time's pretty much up . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order. The time allocated has elapsed.

The honourable member for Fairview-Clayton Park.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: I'm just going to speak really briefly on this, and I wasn't actually planning on getting up to speak to this bill, but I'm hearing the conversation in the Chamber and the debate, and I have to thank the member for Chester-St. Margaret's. It's a hard conversation. It's uncomfortable. When we come in here, we come in with all of our own history and our own stories. As caregivers to our constituents, we come in with their stories. It's highly charged.

One of the things I hate about the way that we do government is that we use terms like "opposition" and "critic" and it makes it seem like every motivation has an ulterior motive. It sets us up for an us-versus-them when, in 10 years, I promise you - I know that all 55 people in this Chamber ran for a good intention, do their best to support their constituents, and are good people. There are no perks to this job; you have to be a special kind of person to want to come in and help. You want to care about the people that you represent.

I do take issue with just a few things that were talked about. One of the things was the timeline on this. We're talking about one bill that was introduced, but this is an issue

that was actually introduced by the NDP a year ago. It's been something that the Minister of Justice has wanted to look at. I trust that he will, but there is time sensitivity.

THE SPEAKER: The time allotted for consideration of this bill has elapsed. The debate is adjourned.

The honourable Official Opposition Deputy House Leader.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: Mx. Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 268.

Bill No. 268 - Primary Care Physician Incentive Program Extension Act.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I appreciate you recognizing me. I'm going to take the next 15 minutes and talk about this very important bill.

First of all, I think there is some confusion around health care from the government's side. We did hear today in Question Period that they think if they invest in health care, then the other outcomes will happen, outcomes like food poverty, housing, and education. This flies in the face of the experts and study after study. It's the other way around. It's if you invest in food and you invest in housing and you invest in people, you will have better outcomes.

I was hoping to get to that yesterday - I know that during Estimates, we had a conversation about this - but obviously I wasn't permitted to by the minister, who allowed me only one question in an hour session. I'm going to stand here today and talk about the social determinants of health because I don't think that this government fully understands it.

When you don't give people the capacity and the money - especially the lowest-income people - to buy healthy food, they're going to have worse outcomes. I think it's shameful that the government doesn't understand that. I think it's shameful that nobody on that side is advocating for lowest-income individuals, our working class, and our middle-class individuals. The response from the government has been to just go to a food bank.

I would argue that people on that side of the aisle probably haven't been to a food bank in their entire life, so they don't know what it's like to have to go to a food bank and ask for food, which you can only get once a week.

We did get a promise from the minister today that if anyone is hungry in Nova Scotia, to give them her phone number and she will supply them with the funding for food - any individual in Nova Scotia. That's what was said, and we can play that back. So to the

thousands of people who are on income assistance, be prepared to get a mailout with the minister's phone number and email address so they can personally contact that minister, and get the support they need for food - because no Nova Scotian will go hungry under her watch. That is what was said.

The reason I bring that up is because when individuals don't have access to healthy food, to housing, to these lifesaving and life-altering resources, they end up with worse health outcomes. We know that. That's a fact. There's no denying it. It's like denying climate change. It's just a fact.

What did this government do to respond to the ever-growing crisis in health care? They removed the doctor incentive in HRM because they are - the vast majority of them - a rural caucus. They have very few members in HRM. In fact, I think it was allNovaScotia - and I can't print from allNovaScotia because they don't allow you to print from there, so maybe I'll send you the link. The reporter from allNovaScotia did a fantastic breakdown of resources from this Progressive Conservative government, and found that in most cases, over 80 per cent of their spend was going into rural and PC communities - even though 50 per cent of the population is here in HRM.

They have made it abundantly clear that HRM is not a priority for them - that it's a bother to them. The only time that HRM is even considered is when they have to come to the Legislature - even rural parts of HRM. No other capital - no other major urban core in Canada is without a doctor incentive. That is a fact. We have to compete with Toronto. We have to compete with Vancouver, Calgary in Alberta, and all these different urban cores - and we were competing with them. The first thing this government did in health care is penalize HRM for not voting for them. That's what they did - because they removed the doctor incentive.

Fact after fact after fact for the last two years have been placed in front of the Minister of Health and Wellness in Estimates, when she wants to answer questions, and throughout Question Period. Yet they deny the truth. They deny the facts.

Mx. Speaker, I'm going to read you some of those facts. I represent the Spryfield-Herring Cove-Sambro Loop. The member for Armdale represents Armdale. These members would be screaming from the high heavens if their numbers looked like this. Before they got into power, the Need a Family Practice wait-list for the Armdale-Spryfield-Herring Cove area was 768 people. In their 18 months, it has grown to 3,433 - a 400 per cent increase - not including the two doctors we just lost, which is going to leave another 3,000 people without a family doctor in our community.

Let's talk about Dartmouth, because I know they have some Dartmouth MLAs. Before this election, Dartmouth was sitting at 3,511. After they removed this incentive, it is sitting at 14,118 people they represent without a family doctor. Not a single member -

outside of the NDP from Dartmouth - has stood up to say we have a problem - and the Liberals, of course.

[4:00 p.m.]

Let's talk about West Hants - 17,006 is what it was before the incentive was removed. Can you guess what it is now - that we know of? It's 2,642 - a thousand-person increase.

How about in the minister's backyard? I've lost my train of thought - one of the ministers, I don't know. What I'm trying to say is that these numbers have exploded. This is a government that has passed two historic health care budgets. They have spent tens of billions of dollars. When we ask them in Question Period, they won't give us answers. We ask them in Estimates, they filibuster or won't give us answers.

Somebody on that side is going to stand up on their feet and defend these numbers. They'll probably blame the Liberal carbon tax, because that seems to be the go-to for everything. They are going to blame, blame, blame. Since I can't get answers from this government, I am going to leave you with some questions to ponder.

This government has said they will spend whatever it takes. Right now, they are spending 45 cents of every tax dollar on health care - and things have gotten worse. They haven't come up with a single idea of their own. They tout the building of health care facilities in Cape Breton, which they voted against. The minister in charge of health care infrastructure voted against that in Opposition. Then he put on his hard hat, grabbed his little hammer or whatever, and smiled - voted against it.

Those members voted against expansion of the QEII. You know what? They actually grilled us, I think, for over a week on the Bayers Lake outpatient centre - how it was a disaster, and it was in the wrong spot, shouldn't be built (Interruption) What was that? A whopper dropper. I don't even know what that means but that's what they called it - a whopper dropper. The minister for health care infrastructure voted against it. The Minister of Health and Wellness was not here at the time, but the Premier - at the time the Leader of the Opposition - voted against it. You can find article after article on them destroying that bill.

But they are there to cut the ribbons now. When you ask them about health care they say, look at what we did out in Bayers Lake, look at what we did over here in Cape Breton. The only major thing they've done is buy an unfinished hotel at the most expensive door price in Nova Scotia history - so they're willing to spend the money.

The Minister of Health and Wellness, the Premier, and the minister for health care infrastructure will not stand up and tell Nova Scotians how much it's going to cost them. In fact, at one point when I brought the question to the minister on this floor, one of the

ministers - the minister in charge of infrastructure - yelled over that he doesn't have to tell people. He doesn't have to tell them. He doesn't have to tell Nova Scotians what the cost is - his words.

So they have all kinds of money. They're throwing it around. We've given them very easy and factual programs that work. They worked for a long time, and they said no, we're not going to do it. Why? Well, because rural Nova Scotia was at a disadvantage.

Okay, why don't you do incentives for both? If rural Nova Scotia is at a disadvantage, give them a higher incentive, but do not take this incentive away because the numbers show 300 per cent, 400 per cent, 500 per cent, 600 per cent, 700 per cent, 800 per cent increase in people without a family doctor.

The information we're getting from that side of the House on closures like the one in the South End of Halifax runs contrary to what the doctor said. When the Minister of Health and Wellness gave an explanation on all the help they were given, the doctor came out and said, that's not what happened. Who are we to believe - a partisan politician or a doctor?

I know for a fact that for the last year, the Spryfield clinic has reached out to the Department of Health and Wellness for help. Guess what happened: Two doctors retired and 4,000 people without a doctor. One of the doctors left is married to the doctor who's retiring. How long do you think until that individual leaves?

What they say is, we'll do more for you if you do more for us. If you make us look good and you take more patients off the family doctor wait-list, we'll give you more. The doctors are saying - if people don't believe me, talk to your doctor - we are stretched thin, there's nothing left to do. We don't have the energy. We don't have the time. There's nothing more to give. We're doing everything we can. We're begging you for help. Bring people to the province. Give us the resources we need. Implement that incentive. It's like they're dangling in front of them - help us meet our political goals, and we'll give you the help you need so you can deliver health care to Nova Scotians. That is exactly what's happening here.

This is an easy win. I have to say, anyone who has even a piece of HRM in their riding, it is shameful that they have not stood up publicly and spoken for this. I heard those members speak passionately in Opposition, yet they're quiet in government.

THE SPEAKER: Could I ask the honourable member for Halifax Atlantic to formally move second reading of the bill?

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Do I get to start all over again?

THE SPEAKER: No. (Laughter)

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I would like to move second reading of Bill No. 268.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you very much, Mx. Speaker, and thank you to the Liberals for bringing this bill forward. It's clear that the removal of the incentive for Central Zone physicians has had a serious impact on the availability of doctors and primary care providers in the Central Zone. The numbers speak for themselves: 14,000 people in Dartmouth alone - the Dartmouth region or the Dartmouth part of the Central Zone - where at one point, it was much, much lower than that.

So we in the NDP are also puzzled as to why this was cancelled, especially as we have seen and heard that things are going to get worse - that more doctors are set to retire. We have been talking about doctors planning to retire in Dartmouth since we were elected. It was one of the very first things that came across my desk and the desk of my colleague, the member for Dartmouth South. There's a whole bunch of doctors who want to retire.

Instead of hearing that and planning for that - I'm not just blaming this government, by the way, because we were elected when the Liberals were in power, and they didn't really plan for it either, let's face it. Instead of planning for that and figuring out what we're going to do to keep people attached to primary care, it just wasn't really addressed. There were some recruitment efforts and some doctors were recruited for a while. I'm not really sure - actually, I know that they would have been recruited when the Liberal government was in power, and therefore, probably got the incentive. But there haven't been many doctors recruited since - as far as I can tell, as far as I know.

The primary care crisis in this province is worsening and it's extremely concerning. There are currently 61,284 people in the Central Zone who are not attached to primary care. Again, I will say that I understand that the minister understands this. There's a difference between attachment and access, but we're looking for attachment, for all of the good reasons that attachment makes sense. People need to have a primary care provider who follows them and their families.

We've seen multiple clinics in the last short while shutter with no support from the government to keep going. We know what we need to do to fix this whole thing and that's collaborative care, but there is not enough in this Budget for implementing a radical system of primary care, family health teams, and it doesn't appear that the government has a full plan about that. There is some money for primary care, we know that, we're welcoming that, but we still have yet to see how exactly this issue is going to get attacked.

Of course, the knock-on effects on all parts of the health system are truly alarming. There are ways to address the issue that the government is not pursuing. We know that the conventional private practice model does not make the best use of limited health care resources and many health care professionals have expressed a desire to work in different,

more collaborative models. We've heard this from the minister, we've heard this from the professionals themselves, and we've heard that the minister has heard them.

The conventional model means that doctors are doing work that other professionals are skilled in performing. We know that collaborative care delivers huge results. Research shows that community health centres offer significantly more comprehensive services than other primary care models, like fee-for-service practices and clinical-care-only teams.

We know that clients at community health centres report higher satisfaction across accessibility, prevention and health promotion, client and family-centredness, and chronic disease management compared to clients of other models of primary care.

We know that community health centres provide superior chronic disease management. We know that clinicians in community health centres find it easier to promote high-quality care through longer consultations and interprofessional collaboration. All of this sounds really good.

Community health centres foster environments in which community members and staff feel empowered to participate in decision-making. Collaborative care provides a triple bottom line solution: improved individual health care, improved community and population health, and more cost-effective health care and social service systems.

Collaborative health care, family health teams, equals better health and - wait for it - wellness. We saw the benefits of this model of care in the NDP-developed collaborative emergency departments that this government is shuttering and that the Liberals did not invest in. A 2014 evaluation of collaborative emergency centres found that at all CEC sites, patients had better access to primary care services. When the CEC model was implemented, there was a dramatic decrease in unplanned closures of local emergency departments and patients were far more likely to have access to the right provider at the right time, in the right place, than they did before the CEC was introduced. It sounds like a good model to me. Too bad it wasn't continued.

It was continued in other places. Across the country, the model was copied but not in Nova Scotia, unfortunately.

Despite the mountains of evidence that these models work, we know there are still not enough allied health care professionals working in collaborative care in Nova Scotia. There are not more than a few social workers, licensed practical nurses, and dietitians working in primary care, for instance.

As far as I know, there are no collaborative primary care clinics that employ paramedics, physician assistants, midwives, occupational therapists, or psychologists anywhere in the province. There is incredible potential here to make sure that we are making the best and highest use of health care professionals.

Multiple other jurisdictions have much more advanced abilities to support this style of health care delivery, such as P.E.I., Ontario, B.C., and New Brunswick. There are a range of funding models that could be used to encourage team-based care. For example, Ontario has over a dozen different alternative payment arrangements designed to encourage collaborative care delivery.

[4:15 p.m.]

The government has taken tiny steps in the right direction, but we need to take huge leaps. One example of something the government could do right now is fund the Nova Scotia Association of Community Health Centres to operate at their maximum capacity, and to treat them as full partners in primary health care delivery.

And this is why our caucus has introduced the Collaborative Care Act that would require the government to speedily appoint a task force to consult with physicians, nurses, midwives, occupational therapists, paramedics, pharmacists, physician assistants, physiotherapists, psychologists, counsellors, respiratory therapists, social workers, speech language pathologists, dentists, dental hygienists, community health centres, community health organizations, health education programs, patient advocacy groups, First Nations communities, African Nova Scotian communities, Acadian communities, and other bodies as needed.

And the task force should report to the minister on current payment models, staffing roles and ratios, scopes of practice, models from other jurisdictions, health equity, and areas of greatest need, and other things.

That will always look different in different communities. From community to community, collaborative care and family collaborative care practices will look different, because by their very nature they are responsive to what communities need and what communities look like. As government works with communities to tailor what's needed, we need to have - but we need to have a start to this, and we need to move quickly. Our health care system depends on it.

This bill that's been introduced by the Liberals would be a good step in ensuring that we have access to some of the information we need to solve this issue, i.e., a way to attract doctors to the Central Zone, but we also need this government to get moving on tackling the root of the issues.

Oh, I'm sorry, Mx. Speaker, I'm a little confused by my notes. Our bill, the one that I was just talking to, would be a good step in ensuring that we have some access to the information. The Liberal bill that we're talking about would help the cause, because it would help incentivize or entice family care physicians, family practice physicians, to come back to the Central Zone. We have lots of ideas. Health care workers want to be part of the solution and there's lots we can do to support them to work better together.

I will leave my comments there and, again, thank the Liberals for introducing this bill. I encourage the government to reinstate the incentive program for doctors in the Central Zone. And echo my colleague's thoughts when he said we don't need to get rid of a rural incentive bonus, but perhaps we have a rural incentive bonus that's at one level, but we also have incentives to bring doctors back to the Central Zone. It's not - oh, maybe it is rocket science, I don't know. But I know it's complicated. I know health systems are complicated, but that, to me, seems like it makes sense.

So with those several words, I will end it there.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Colchester North.

TOM TAGGART: I'll make a few short remarks here on this bill, mostly prepared remarks, but I have some others I'd like to make towards the end here. But anyway, I thank you for the opportunity to speak on this.

Recruiting doctors is a big priority for this government. We've already made several changes that demonstrate our commitment to making health care better for Nova Scotians and for health care workers. For instance, we established the Office of Healthcare Professionals Recruitment to focus on the sector as a whole. It was time for a change, and I'll go back to the sector as a whole shortly, but we realize it's time for a change in how we approach recruitment overall, and we are already starting to see the success. Just last week we announced a bonus and incentives for nurses and other health care workers, including paramedics, telehealth staff, and continuing care staff.

The current Primary Care Physician Incentive Program reflects the current needs of our health care system and allows us to target physicians who can help us to meet those needs. I'm pleased to tell the House that the changes we've made to our incentive offering actually make more doctors eligible for incentives than before. They are more generous, which makes us more competitive. They are also more straightforward, and these programs reduce the administrative burden on staff and on doctors, which is really important, since we want them seeing patients, not trying to cut through red tape.

Financial incentives alone will not do it, but financial incentives along with other things that Nova Scotia has to offer, like a great quality of life, interesting work, career growth, and opportunities for spouses and families - these things together make us an attractive destination for doctors. It is an extremely competitive market out there, and Nova Scotia is a relatively small jurisdiction. Having incentives is one tool in our toolbox, and it can sometimes get us in front of people who haven't even been considering Nova Scotia before. Once we're in the door, we know we have a compelling story to tell about living and working in Nova Scotia.

Mr. Speaker, there are a couple of things. I guess I'll start by talking about how I fully understand the concern and the angst for any community in Nova Scotia that is faced

with the challenge of trying to recruit doctors. It's a difficult job. In my community, in my small rural community, we have a place called the West Colchester Community Health Centre. That clinic, until just recently, we were fortunate enough - I think two or three or four months ago - that the Nova Scotia Health Authority took charge and responsibility for that clinic. That clinic, the building was built by the community. The West Colchester Medical Society fundraised. They operated that clinic. The doctors paid rent, and they billed the Nova Scotia Health Authority or whoever it was at the time - this was 25 or 30 years ago that that began.

Unfortunately, one doctor who had worked there for 25 years, and another doctor who was working there as - I don't know if you would call it a locum or not, because he was back and forth. I think he did - if I remember right - two and a half days a week in that clinic in rural Nova Scotia, in Bass River, that the community ran. In 2019, they both retired together at the same time. Here we were, in a pickle - no doctors and no nurse practitioners.

Before I go any further, I want to give the Deputy Premier of the former government kudos on this, because if it wasn't for her, we wouldn't even have had a nurse practitioner fill in. We have been quite successful at that since.

However, I know very well the challenges of trying to recruit doctors to rural Nova Scotia. A little caution here, I guess, in how I frame this. Young doctors are certainly a target, and as we tried to recruit them, it became very obvious that they're not comfortable coming to a small rural community initially. They want to be in a larger collaborative care setting where they have other more experienced doctors to lean on. I can understand that. It's very hard to recruit them. There was some interest by some senior doctors who were kind of ready to maybe slow down a little bit. They were more interested, and we still weren't successful there, but there was some interest from them.

Another challenge, of course, is in the rural parts of Nova Scotia - I'm saying this because the member for Halifax Atlantic, when he presented this bill and framed it, he continued to talk about Halifax and HRM. The last thing I want to do, and mind you, I'm pretty passionate about rural, but in this doctor's discussion, the last thing I want to do is pit rural against urban in this. He kept referring to that. Certainly, large centres like Halifax or Sydney or wherever, where they have larger regional hospitals, are very attractive to, once again, young doctors. Some of the things we were told was they want to be closer. They don't want to be that far away from these regional hospitals. They want to have, again, more people to lean on.

A lot of young people, young doctors, we were told, don't want to just practice primary health care, okay? They want to have an opportunity sometimes, to do some emergency medicine, maybe they want to have an opportunity to do, I don't know whatever - I'm not a doctor, I don't know what all those things are. But anyway, they wanted some variety in their work.

So, as I said, I understand the challenges of folks in any community who need doctors. And we all know it's a challenge, it's a defining issue, I think, of our day. Quite frankly, it doesn't matter if you're in Alberta or if you're in Nova Scotia, where you're at, there's a demand for doctors. So, we're no different than anybody else.

I have no idea the rationale of the decision with this incentive business. I just want people to understand how challenging it is to get a doctor to come to rural Nova Scotia, or a nurse to come to rural Nova Scotia. We all know that; it's no secret. We have invested, as a government, in 25 seats for rural doctors in Cape Breton. And everybody was happy with that, so there must be some recognition that rural has a challenge there, right?

So, we've invested in that. We've invested, I think, in StFX on some research for rural health care. So there are some real challenges there. So I just - it's important that I - I feel - I understand what it's about, but we've faced those challenges for years. And so suddenly others are kind of feeling the same that we felt for years, and suddenly they want a change.

Now, I want to shift gears a little bit, because I need to - the member for Halifax Atlantic, when he stood there, he made a lot of what I consider to be kind of, I don't know - I don't know. I really don't know - some comments, some claims that I think might be a little bit off, but I don't know that for sure. Certainly I'd like to see those tabled. In particular, the information about, I think it was Armdale, I can't remember, but he said there were 2,000, when we came to power, without a doctor, and now there's 14,000 without a doctor. I'd like to see that tabled.

Because as I understand it, and I might be wrong about this, but as I understand it, they're not broken down by communities. I can't tell how many people in Bass River don't have a doctor. I can tell how many in the Northern Region don't have a doctor. But maybe he has different information than I do, so I'd like to have that tabled. Am I allowed to ask that? Is that a requirement? Because I'm going to make a comment here in a minute that I'm more than prepared to table the information on. So can I ask to have that tabled?

THE SPEAKER: The requirement for tabling is for really citing documents word for word.

TOM TAGGART: Oh.

THE SPEAKER: It's my understanding that referencing a document doesn't necessarily need it to be tabled. I will consult with the Clerk for a moment, though, just to get the proper answer. I'll advise the member and the rest of the House that you can request a document to be tabled, for sure. But unless the member is citing it word for word, it's not necessarily a requirement.

The honourable member for Colchester North.

TOM TAGGART: All I know is - I just recalled that I'm not allowed to use a prop. But I do remember him waving some papers around like this, as if he had those documents in front of him. Do you remember that? So he must have those documents. Thank you.

[4:30 p.m.]

So here's what you can take to the bank - in Colchester North, right now, there are 21,000 - I'm sorry, I'm wrong. In the Northern Region, right now there are 21,882 people without - hold it. I don't want to say anything wrong, because I'm going to table this, okay?

Currently, the Northern Zone has 24,492 people without a doctor. Back in 2021, there were 21,882. We're not being favoured. We don't have a big advantage.

The one thing that I want to say here in closing is - I hope I have enough time - during that time, when we were trying to recruit doctors to West Colchester Medical Clinic, we couldn't get a doctor. There was a doctor in Halifax who was willing to come and bring her colleagues to West Colchester to help in that clinic, and the government of the day and the Minister of Health and Wellness of the day refused to give them whatever that is, that accreditation number or that billing number that would allow them to bill in our region.

Let's not talk about how we're somehow favouring ourselves when the government of that day deliberately would not allow a doctor from Halifax to come to rural Nova Scotia to help us out.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: I just wanted to raise a few points on this bill here, which I think is really important. I wanted to start with some numbers as well. To the previous member's point, I will table those, certainly. Just wanted to talk about Bedford-Sackville as a region that's tracked. This would probably include my riding, the member for Bedford Basin, the Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture, and probably the Minister of Justice as well.

In August 2021, obviously the month of the last election, there were 3,837 people in Bedford-Sackville without a family doctor. August 2021: 3,800. March 2023, this month: 17,931. That is an increase of 467 per cent in just 18 months. A little over 14,000 people have been added to the list in Bedford-Sackville alone in the last 18 months. Obviously, the area is growing very quickly. Every day, there are new buildings going up, and as the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing will know very well, three of the nine special planning areas that the province has put forward are in my riding as well. Another 9,000 units, another 20,000 people, let's say, over the next decade or so.

Unless something changes quickly, that number of unattached people in the Bedford-Sackville area, I imagine, will be over 20,000 very soon with no signs of slowing down.

Just to give the sense that the issue is not just that the area is growing quickly. It's not just that there are more people moving in and therefore they don't have a doctor when they move here. Over 50 per cent of the people on that wait-list are on the wait-list not because they moved here recently but because they have a doctor who is retiring or a practice that's closed down. The issue is not simply that the area is growing quickly, but that doctors are either stopping practice for one reason or another or they are retiring.

I want to touch on a couple of points that the member for Colchester North mentioned. He talked about the fact that the current incentive program - and I may have his exact words wrong, I apologize, but the essence was that the incentives that are in place now reflect the current needs of our health care system. With respect, I just can't agree with that, because we see, as we've all pointed out many, many times, a massive increase in the Need a Family Practice wait-list in the Central Zone, specifically since this government took power, more than doubling.

To suggest that the current system is working, I just don't think it's borne out by the facts in any way, shape, or form. In the first-year psychology class I remember at Dalhousie, they said, don't confuse correlation with causation. Sometimes those are two different things. That's a good thing for politicians to remember, by the way. I think in this case, this is actually a good example of causation. There's an obvious cause and effect. Cause: March 2022, we see an incentive program disappear quietly, as these things tend to do when it's not necessarily good news - disappears into the night. A year later we see a huge spike in the number of people without a family doctor in the Central Zone. To me that's a pretty clear cause and effect link.

Unless there is some change to this program which we are putting forward in this bill and which I think is common sense and an obvious need, and as the member for Halifax Atlantic said, there are members on the government side who are within the Central Zone and I'm sure dealing with the same issues that I am dealing with in my office, which is a huge number of people without a family doctor waking up with a sore throat or a runny nose or a cold or their kid has a fever and what are their options? Their options are to go to a walk-in clinic, which they often can't walk into, which they need to line up at 7:00 o'clock in the morning for an hour before the door is open. They might sit in line for five hours with a crying, sick kid. It is not fun. I have done that; that is not fun. Then you may be seen, or you may not be.

What is the other option? Go to an ER. Maybe you go to Cobequid; maybe you go to the QEII; maybe you are over in Dartmouth and go to the Dartmouth General. No matter where you go you are probably waiting a few hours again. Whether or not you get care is uncertain.

The number of people without a family doctor is really the root cause of so many other issues in our system, so if we can figure out how to address that in a meaningful way, I think a lot of the other issues we're dealing with will not fix themselves, but certainly it's a great first step.

This government, as they've talked about endlessly since the budget was tabled and even before that, is willing to spend huge amounts of money on health care - \$6.5 billion the Minister of Health and Wellness was talking about today, \$300 million-plus at the very tail end of this fiscal year for incentive bonuses for nurses and others - \$300 million-plus.

Now I don't know exactly how much it cost to have this Family Doctor Incentive Program in the Central Zone, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't \$300 million. So if you're willing to spend \$300 million on an incentive, and the member for Colchester North talked about the importance of incentives, and we agree, so if the member for Colchester North thinks that incentives are such a great idea, why did we get rid of this one incentive that was obviously working to help? It just doesn't make any sense to me.

This is a very simple, common-sense change. This is not something that requires study or jurisdictional scans or endless work because we just had this program in place a year ago. It wouldn't be difficult at all to put it back in place, and the cost versus benefit I think is obvious.

I do want to end on a hopeful note, I would say. Last night during Estimates, I was asking the Minister of Health and Wellness about this issue. I don't want to put words in her mouth. and I don't have the exact words, but she did suggest that things can change, they are always monitoring. Maybe she was just being nice to me, it's possible, it was late, she had been there for a while. But I took some hope from that and I think that this is a really obvious area where there can be, and should be, some change, and I think it would make a huge difference, not just in my area but in half the constituencies of this province. This city is growing very, very quickly and if we don't get hold of this issue sooner rather than later, we're going to see tens of thousands more Nova Scotians without a family doctor and all of the trickle-down effects that has on their social, physical, and mental well-being.

I would encourage the government to take this issue forward and please reinstate this incentive for the Central Zone.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Eastern Passage.

HON. BARBARA ADAMS: I am very pleased to speak on this Opposition bill. I forget which member actually just said it but it was an assertion that I am sure there are a lot of things that can be done to help recruit physicians to Nova Scotia. One of them is Bill No. 256, allowing allied health professionals to work to their full scope of practice.

Having allied health professionals across the province who can support the physicians of our province makes us more attractive. As one of the metro MLAs, I am certainly well familiar, especially as a health professional, with the challenges that we face recruiting across the province. One of the things that also helps to recruit a physician is having One Person One Record. This government's going to make that happen. Something else that brings physicians to this province is the coolest robotic arm for operations, and Mr. Speaker, I got to use that as a physiotherapist. I took all those years of playing video games and put it to really good use because I got to operate on a hip using that robotic arm, and you cannot scrape away healthy bone using this device. That excites physicians to come to this province.

What also excites physicians coming to this province is when we have enough beds for everyone in acute care, in our rehabilitation centres, and in long-term care, and in residential care. I can tell you, I graduated a long time ago, as everybody knows. The same rehabilitation facilities - I'm not that old - the same rehabilitation facility that was there when I graduated in 1984 is still the same rehabilitation facility in Halifax. This government is going to bring in a transitional care unit to help people who are in acute care waiting for long-term care to be in a place that's more appropriate for them.

It was actually raised during Question Period where someone commented, rightly so, that people in acute care who are waiting for long-term care are not getting the full scope of services that they need to improve their mobility, to improve their quality of life, and I agree wholeheartedly with that member. That is why we are moving quickly to provide more acute care to long-term care access beds in the province of Nova Scotia.

You know what also helps to recruit family doctors? A new emergency department at the Dartmouth General Hospital. I'm from Dartmouth. That facility has been in dire need of a new emergency department. I have four boys. I can tell you how many times I've been there. I think we should have had our own bed with a plaque on it for the Adams-LeBlanc family because we spent a lot of time in that emergency department. That new emergency department is going to be spectacular. It is one of the biggest investments in Dartmouth.

You know what's also going to bring more physicians to the province of Nova Scotia? It's 34 new nursing homes. I know that Opposition knows where they're going, so if you're going to put coloured pins in them, in metro, get out some red pins. That's all I'll say, get out some red pins, because a lot of those are going into Liberal constituencies, because that's where they're needed, and that's where they're going. You're welcome.

You know what else brings people to Nova Scotia, and physicians in particular? When they hear out west, and around the world, that this province has the highest staffing ratio in long-term care in the country, with the exception of Yukon. That is a very big deal, Mr. Speaker, because I worked, as you know, during the pandemic at Ocean View Continuing Care Centre, and I know what the contingencies were when there were days we

were working at 60 per cent, 70 per cent, and 80 per cent. It's not a great feeling to chronically feel that you're understaffed.

[4:45 p.m.]

But the winds have changed, and as I'm touring around this province - the Minister of Health and Wellness is doing her listening tour, I'm doing my listening tour - and what I'm hearing from the physicians, as well as the staff in those facilities, is that there is hope that when you are working in fully staffed facilities when there are enough long-term care beds, when those beds are open, which they are right now, that attracts physicians to the province of Nova Scotia.

When you hear of the inequities in a sector, especially predominantly dominated by women, like continuing care assistants, like all of the staff who work in long-term care, and acute care, and home care - predominantly female, and we raised the CCA wages by 23 per cent - that's almost \$9,000. So when the Opposition says we haven't done anything to improve food security, Mr. Speaker, a 23 per cent pay raise sure as heck goes a long way to helping with that.

What we are talking about in terms of physician recruitment is that bonuses are one method, and we are constantly reviewing physician incentives. I know the Minister of Health and Wellness meets regularly, every week, to discuss that. I know it impacts long-term care because we need physicians and clinical nurse practitioners to provide that essential service in long-term care.

We also need our allied health professionals working to their full scope of practice. That brings physicians to the province of Nova Scotia. I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that other legislation before this House that is going to give all allied health professionals the opportunity to step forward and elevate what they are able to offer as supports to physicians is also going to bring physicians to want to come to Nova Scotia.

What we are talking about is a multi-faceted, multi-targeted approach to physician recruitment. We don't talk about it very much in this Legislature, but if you look at the physician levels in all of the provinces, it's not like Nova Scotia stands out here as an outlier. There are physician shortages across the country. We are privileged to have seen such dramatic growth in the population both through immigration as well as our children - not mine - moving home. We wanted our children to move home. We are privileged to have a challenge of having such a significant increase in the population. I know that the military are having similar challenges in recruiting physicians.

All of the targeted strategies, including an unprecedented \$350 million - give or take a dollar or two - bonus retention incentive for allied health professionals, mean that any physician who's coming to the province of Nova Scotia is going to be working with a staff that just received a significant thank you. It demonstrated our commitment to meeting

all health professionals, all of the support staff, the IT people, everyone who works in home care, long-term care, continuing care, public health, all across the board.

There are also other things that we have done directly to impact bringing in physicians to the province of Nova Scotia. There is a designated path residency for 10 international medical graduates studying outside of Canada, with priority given to those with a connection to Nova Scotia. Expanding virtual care to Nova Scotians on the Need a Family Practice registry is another support system to physicians to want to come to Nova Scotia because they know if they go away on vacation, there is someone else who can help provide support for their constituents.

Our government also introduced a new funding model pilot for family doctors to encourage a more team-based care. I have to tell you, Mr. Speaker, when I was in Opposition and the whole concept of clinical nurse practitioners and collaborative health centres came about, I was super-excited because as a health professional who has worked exclusively with those with chronic illness, a team-based approach is the most cost-effective as well as the most clinically effective way to improve health care. But I didn't see that move towards having, as other members have mentioned, a physiotherapist, a social worker, a dietitian. All of those support staff were not brought into collaborative health centres. If you actually look at the sheet that lists all the collaborative health centres from years ago and how many allied health staff they had, it's a very small number. We're changing that, Mr. Speaker. We know that physicians are inundated with report forms to fill out - disability tax credits.

I had a constituent come in yesterday whose son wants to get into the military, but he doesn't have a family doctor, so he can't get a medical evaluation in order to meet the requirement to get into the military.

We need every available option on the table to support the physicians when they come to Nova Scotia. Of course, having every allied health professional in the province super-excited to work to their full scope of practice, in ways they could never have imagined when I graduated 40 years ago, is also going to bring physicians to this province.

Mr. Speaker, with the minute and a half that I have left, I just want to remind all the members of this Legislature that every allied health professional and every support staff person in this province has worked their hearts out, especially over the last several years. One of the things we learned with COVID-19 is that we had to be more adaptable, we had to move quickly, and we needed to bring about changes in how every one of us practises. That is the target and focus of this government, to make sure that every allied health professional body is consulted.

I want to remind members - for those of us on this side of the House, where we have six of our members who are health professionals - we are self-regulating professions. We are highly regarded in our communities. There is not a single health professional I have

ever worked with in all of my years who doesn't put patient rights and patient safety at the heart of every decision they make, Mr. Speaker.

Finally, everything that was in our budget was designed to improve access to health care and to bring our physicians back to Nova Scotia and to welcome physicians from around the province. There's an entire Budget Book designed to do physician recruitment, and we're going to continue to use every tool in the tool box to make sure that every Nova Scotian has access to the health care they deserve.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The time for debate on Bill No. 268 has expired.

The honourable Deputy Opposition House Leader.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: That concludes Opposition Business for the day. I'll turn it over to the Government House Leader.

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, I move, pursuant to Rule No. 5C, that the hour of adjournment tonight not be 10:00 p.m. but 11:00 p.m. so we can finish our Estimates.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is that the adjournment for tonight be moved from 10:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

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 the Committee of the Whole on Supply.

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

KENDRA COOMBES: Mr. Speaker, it's that time again: time for my annual speech about municipal funding.

I rise today to discuss various funding issues facing municipalities. I have spoken many times on this topic because it is an important issue that deserves attention. As a former councillor and now the NDP spokesperson for the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, I have often witnessed municipal units fighting over scraps of money, due to lack of funding. Municipal units often compete over these small pots because the large pot of money, the Municipal Capacity Grant - also known as the Municipal Grants Act and better known as equalization - has stayed the same for years while its name has changed a few times.

Mr. Speaker, I was excited, I was elated, I was happy, I was all those things that you could think of - and appreciative - I was also very much appreciative to see more money provided to municipal units last year. This is something that I have fought for years for, and to see them receive just a little bit extra was very exciting.

But that was last year. This year, I've been informed that that top-up has not occurred. The federal legalization transfers to the province significantly increased, yet the provincial transfers to municipal units, like the CBRM, have now remained capped again at \$30 million for the entire province - and the CBRM, the second-largest city, receiving \$15 million.

This has created a situation where municipal staff spend a lot of their time chasing various funding streams, writing grants and proposals, when there is other important work for municipal units, and for those workers, to be done. Municipalities are required to balance their budgets. Due to a lack of revenue, municipalities often need more revenue to avoid budget shortfalls. This lack of funding limits municipal units' choices to improve their communities.

Municipal units do not want to raise property tax rates because rates are too high comparable to the services that are provided. The lack of funding means municipalities cannot properly improve infrastructure - roads, water, sewer. I know, very riveting things, but also very fundamental - very important to our everyday lives. I'm sure my colleagues across the way would know that roads, water, sewer, garbage, all of that, is very fundamental to every resident's everyday lives.

Yet the lack of funding makes it so many municipalities have to do some cutting. It has created an inability for municipal governments to create more sidewalks, especially in our rural areas. In fact, I know in our municipality, they cannot even create new sidewalks. They first have to bring up their old sidewalks to code - and they can't even afford to do that.

So it creates, again, another inability for municipal units to afford to expand water to the rural areas. Now I'm sure some of my colleagues who know the well systems very well - for lack of a better term - you have some great water from wells. But as more people move into those rural areas and create subdivisions, it puts a pressure on those wells. Water that was once great - for some areas, including my own - basically, they can't even wash their clothes in that water. These areas are calling and crying out for more municipal water services. Great union jobs, by the way. But municipalities can't afford to do that because the cost is so great.

[5:00 p.m.]

The lack of revenue means that municipal units cannot provide more accessible recreation indoor and outdoor facilities. As we move towards a world and communities that are more accessible, municipal units also have to upgrade all their recreational infrastructure. Many cannot do that. They do not have the revenue. This lack of revenue makes it difficult for smaller or more economically challenged areas to retain their younger population and recruit newcomers to the areas. They simply do not have the infrastructure, the facilities, and the supports that people are looking for - and it makes it hard to compete with other areas.

Mr. Speaker, residents are entitled to comparable services at comparable tax rates. Some residents in municipal units would agree that the services residents receive are not comparable to the tax rates they pay. Over the years, there have been disagreements on what that appropriate level of funding should be, but people can agree that municipal units are not receiving enough equalization funding that would enable municipal units to provide comparable services at comparable tax rates. Municipalities need financial help. The NSFM, the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, has asked for this financial help. They have been calling on the province to increase equalization payments to municipal units by \$20 million over three years. I do not see this reflected in the budget.

Our caucus has put forward - I know I have put it forward twice now - a bill that would see \$50 million over three years for the CBRM until we could look at a new funding model. Yet we don't see that reflected.

Despite the government's continuing to change the name of equalization, there still needs to be increases in the funding. The government can change the name of a program, but it does not change the fact that another budget has come before the Legislature, and municipal funding remains frozen while mandatory transfers from the municipal units to the province are rising based on CPI. The issue of compulsory payments needs to be addressed.

The provincial government is receiving funding from municipal units for education, housing, corrections, and other services, which are not municipal units' responsibilities. These are provincial responsibilities, but municipal governments are

paying for it - and taxpayers are paying for it twice. These payments are one of the top three budget expenses for many municipal units. Provincial costs were calculated by population. The municipal costs are based on CPI. It is not fair that municipal units are paying for provincial responsibilities.

The second is how the provincial government calculates their portion based on population while calculating the portion of municipal units based on CPI. How can that even happen? How can you calculate provincial - oh, we're just going to go based on population, but municipal units, guess what? We're going to go based on CPI. It just doesn't wash - not to me, anyway.

The Nova Scotians for Equalization Fairness group has requested accountability and transparency for government's federal equalization funding of 23.1 per cent, generated out of the municipal units to provide comparable services at comparable tax rates. What this group is looking for is the ability to know and to see where the equalization money of the federal government is being allocated. This task is manageable when we can simply put it in a budget or put it online.

Municipal units are also getting short-changed in the funding department through the cannabis tax money. I know I have brought this up many times before, but I'm bringing it up again. Before cannabis became legal, the Canadian Federation of Municipalities, the provinces, and the federal government agreed that instead of a 50/50 split between the federal government and the provinces, the feds would take 25 per cent, giving the provinces 75 per cent, with the agreement that 25 per cent of the province's 75 per cent would go to municipal units. Instead of allocating the 25 per cent to the municipal units and working with the municipal units to devise a formula, this government - like the previous government - is making municipalities show the receipts and prove their costs, rather than creating a formula.

That was not the federal government's agreement with the province when it agreed to reduce its revenue share from 50 per cent to 25 per cent. This has created an unnecessary administrative burden on municipal units, municipalities, and police departments. This government needs to work with the municipal units and NSFMM to create a better way of distributing the cannabis tax revenue to municipalities that reflects the spirit of the agreement made with the federal government.

I have a few other things I want to talk about, but one I'm going to talk about is this. In 2016, the Auditor General made several recommendations to the Liberal government regarding critical infrastructure resiliency. I understand that the department accepted all of the recommendations, and I am hoping to see the department's response to the report.

Our caucus has been working hard on climate mitigation and adaptation policies. In the prior legislative sitting, I reintroduced a bill called Local Action and Climate Change, which would require the government to create a fund and other supports to municipalities

for climate adaptation. In the election, this government promised that, if elected, they would meet the municipalities' adaptation needs. I'm still looking for that.

From the storm on November 22, 2021 to Hurricane Fiona, it is more apparent than ever that the cost of inaction is still higher. I look forward to an update on how the department works to help our province become more resilient and secure in the face of the climate change emergency. That includes our municipal units. We need to provide more funding to municipal units for them to be able to deal with the climate emergency that they are facing. With that, I will take my seat.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

HON. KELLY REGAN: Going into Supply today, I just had a few things I'd like to comment about. I was getting under way the other day during member statements, but we got a little interrupted there, so I thought I would talk a little bit about some of the things that I had noticed about the budget.

What I was saying the other day was that I don't understand what people who are on income assistance are supposed to do. Everyone I talk to is feeling the pinch of rising costs. Whether it's rent or electricity or food or pretty much - I don't know of anything that's actually going down. Everyone is feeling the pinch. You go to the grocery store, and you get three bags of groceries and it's \$150. I don't know how people who are on income assistance are supposed to live.

I don't want to be entirely negative here, because there are some good things in the budget for people who are on income assistance, or people who are living on lower incomes, people who have children. The Nova Scotia Child Benefit - that's a significant increase for those families. But the majority of people who are on income assistance do not have children. They are single people. They are the poorest of the poor. I don't know how they make ends meet. We know the cost of rent is going to rise in this province in the coming years. I don't know how these people are supposed to be able to make ends meet.

Many of the people who are on income assistance are disabled. Roughly 50 per cent of those who are on income assistance do have a disability that makes it difficult for them to work or hold a full-time job. For them, income assistance is a lifeline. I've been asking myself: Did the government not increase income assistance because they thought that the federal government's disability payment would be coming online? We now know after yesterday that while there is more money to develop that particular payment - I think it was \$23 million - that will not pay for that payment to go across this country.

We know that Nova Scotia has the highest percentage of people with disabilities, so I think about those people.

We have been talking a lot over the last couple of days about the social determinants of health. Being able to buy enough food, enough of the right kind of food, enough of the food that you need to nourish yourself, is important for good health. It's like we've said to people with disabilities who also happen to be on income assistance: Well, you're going to have to choose - you can have rent, or you can have food, but you can't have both. There is nothing in here to help with that if you are a single person on income assistance. There is nothing in this budget that is going to help you.

I take the Minister of Community Services at her word when she says, call me if there's people who don't have enough to eat, but I am concerned she is not going to get any sleep because her phone will be ringing all the time. The truth of the matter is there are Nova Scotians who go hungry in this province and the situation, because of the cost of living at this time is more acute.

Now this government didn't cause that but that is the situation in which they are. There is a cost of living crisis. For people who do not have the ability to earn more money, who are on fixed incomes - so it can be seniors as well - this is felt most acutely.

The Heating Assistance Rebate Program in the coming year will be 50 per cent of what it was this year. The Minister of Finance and Treasury Board indicated that in an answer to a question to me. Maybe it was naive of me but the year that we did a \$100 increase to income assistance, I actually thought we had turned a corner. I thought that people are going to realize this is what you have to do: You can't just tinker around the edges, we are going to have to make some big changes here for income assistance.

I was speaking to the then-Premier, now the member for Timberlea-Prospect, about it today and it's one of our great regrets that we didn't index income assistance at the time. Honestly, we thought we were coming back and that's what we were going to do in the next year, but that didn't happen. I guess it's a lesson to all of us not to let opportunity to do the right thing pass us by. We should always seize that opportunity and make sure we don't let it pass us by.

In recent days we've heard the Minister of Community Services talking about the number of people who are coming off income assistance because of the programs they have initiated. I have news: That has been happening for years. The number of people on income assistance has been steadily declining for years, probably because it's really difficult to live on it, but that's nothing new, and it's not a reason to underpay our most vulnerable citizens who, quite frankly, need this money to live. There are Nova Scotians who live on less than \$12,000 a year.

Now perhaps the government decided, well, we're just going to wait and see what the feds do, because the federal government has been working on a disability payment for those who qualify for the disability tax credit. That would raise their incomes to about \$24,000, so it would piggyback on top of whatever social assistance was available in the

province. With yesterday's budget we know that's still in development, that's not going to happen.

[5:15 p.m.]

My concern is we have people who are in the most vulnerable state, often because of their health. Through no fault of their own, they are unable to work, and they are vulnerable. With this budget, we - when I say we, I guess I should say the government. The government has said to them with this budget: You can wait again. You can wait until next year.

I have sympathy for the Minister of Community Services. I know what it's like to be the minister. It's a difficult gig. There's no two ways about it, and people don't always recognize it. They know Health and Wellness is difficult, but they don't always know that Community Services is difficult. It is because the needs are many, and the dollars are often limited.

At the end of the day, if we are not supporting our most vulnerable citizens, we are guaranteeing that they will get less health, and that will happen to them quicker. Instead of more health care faster, it'll be less health. They'll be less healthy, faster, because they're not getting the food they need to eat. They may be living in dangerous conditions because they can't afford rent in a safe area.

I actually do appreciate the single-mindedness of the government on the health care front. I hope that we feel its effects in the central region one of these days. I hope that we actually see the doctor numbers, the Need a Family Practice Registry, going in a different way soon. I would note that - no I'll probably wait until we get into Estimates, and I'll just ask a question about that.

A budget is about priorities, and this government has decided that health care is their priority. I commend them for that, but no government can do just one thing. You have to be able to do multiple things. I joked the other day and talked about walking and chewing gum, but the truth of the matter is that governments have to do more than one thing. They have to look after the economy so that you can pay for the programs. If you're not looking after the economy, you can't pay for the programs.

If you don't increase income assistance, the most vulnerable Nova Scotians get sicker. I do worry about those folks. The implications for a child growing up in a family without enough income can be great. That's why I'm grateful for the increase in the Nova Scotia Child Benefit, but I worry about the people who don't get the Child Benefit. I worry about the people who were just scraping by before COVID-19 hit. Now, with this cost of living crisis, their heads aren't above water. I don't know how they're making ends meet. You can't go to the food bank all the time.

I worry about people not being able to get off income assistance because they're sick. They want to get off. They want to have a job. They can't get off because they're not well.

After last year when there was no increase, I was sure there would be an increase this year, and more shame on me. I shouldn't have been so hopeful.

I guess I'm making my plea for now, my plea for next year, that the government not do that again, that the government - and I get it, a \$20-per-month increase is a huge cost to the department - no two ways about it.

It is a significant amount of money to do that. A \$100-a-month increase was five times that, obviously, but I thought it was the beginning of something good, and it hasn't been. I worry about that. I worry about the people who live in situations where there is no hope, where the money is gone the day after their cheque comes, and I worry about what happens when the rent goes up. Here in metro, we have the bus pass. I worry about people who live in areas of the province where they don't have that and where gas costs are high. In some places, if you're in a rural area, you can't get about if you don't have a car, so the transportation costs are higher.

We'll be looking for clarity on what exactly the new rent supplements mean, who they are for, who's going to get them, and who is not going to get them. There are people who need them who are in that gap between core housing need and acute housing need who are not going to be able to get rent supplements and who need them. If you're spending 48 per cent of your income on rent, you won't get one. You're spending 50 per cent, you will. There's nothing in between that area, so I do worry about that.

And with those few words, Mr. Speaker, I thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'd like to spend a few minutes talking about housing in Dartmouth North. As we go into Supply debate on this budget, I want to talk a little about the current situation in Dartmouth North and what we see or don't see in the budget for the scenarios that I'm about to offer and to describe.

When I was elected, when I first knocked on doors in the 2017 election, the thing that I heard most about in many parts of my community was the people's concern about the rising rents. At that time, Dartmouth North, as I've said before, was a place where you could get a cheap place to live. At that time in 2017, rents were beginning to rise. There was this indication that things were getting a little out of hand. Meanwhile, income assistance rates were frozen, minimum wage was extremely low, there was quite a lot of unemployment at the time. It was a tough go for many people.

When I was elected, I went to our then-leader, the member for Halifax Chebucto, and I suggested that we introduce some legislation on rent control, which he thought was a good idea, so we did. That piece of legislation sat on the order paper for several years. We introduced it, reintroduced it, the government at the time was not interested in looking at rent control at all, even though we were sounding the alarm in the NDP caucus about rents rising and that kind of thing.

In 2019, things began to change in a very identifiable, remarkable way, I would say. I remember sitting in my office in the Summer of 2019 and reflecting to Sandy and Rebecca, who work with me, everyone who comes in this office now has an issue with housing. They said, it's true. It wasn't totally true, there were a few other things that we were doing in our office in terms of case work, but by and large we were beginning to see and hear stories of people getting evicted for funny reasons and not knowing that they could carry on an eviction process through Residential Tenancies to protect their rights.

People were applying more for housing, for public housing, and being told that the wait-lists were two years long. People's rents were going up in a way that was just unsustainable, and they literally were unable to pay for the rent increases, and renovations began to become popular, as it were.

Then when the pandemic hit, we heard the then-Premier say the now famous words "Stay the blazes home." People couldn't stay the blazes home if they didn't have a home to live in, so we lobbied hard for putting in a ban on evictions and some kind of rent cap and that did happen. For a while it was sort of just to manage the pandemic but then, of course, the pandemic hasn't really ended yet, has it?

Some things were sort of turning around a little bit to protect people. Meanwhile, the situation was getting worse. Now we come to 2023 and we see that the rent cap is being extended, though no longer will it be a set-in-legislation rent cap, but it will be a set-in-Executive-Council rent cap. The minister has said he suspects the rent cap will be 5 per cent but we know that anything that is set in Executive Council is subject to change at any time, with no debate, no scrutiny, and no need to answer questions, so it's a bit concerning.

Here we are now - rents are skyrocketing. In Dartmouth North we have the lowest vacancy rate in the province. The average vacancy rate for Nova Scotia is 1 per cent, which is unhealthy. We know that a healthy vacancy rate ranges around 3 per cent. In Nova Scotia our vacancy rate is 1 per cent, in Dartmouth North it is around 0.6 per cent, so it's lower. It's the lowest in the province. There is nowhere to rent an apartment in Dartmouth North.

If people need to leave an apartment for a reason like the condition of the apartment - say it's an unsafe building, say their neighbour is harassing them and they just don't feel safe anymore, say they had their job hours cut and they no longer can afford something - if they try to find another apartment in Dartmouth North, it would be virtually impossible

because every time an apartment comes up for rent, the rents are doubling and, in some cases, tripling.

At 71 Primrose, Mr. Speaker, there are a number of tenants - I think there are 16 units in that building, maybe a few more - who have all been told their units need to be renovated. I have been in some of the units, and they do not need to be renovated.

I'm not a contractor, but I know a brand-new backsplash and brand-new cupboards and brand-new flooring when I see it. Many of the units literally have those things. They do not need improvements and if they did, they would not be the kinds of improvements that require someone to move out, but the tenants in this building have been told that, no, they need to leave and if they want to come back they certainly can but their rents will go up almost \$1,000.

The Minister Responsible for the Residential Tenancies Act will say that this type of practice, or this type of thing that is happening, happens few and far - not very often, the occasional time this happens.

The other thing that is happening in Dartmouth North is there is a gal who lives in my neighbourhood who was told by her landlord - she had a fixed-term lease - he would not be renewing her fixed-term lease, which I think she was paying upwards of \$900 for her apartment, but he would not be renewing it because he had a family member who was going to move into the unit.

A few weeks later, after she moved out of the apartment, she saw the unit listed on the internet at \$2,200. So that landlord used the fixed-term lease loophole to get her out of that apartment and to charge more than double the amount that he was getting for that apartment.

Now, I understand inflation. I understand that people are facing inflation, expenses are going up. I understand that if you pay for your tenant's heat that it is going up. I understand that roofs cost more. I understand all those things, Mr. Speaker, but I don't understand how this government can sit back and allow such an abuse of the Residential Tenancies Act.

That brings me to this budget, and what's in this budget for housing. I hope I've painted a bit of a picture about the situation that's happening. People are getting renovicted, people are getting kicked out because of a fixed-term lease loophole. People's rents are rising. There is no place to go in public housing, and there is no place to go in market housing. And this budget has no money for new affordable housing.

Now the Minister of Housing and Municipal Affairs will say that the government has put millions of dollars into housing, and that is true. Millions of dollars into housing is true. But it's not millions of dollars into affordable housing. And this government refuses

to adopt a definition of affordable when it comes to those development deals, when buildings are going up - at least in HRM, apartment buildings and many, many units are being built as we speak.

[5:30 p.m.]

There are three or four in the tiny bit of Dartmouth North that I live in myself. And none of those units are guaranteed to have affordable units in them, none of those builds are guaranteed to have affordable units in them. The minister says, okay, so what we'll do instead is we'll provide rent subsidies. We've got 1,000 more rent subsidies coming.

Except that you have to be paying more than 50 per cent of your income to now qualify for a rent subsidy. And the minister explains that - the reasoning for that change - well, because there's so much pressure on the program. Well, no kidding there's pressure on the program. Rents are skyrocketing, landlords are misusing the Residential Tenancies Act to misuse fixed-term leases. Renovictions are happening all over the place, and there's nowhere to live.

So of course there's pressure on the rent subsidy program. My office has been signing people up, or helping people apply to the rent subsidy program for at least six or seven months. Because it is literally the only way to stop people in my community from becoming homeless and adding to the tent communities that are already up and around Dartmouth North and other places in HRM.

We are hearing stories - I heard a story on *The Current* this morning, Mr. Speaker, about a woman in Bridgewater who has been living in a tent with her daughter, and they have to stop doing homework when it gets dark out, because there's no more light to do homework. Think about that for a minute, folks. Think about that. Imagine raising a child, who goes to public school, in a tent.

There's another story that *The Current* played the other day about a woman, I think in Lunenburg, somewhere like that, who's renovating a school bus to live in. Which would be kind of cool, but right now the cost of renovations is making it impossible for her to finish that job.

This is the province that we are making decisions about and for. This is the province where this government says there's so much pressure on the rent subsidy program that we have to change the qualifications to cut out people who are in what the CMHC defines as core housing need. We recognize people are in housing need, but we're not going to help them until they're in deep housing need. That is reprehensible. It's a terrible move, Mr. Speaker.

So what happens to folks who are in this situation? They pay more and more of their income, the little income they have, on their rent. Which means they buy less

groceries, which means they go to the food banks, which this government is happy to support. No one goes to school hungry in this province, we heard that today. So people are using food banks, people are using the insufficient food programs there are in schools. People are just going hungry.

People are splitting their medication prescriptions in half. Spreading their medications over longer so they're becoming more unhealthy. Therefore, we're putting all kinds of burdens on people in general, and also our systems that we are trying to improve, like our health care system and our education system. When kids go to school hungry, they don't learn as well. When people can't take required medication that they've been prescribed, they get sicker and they're more of a burden on the health care system.

If we want to fix health care "more, faster," then we need to properly invest in affordable housing. We need to make sure that everyone who needs one can access a rent subsidy. We need to make sure we're actually building new affordable housing that is rent geared to income. That means it doesn't cost more than 30 per cent of one's income. And we have to make sure that people can buy nutritious food.

These are not difficult concepts, Mr. Speaker. This is what we need to do to make sure that our population is healthy and that our health care system can flourish and can become a system of wellness. Imagine being the minister of the Department of Wellness. Well, we could have one, if we could do all of these other things that contribute to wellness in this province.

I will end my time by saying that I am wholly disappointed that there is no real investment in affordable housing in this budget, that the rent subsidy program has been cut to shreds, and that this government thinks it's okay that people go to food banks for their food instead of being able to afford their own purchasing of food in grocery stores or in a market.

It's shameful, it's reprehensible, and we need to change it.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is carried.

We will now resolve into a Committee of the Whole on Supply.

We will take a short break in order for the participants to get set up. A short recess.

[5:36 p.m. The House resolved itself into a CW on Supply with Deputy Speaker Angela Simmonds in the Chair.]

[9:51 p.m. CW on Supply rose and the House reconvened. Deputy Speaker Angela Simmonds resumed the Chair.]

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

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

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: That concludes government business for the day. I move that the House do now rise to meet again on Thursday, March 30th between the hours of 1:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m.

Business will include second reading of Bill No. 279, second reading of Private Member's Bill No. 274, Committee of the Whole House on Bills, on Bill Nos. 256, 263, 264, 269, and Committee of the Whole House on Supply to deal with Estimates.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is that the House rise to meet again on March 30th between the hours of 1:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We stand adjourned until March 30th at 1:00 p.m.

[The House rose at 9:52 p.m.]