



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

DEBATES AND PROCEEDINGS

Speaker: Honourable Karla MacFarlane

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First Session

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2023

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House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2023

Sixty-fourth General Assembly

First Session

1:06 P.M.

SPEAKER

Hon. Karla MacFarlane

DEPUTY SPEAKERS

Lisa Lachance, Danielle Barkhouse, Nolan Young

THE SPEAKER: Order. We will now begin the daily routine.

PRESENTING AND READING PETITIONS

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

KENDRA COOMBES: Thank you, Speaker. I beg leave to table a petition entitled Safe, Affordable and Accessible Housing, the operative clause reading:

“People in Cape Breton are struggling to find safe, affordable and accessible housing to rent. Seniors, families with children and individuals living alone are finding it increasingly difficult to get into Housing due to long waitlists and a lack of physical housing infrastructure. We the undersigned, as residents of Cape Breton respectfully request the Nova Scotia Government through the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing act quickly to build new rent-geared-to-income housing that is safe, affordable and accessible. We further request the government adopt a right of first refusal to buy affordable units when they come on the market to ensure they stay affordable, this includes working with non-profits.”

There are 297 signatures and I have affixed mine, as per the Rules of the House.

THE SPEAKER: The petition is tabled.

The honourable member for Kings West.

CHRIS PALMER: Thank you, Speaker. I beg leave to table a petition from residents in Nova Scotia, the operative clause of which reads:

“Therefore we, the undersigned residents of Nova Scotia, call upon the Premier to pause all harvesting and roadbuilding activities in forests over 80 years old on Crown land in Kings County until such time as 20% of Nova Scotia’s lands have been permanently protected.”

There are approximately 1,000 signatures and I have affixed my signature to the petition, as per the Rules of the House.

THE SPEAKER: The petition is tabled.

PRESENTING REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Justice.

HON. BRAD JOHNS: Speaker, as Chair of the Law Amendments Committee, I am directed to report that the committee has met and considered the following bills:

Bill No. 320 - Tourist Accommodations Registration Act (amended).

Bill No. 321 - Conseil scolaire acadien provincial Act.

Bill No. 322 - Opioid Damages and Health-care Costs Recovery Act (amended).

Bill No. 323 - Regulated Health Professions Act.

Bill No. 327 - Motor Vehicle Act (amended).

Bill No. 329 - Halifax Regional Municipality Charter (amended) and Housing in the Halifax Regional Municipality Act (amended).

The committee recommends these bills to the favourable consideration of the House, each without amendment.

THE SPEAKER: Ordered that these bills be referred to the Committee of the Whole House on Bills.

TABLING REPORTS, REGULATIONS AND OTHER PAPERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: Speaker, I'd like to table a document in consideration of something that will be cited in a member's statement later. It is a press release from the Atlantic Publishers Marketing Association called "Atlantic Book Awards Announces Six Winners and Presents 2023 Atlantic Legacy Award."

THE SPEAKER: The report is tabled.

The honourable Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

HON. JILL BALSER: Speaker, before I read my ministerial statement, I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

JILL BALSER: Speaker, I am honoured to introduce guests from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community who are sitting in the East Gallery today. With us today are Connor McKiggan, treasurer of the Halifax Pride executive board and business development manager at the Canadian Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce; Cynthia Sweeney, Pflag Canada chapter lead and owner of Simply Good Form Inc.; Kate Macdonald, founder of the Magic Project, youth project facilitator, and Halifax Pride board member; Carmel Farahbakhsh, executive director of the Youth Project and Halifax Pride board executive; Hayden O'Malley, Youth Project employee and Halifax Pride board executive; Mark Boudreau, member of the PC Party Diverse Communities Committee and committee volunteer; and Emma Maerten, 2SLGBTQIA+ advocate.

I ask them all to rise and accept the warm welcome of the House. (Applause)

STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

HON. JILL BALSER: Speaker, I rise to deliver a statement on behalf of the Premier.

Our government stands with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. There is no place for systemic racism, hate, and inequity in our province, in Canada, or the world. We support

you. We're here for you. We are your allies. I know my friends in the Opposition parties share this belief, and I am eager to hear their remarks.

Speaker, the Premier's message during the election campaign two years ago is even more important now, when dangerous and harmful protests targeting the 2SLGBTQIA+ community are rising across the country. He said: "No matter who you are, who you love, or how you identify, Nova Scotians deserve to live without fear and intimidation." That is non-negotiable.

But our support goes beyond that. In July, our government unveiled the Equity and Anti-Racism Strategy, the first of its kind in Canada. Its goal is to ensure a whole-government approach in addressing systemic hate, inequity, and racism. The strategy details actions to ensure that work reaches all regions, communities, and people of our province. Through the strategy, we will develop the first Nova Scotian action plan dedicated to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. The plan will work to meet community needs and address hate and discrimination based on gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. The Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives will work with the community over the next years to create the plan.

Another important part of the Equity and Anti-Racism Strategy is the Health Equity Framework, another Canadian first. It contains actions to make Nova Scotia's health system more appropriate, effective, and free from barriers and discrimination.

Our government has also made strides in areas of gender-affirming care. For example, the number of applications for gender-affirming surgeries has steadily increased since 2014. Back then, 41 applications were approved. This year, 343 applications have been approved. In fact, the 2023-24 budget includes an increase of \$1.7 million in funding, which will allow up to 380 people to receive surgery. (Applause) In partnership with post-secondary institutions, we are creating mandatory courses on 2SLGBTQIA+ and trans care in the curriculum for all health care providers.

Speaker, the history of Canadian 2SLGBTQIA+ activism is strong, and the resilience is indestructible. The community has fought time and time again for their freedom, their safety, and their existence in what we now call Canada.

This shouldn't have to happen, but here we are today condemning the dangerous anti-trans protests that took place across the country in September, including here in Halifax. Today we are condemning any forms of hate, may they be flagrant public displays of discrimination or hate that quietly progresses in everyday life.

Speaker, we have come a long way, but there's still a long way to go. Today, I am proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with my colleagues in the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party, united against hate and with unwavering support for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. (Applause)

[1:15 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: I do want to thank the minister for her very important remarks in this House and for sharing a copy of this in advance.

Speaker, I also want to rise today to show our Party's continued commitment to the rights and freedoms of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community here in Nova Scotia and beyond our borders. Everyone deserves to be able to live and love without fear of discrimination and hate.

While we celebrate the incredible gains we have made over the last decades, we do have to recognize that, unfortunately, we have seen a number of disturbing events happen across the globe and here at home in recent months, showing pushback against the strides this community and our society have made.

More importantly, we've seen so many communities come together to create safe spaces for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. These events celebrate the pride of these folks, and have also become a platform for important discussions of how we can stand up against the forms of hate and discrimination that often target this community.

Dialogue is really needed here. People do need to come out of their trenches on this issue. We have to lead this conversation, and points of contact with each other, with our hearts and with compassion. Too much is at stake.

We know it's going to be our most vulnerable youth who will be impacted the most, and in a very consequential way, as a result of the pushback against the great strides we have made. More of this work needs to continue. As elected officials, we have the opportunity to use our voices as a vehicle for continued change in our society.

I'm pleased to have the opportunity to rise today in solidarity with my colleagues in the Legislature to show our support and commitment to creating a better Nova Scotia for our 2SLGBTQIA+ community and, in so doing, for all Nova Scotia. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Before we can continue, I want to remind those in the gallery that due to the rules, we are not allowed to clap. I know there's so much to cheer for and be thankful for, but I do have to follow the rules, so I ask that you not clap. Thank you.

The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: Thank you for the opportunity to rise today and speak to this critical issue on behalf of the Nova Scotia NDP caucus.

Now is the time to stand up and say we stand for belonging, inclusion, and safety, and that we do not stand for hate. 2SLGBTQIA+ young people and their rights are being tossed around by people seeking to spread hate and create social turmoil.

There is a tidal wave of disinformation and hate about how trans and queer people are being supported in our schools and in our communities. Put yourself in the shoes of a young trans person. They may not be safe at home. They may also not be safe at school, with peers, or in classrooms. They don't see themselves reflected in the curriculum.

Honestly, simply going to the bathroom can be terrifying. Young queer and trans folks know that how and where they go to the bathroom is taking up an inordinate amount of time and public dialogue. They fear confrontation, of being accused of being in the wrong place, and of being in the wrong bathroom with ill intent, walking down the street - and I can guarantee this, I hear stories every day - going to the store, going to work, and facing daily harassment.

These young people carry an enormous weight on them to counter misinformation and hatred when they themselves are in a developmental stage where they should be free to explore the world without judgement and fear. At worst, these young people who don't feel safe - and frankly, aren't actually safe - experience much higher rates of suicide, challenges in school and in employment, and in securing safe housing.

With all this happening in our world, I want 2SLGBTQIA+ young people to see us here today - all of us - standing up for them, telling them they belong in Nova Scotia, and then showing them by our actions. Let's show them by showing up in community, whether at a Pride celebration or a counter-protest this weekend. Let's show them by respectful and equitable governance designed to protect and support all Nova Scotians. Let's show them by the laws and policies that we make and pass, and show them by the money we allocate to make good the intentions we have for queer and trans young people.

Show them they are included in our histories that we tell, the stories that we tell, and what we teach. Show them that we recognize all different kinds of families, and that we celebrate these diverse histories and the accomplishments of queer folks. Let's show 2SLGBTQIA+ young people their place in the skills, training, retention, and economic development programs we run. Let them see us show with pride our 2SLGBTQIA+ communities to the world by supporting queer small business and tourism. Let's show 2SLGBTQIA+ youth that their health matters by immediately acknowledging that gender-affirming care is health care, and following the evidence and the experts to implement WPATH's Standards of Care Version 8.

Let them know every day that we respect and celebrate the history of their communities, that we will do today and every day what we can to make their present better and safer, and that their future - their safe, respected, joyful future - is here in Nova Scotia.
(Standing ovation)

GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

HON. JILL BALSER: Speaker, before I read my Notice of Motion, I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Yes, please.

JILL BALSER: It is with great honour that I introduce a special guest who is sitting in the gallery today. With us is Shelly Gray, winner of the 2023 Council of the Federation Literacy Award for Nova Scotia - an award that acknowledges the importance of literacy and celebrates Canadians who have achieved excellence in literacy. In fact, this year marks the 19th year for presenting the awards across Canada.

Ms. Gray is a dedicated single mother and an inspiration to her community. She decided to fulfill her dream of going back to school to set a positive example for her daughters. Shelly is working with the dedicated staff at the Valley Community Learning Association to earn her GED and is currently working with the Community Living Alternatives Society supporting people with intellectual disabilities in the community. Her commitment to family, community, and learning is an inspiration. I ask Shelly to now rise and accept the warm welcome of the House. (Standing ovation)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

RESOLUTION NO. 705

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

Whereas Canadian premiers and territorial leaders have recognized the importance of learning by presenting an annual award in each province and territory to an adult learner who demonstrates outstanding achievements in literacy and makes a significant contribution to their school, workplace, or community; and

Whereas the Government of Nova Scotia is committed to empowering Nova Scotians through literacy and creating opportunities for life-long learning through the Nova Scotia School of Adult Learning's tuition-free programming; and

Whereas Shelly Gray from Annapolis Valley is a dedicated role model for her daughters and her community, and her journey is an inspiration to all adult learners;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of the Legislature join me in congratulating Shelly Gray, this year's Nova Scotia recipient of the Council of the

Federation Literacy Award, on her continued success, and wish her all the best in the future. Shelly's strength, resilience, and dedication to improving her literacy deserves to be recognized.

Speaker, I ask for 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 SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Economic Development.

RESOLUTION NO. 706

HON. SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas this week is Small Business Week 2023, and serves as an opportunity to recognize and honour small business owners across Nova Scotia, and the significant contributions they make to our province; and

Whereas small businesses are the cornerstone of any successful economy creating jobs, powering innovation, and fueling prosperity; and

Whereas time and time again, small businesses have demonstrated their resilience, dedication, and generosity to the customers and communities they serve;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this Legislature recognize Small Business Week, and whenever and however we can, let us reaffirm our commitment to supporting local in Nova Scotia.

Speaker, I ask for 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.

[1:30 p.m.]

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill No. 340 - An Act Respecting Municipal Contributions and Grants. (Hon. John Lohr)

Bill No. 341 - An Act to Amend Chapter 217 of the Revised Statutes, 1989, The Income Tax Act, to Expand the Skilled Occupations Tax Refund. (Hon. Zach Churchill)

Bill No. 342 - An Act to Establish a Universal School Food Program. (Claudia Chender)

Bill No. 343 - An Act to Establish a Provincial School Lunch Program. (Hon. Derek Mombourquette)

Bill No. 344 - An Act to Establish a 2SLGBTQIA+ Bill of Rights. (Lisa Lachance)

Bill No. 345 - An Act to Reduce Power Bills for Working Families. (Hon. Ian Rankin)

Bill No. 346 - An Act to Amend Chapter 380 of the Revised Statutes, 1989, the Public Utilities Act, to Reduce or Waive Water Rates for Non-profit Affordable Housing in the Halifax Regional Municipality. (Claudia Chender by Susan Leblanc)

Bill No. 347 - An Act to Amend Chapter 25 of the Acts of 1996, the Fisheries and Coastal Resources Act, and Chapter 504 of the Revised Statutes, 1989, the Wildlife Act. (Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin)

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

NOTICES OF MOTION

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hants West.

FLOOD VICTIMS: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: On the night of July 21 into July 22, 2023, our community faced a tragic flood event. The shock of this disaster is still very deep, leaving behind not just a changed landscape but aching hearts as well.

The unimaginable loss endured by the families and the friends of the four who were taken from us on this awful night: Colton Sisco, age 6; Natalie Harnish, age 6; Terri-Lynn Keddy, age 14; and Nicholas “Nick” Holland, age 52, are etched in our collective memories. These lost souls who were taken far too soon will be forever part of our community and will never be forgotten. We can rebuild and replace so much but we can never bring back those we have lost.

As we mourn together as a community and try to move forward, I ask that members please keep these families and friends in your thoughts, sending them strength, courage, and love.

Speaker, I ask that we can have a moment of silence.

THE SPEAKER. Of course. We will now stand for a moment of silence.

[A moment of silence was observed.]

THE SPEAKER: Please be seated.

The honourable member for Yarmouth.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, may I make an introduction before my member statement, please?

THE SPEAKER: Yes, you may.

ZACH CHURCHILL: I'd like to bring the attention of the House to the West Gallery, where we are joined by Tyler Long and his mother Joanne, who have joined us here today. Please accept the warm welcome of the House. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Yarmouth.

LONG, TYLER: MOOSEHEADS ASST. EQUIP. MGR. - RECOG.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, I rise today to recognize an exceptional young man from Eastern Passage, Tyler Long. Tyler is the assistant equipment manager for the Halifax Mooseheads. Tyler's involvement is largely attributed to Chris MacDonald, who laid the groundwork for Tyler in joining the team.

Throughout his employment, Tyler's responsibilities have grown, thanks to the mentorship of other Mooseheads staff. Tyler has Down syndrome, and through his work he is inspiring other Nova Scotians with Down syndrome and other intellectual challenges to do better and to achieve more. He is a shining example of what can be accomplished when we don't set limits on ourselves and when we support each other in our community.

The Mooseheads community has welcomed Tyler with open arms and has supported him and helped him fulfill his integral role on the team. Tyler is very much respected by the players, some of whom refer to him as their big brother, and I know that Tyler wouldn't be where he is if it wasn't for the support of his wonderful mother and family.

I'd like to ask this House to join me in celebrating Tyler Long and all of his accomplishments, current and future. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Yes, you may.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Before I read my member statement, I would like to draw the attention of the House to the West Gallery, where we are joined by Olympian Katie Vincent, whom I will be celebrating in this statement, and I ask all members to give her the warm welcome of the House. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

VINCENT, KATIE: CANOEING ACHIEVEMENTS - RECOG.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I rise to recognize the hard work and accomplishments of the very fair and noble sportswoman Katie Vincent. Katie put her name in the history books at Tokyo 2020, where she was a bronze medalist in the first Olympic games to include women's canoe events.

Katie's sport has changed a lot in her lifetime. In the early days, she often used men-sized boats and paddles when women's canoeing was new and their equipment was not available. Fast forward to today and she has won nine gold medals in various world championships, three of them in my riding on beautiful Lake Banook at the Canoe '22 world championships last Summer. This year she bounced back from a broken arm to win four medals at the world championships in Duisburg, Germany. Katie is a decorated world champion in her sport and a trailblazer for women in canoeing.

I ask all members of this House to wish Katie the very best of luck at her next destination - the Pan American Games in Santiago, Chile, later this year, and the Paris 2024 Olympics next year. (Standing ovation)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Eastern Shore.

E. SHORE PRIDE FEST.: SUCCESS - CONGRATS.

HON. KENT SMITH: Speaker, the Eastern Shore has always been welcoming to residents. Over the last number of years, members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community have found this to be the case. This Summer the CBC even ran an article entitled “How one corner of Nova Scotia’s Eastern Shore became an unlikely LGBTQ haven.” Members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ have opened new much-needed businesses on the Eastern Shore, providing services and economic growth across our region.

The Eastern Shore Pride Festival in Musquodoboit Harbour features more than a week of fun activities, from the Pride Parade to a variety show, to a dinner and art auction - there is something for everyone. The Musquodoboit Harbour Farmers’ Market even has a Pride Market with 2SLGBTQIA+ vendors.

The festival started three years ago after co-chairs Brenda Hattie and Wayne Collette agreed that the time was right. Each year, the event has grown more successful than the last, thanks to the fantastic volunteers.

I ask members of this House to congratulate Brenda, Wayne and the volunteers for bringing the Pride Festival to the Eastern Shore.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Yarmouth.

BRAGG, MEGHAN: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, I rise today to recognize a friend and community hero, Meghan Bragg, of Westville, who left us far too soon after a courageous battle with cancer. Meghan was elected as a councillor for the Town of Westville at the age of 35. She was everything a politician should be - kind, compassionate, fierce in her advocacy, and committed to making her community a more equitable place.

Given that she was deputy mayor in her first term, it is very likely her career in politics would have escalated quickly. Perhaps she would have followed in the footsteps of her father, the late Ross Bragg, who was a beloved member of this Legislature and a cabinet minister - at least that’s what my hopes were for her, anyway.

Meghan's intelligence, sense of humour, and compassion for others, particularly for animals, lives on in her wonderful daughter Arley. I know she will accomplish great things, just like her mother did.

Meghan's strength lives on, and I want to recognize her mother, Cathy, stepfather, Dave, sister Courtney and brothers Peter and Josh, her niece and nephew and extended family, and many loving friends and colleagues. Meghan's legacy will live on through Meghan's Place, an accessible playground in Westville, something she dreamed of for her community.

Speaker, with your permission I ask that we take a moment of silence to honour Meghan Bragg and her contributions to her community and our province.

THE SPEAKER: Please stand for a moment of silence.

[A moment of silence was observed.]

Please be seated.

The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SMITH, REV. WALLACE, SR.: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, I rise to recognize a leader and trailblazer in the African Nova Scotian community, specifically the North Preston community, Reverend Wallace Smith, Sr., who went home to be with his Lord at the age of 82, in October.

Reverend Wallace accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Saviour at the age of 14. His relationship with God and his relationship with music were intertwined throughout the duration of his life. From the early 1960s until his retirement, music remained a defining part of Reverend Smith's life.

In the mid 1970s he was led by God to form the Gospel Heirs, who remained one of Nova Scotia's and Canada's most beloved gospel groups until their retirement in 2003, after nearly 30 years.

Following his departure from the Gospel Heirs, he became the lead singer of the Sanctified Brothers. I have had the privilege to share the stage with Reverend Wallace many times and I am always blessed when I hear his voice and the voices of the musical talent of the Smith family. They are blessed beyond measure, truly a treasure to the African Nova Scotian community. He was known for his outstanding rendition of Jesus Loves Me, Your Grace and Mercy, and I'm on a Mission for The King.

I'd like all members of this House to join me in celebrating the life and legacy of Reverend Wallace Smith, Sr.

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

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Before I do my member statement, Speaker, I beg leave to make a few introductions.

[1:45 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: Go ahead, please.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: First, I'd like to do a shout-out to the students here from Forest Heights. Please accept the warm welcome of the House. (Applause)

My second introduction - and as I state your name please stand: the heroes of the 333, I so lovingly call them. It is the St. Margaret's Bay Legion ladies: Tammy Hubley, Raylee Publicover, Brenda Morash, Dawn Burgoyne and Lynn McLearn. Please stand and accept the warm welcome of the House. (Applause)

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

ST. MARG. BAY LEGION: COM. SERV. - THANKS

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Speaker, I rise today to bring recognition to the St. Margaret's Bay Legion Branch 116 for their outstanding service to our community. As an example, this organization opened its doors to those families displaced by the devastating wildfires of this Spring.

The zone from the Head of St. Margarets Bay to Peggys Cove was particularly hit hard by these fires. Many residents of this area had to abandon their homes on short notice in the face of the mounting danger.

By opening their doors, families were able to take shelter, get clothing, and get food at the Seabright Legion. This was despite some of the volunteers who were providing assistance being similarly affected by the potential hazards to their own homes, jobs, and families. Everyone was worried at this time.

The Legion also housed members of Team Rubicon as they participated in response and recovery during this disaster. To this day, Legion members are still helping out wherever they can by giving items, gift certificates, you name it.

On behalf of the all communities of Chester-St. Margaret's, I want to honour them.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

WALK TO REMEMBER: IMPORTANCE - RECOG.

LORELEI NICOLL: Speaker, this past Sunday, October 15th, was Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Day. I spent the day at the Halifax Walk to Remember on their first walk since the pandemic.

The Walk to Remember was created 15 years ago by Tina Thibeau after the loss of her daughter Micheline. The walk provides a way to honour babies gone too soon as a result of miscarriage, stillbirth, SIDS, or any other form of pregnancy or infant loss.

As the members of the House know, my family is closely connected to this cause as my granddaughter, Ruby, was stillborn in November of 2020. This time of year is always challenging, but the support that groups like Halifax Walk to Remember provides is invaluable. On Sunday, we took the steps that our beloved babies cannot.

It has been almost a year since the House passed Ruby's Law. The changes to the bereavement legislation were much-needed, and I thank Minister Balsler for her support. I'd also like to acknowledge that Province House is illuminated in pink and blue this week in honour of Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Day.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SMITH, REV. WALLACE, SR.: COM. SERV. - RECOG.

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, I rise again to recognize Rev. Wallace Smith, Sr. Rev. Smith was the first ordained pastor from his community who had the opportunity to serve in his home church and the first individual from North Preston to serve as a moderator under the African United Baptist Association (AUBA) of Nova Scotia.

During his time at Saint Thomas Baptist Church, he was known as the people's pastor. He loved his community and organized many church, family, and community events. Under his pastorship, the church grew spiritually and physically. Many souls were won and lives changed. Through his charismatic approach, he was able to pull people from their comfort zones, compelling them to assume significant roles within the church. Rev. Smith retired in 2022 after 21-plus years of service.

The relationship between Rev. Smith and his family was immeasurable. He was a devoted and loving husband. You would never see him without his best friend, Miss Frances, whom he often referred to as his "Queen." He adored his children and grandchildren, and he lived a life of service.

My heart is with the Smith family as they mourn their loss, and I'm so grateful for the life and legacy of Rev. Wallace Smith, Sr. Rest in power, my pastor.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Antigonish.

SOBOT, LAUREN: PROUD PAIRS PGM. - CONGRATS.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Speaker, I rise today to celebrate a St. Francis Xavier University graduate, Lauren Sobot, who is making a difference in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in Nova Scotia. Lauren was awarded the Pathy Foundation Fellowship and founded the Proud Pairs mentorship program.

Lauren describes the program in this way: The program establishes one-on-one mentorship between LGBTQ adults and LGBTQ youth and young adults in Nova Scotia. The goal of the project is to provide LGBTQ youth with social support and create avenues for knowledge and experience-sharing. Proud Pairs builds relationships that foster connectiveness and belonging. Lauren is not only the founder but also the program coordinator and is currently attending medical school at the University of Toronto.

I ask all members of the Legislature to congratulate and thank Lauren for this incredible project. I would also like to wish Lauren every success in the pursuit of becoming a physician.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member, attending virtually today, for Clayton Park West.

ROCK. SCHOOL STAFF: PROTECTION EFFORTS - THANKS

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Speaker, today I rise to recognize and thank the administrative staff at École Rockingham School for going above and beyond their work expectations in protecting the students of École Rockingham School.

Due to the population growth in Clayton Park West, the school has been experiencing overcrowding issues. The school has little to no parking for parents to drop off their children safely. There is no sidewalk on the school side of Tremont Drive, and therefore hundreds of children have to walk down the middle of the road, surrounded by cars, every morning and afternoon.

To help address these concerns, each morning, the principal, Patricia Leger, and vice principal, Sarah Parker, stand on the sidewalk across from the school to aid children out of their parents' vehicles and guide them to the crosswalk to safely make their way to school each day. They actually do that rain or shine.

Would the House please join me in thanking Principal Patricia and Vice Principal Sarah for all their dedication in protecting and saving children's lives at École Rockingham School.

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

YAKIMCHUK, MADELINE: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

KENDRA COOMBES: Speaker, we lost a social justice warrior and friend, madeline - small M - yakimchuk, in June. Before their death, madeline was working on a documentary about the history of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in Cape Breton. madeline was a founding member of ElderwizeCB, a group of older generations of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

madeline was a friend, a comrade, and a force of nature who spoke their minds and challenged your thinking. The August Cape Breton Pride Parade was an emotional day for many of us who knew madeline, as they were honoured as the grand marshal for the parade. It was a beautiful sight to see their family, friends, and pioneers like Peter Steele carrying posters of madeline, honouring them and the queer elders in Cape Breton.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings North.

HON. JOHN LOHR: Speaker, I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Yes, please.

JOHN LOHR: I'm very pleased to introduce Shawna Young of the Valley Community Learning Association and Shelly Gray, whom I will say a few things more about, residents of Kentville. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings North.

GRAY, SHELLY: LIT. AWD. RECIP. - CONGRATS.

HON. JOHN LOHR: Speaker, I rise today to congratulate Kentville resident Shelly Gray, the 2023 recipient of the Nova Scotia Council of the Federation Literacy Award.

The Council of the Federation Literacy Award, established in 2004, presents 13 awards annually to adult learners in Canada who demonstrate outstanding achievements in literacy and make a significant contribution to their school, workplace, or community.

As a single mother working in the seasonal production industry, Ms. Gray returned to school and changed her life through education, determination, and hard work. She is

now engaged in full-time employment supporting people with intellectual disabilities and assisting them to live within their communities.

Please join me today to congratulate Shelly Gray as the recipient of the 2023 Nova Scotia Council of the Federation Literacy Award. She is truly a positive example for family, coworkers, and communities.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

2SLGBTQIA+ COM.: SUPPORT - RECOG.

HON. KELLY REGAN: Speaker, I rise today to convey our caucus' absolute support for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in the face of hateful protest.

The 2SLGBTQIA+ community just wants the freedom to be who they are. They don't tell other people who to be, how to dress, or who to love. They just want the freedoms that all Canadians want. But there are some Canadians who want to deny them that, who are protesting them. At a recent protest here in Halifax, there were people there peddling hate. There were scared people there, too, who'd been influenced by those peddling hate.

I went there, along with some of my colleagues from the Legislature, to support the counter-protest: people from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, their supporters, religious leaders, and politicians. Make no mistake: this is a way for people with anti-2SLGBTQIA+ views to rile up people. The truth is, support for young people transitioning saves lives.

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

LISA LACHANCE: I beg leave to make a quick introduction in respect of my member's statement.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

LISA LACHANCE: We are joined today by only just a few of the 51 members of the Citadel High GSA and a couple of school staff as well. I think they're behind me up here. As I say their names, they can hop up and let us know they're here: Kai, Koma, Max, Luca, Nik, Erin, and Greg. Thank you so much for joining us. (Applause)

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

CITADEL HIGH GSA: WASHROOM UPGRADES - RECOG.

LISA LACHANCE: Speaker, in a time when the rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ young people and students are under an increasing amount of scrutiny, we are seeing students from all over standing up for their rights and equity for their friends, family, and peers. Kai

Retter and the Citadel High GSA are no exception. Kai and their peers noticed in the past year that Citadel High students have limited access to gender-non-specific washrooms, which results in students lining up and missing class time, or forgoing a washroom visit altogether in order to use a space where they feel safe. Since then, Kai and the GSA have been working hard to ensure that the school leadership and people like their MLA are aware and have been coming up with their own ideas to get the funds required to perform upgrades to existing washrooms.

I ask my colleagues in the House to join me in recognizing Kai Retter's efforts to make Citadel High School a safer place for all and in resolving to do the same in their constituencies.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

CALDER, PAUL: SWISSAIR RECOVERY EFFORTS - THANKS

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Speaker, today I rise to recognize a dedicated community member from the Amherst area, Mr. Paul Calder.

A retired RCMP officer, he's involved in too many community groups to even begin to list. I do want to draw attention to the part of his service with the RCMP that I am certain he never expected or dreamed would become part of his work history. Following the tragic Swissair Flight 111 disaster in 1998 - 25 years ago - Paul was assigned to work at CFB Shearwater as part of the recovery efforts. He covered the temporary morgue at Shearwater, was at Peggys Cove on several occasions, and as a critical incident stress debriefer, he worked with families and Swissair employees to help them deal with the profound loss. Knowing Paul's calm and reassuring ways, I am certain he was a great support to those experiencing unimaginable grief. As Paul said, it's not a time he will ever forget.

I want to thank Paul Calder and the countless others who, 25 years ago, demonstrated to the world what Nova Scotians are truly made of.

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

THE BARGAIN SHOP: COM. SERV. - RECOG.

JOHN WHITE: Glace Bay is a small town, which presents certain challenges. One thing we do not struggle with is the willingness to stand up for others.

During this Small Business Week, I would like to honour The Bargain Shop on Commercial Street, a fairly typical business at first glance. If you watch long enough, you'll soon realize that something special is going on here. This business is just as concerned about supporting the community as it is about a healthy marketplace. The

Bargain Shop is supportive of fundraising events all year long, but Christmas is when they go above and beyond.

For example, during this last Christmas, The Bargain Shop hosted a toy drive for the Jay It Forward movement. This group often partners with the Christmas Crew Society. Together, they make sure that tens of thousands of dollars of toys are wrapped and delivered to underserved children all over Cape Breton.

Speaker, businesses need communities, and communities need businesses. This is a relationship clearly understood in Glace Bay.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

[2:00 p.m.]

GLAZEBROOK, JAMES JOSEPH: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Speaker, after this, I would ask for a moment of silence.

My community - actually, Nova Scotia - lost a very special person this week: James Joseph “Red” Glazebrook. Red was a teacher, a hockey coach, a volunteer, and a Nova Scotia leader, but most importantly, a father and a grandfather. Red helped so many, inspired so many, and asked for nothing in return. He did it because he loved people. He loved this province, and he had it in his heart and soul. Sharon, Jacob, and Ja-red, know your husband and father was loved by so many. We grieve with you. Rest in peace to a legendary figure: James Joseph “Red” Glazebrook.

THE SPEAKER: We’ll stand for a moment of silence, please.

[A moment of silence was observed.]

THE SPEAKER: Now we will begin Orders of the Day with members asking questions to ministers. The time is now 2:00 p.m. Question Period will conclude at 2:50 p.m.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM.: RACISM POLICY - CONTINUE

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Two years ago in this House, the Premier was taken aback when a member of his staff made a racist remark about a former member of the Legislature. He also said there was a zero-tolerance policy for any type of inappropriate behaviour, and I'll table that. That staff person was fired. I would like to ask the Deputy Premier: Does this policy of zero tolerance for racist and inappropriate comments remain in place today?

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: I know in that situation, in that matter, action was taken swiftly. I know the Premier was involved in terms of taking the action. There's no question. In fact, our caucus has had - as I'm sure other caucuses have had - training from organizations to help ensure that people are aware of things like unconscious bias. It's something that we as a government take seriously, and we are always looking for ways that we can improve for Nova Scotians.

ZACH CHURCHILL: All caucuses, I hope, will take that inclusive education training, and hopefully that impacts our behaviour and the behaviour of our staff. After the by-election in Preston, we had another concern with staff - the Special Advisor to the Minister of Economic Development - who retweeted a tweet that said that the Premier's government will be a thousand-year Reich. The staff removed the tweet and did apologize, but I'd like to ask the Minister of Economic Development: Why was the Special Advisor able to circumvent the zero-tolerance policy?

ALLAN MACMASTER: As I recall, this was also something that was raised publicly at the time. The person who made the comment on social media did retract it and did apologize for it, and acknowledged that making it was inappropriate and hurtful. We have to expect that people apologize sincerely, and that they mean it, but we also need to be open to forgiving people if they make a mistake, and if they're sincere in resolving themselves to do better. If we can't forgive in our society, how can we ever expect our society to move forward?

ZACH CHURCHILL: Yesterday, a third Progressive Conservative staffer, the Special Advisor to the Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration, no less, made a horrifically anti-Semitic statement, which I'll table. It read that Israel must stop being the Nazis of the 21st century. Speaker, this is unacceptable for any person to tweet, but it is especially shameful coming from the Special Advisor to the Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration. My question to the Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration is: Will she follow the Premier's zero-tolerance policy on this issue and take action against that staff person?

ALLAN MACMASTER: This is something I heard about today, and I understand this is being investigated. The post was taken down, and I understand there's also some question as to who actually put it up, even though it was up under that individual's name. I

have to say that for today, I want more details, and on behalf of the Premier, we want to see more details. We want to investigate what actually happened. Certainly, if somebody put that up, it needs to be dealt with. Because this is new to me today, I cannot offer more than that - other than there is a sincere interest in investigating that, getting to the bottom of what happened, and taking corrective action.

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

PREM.: AFFORDABLE HOUSING - CREATE

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Speaker, we are in a housing crisis here in HRM and across the province. While the Premier has been focusing on picking fights with other orders of government and freezing development fees, he has done precious little to address the shortage of affordable housing across this province. In fact, we've heard from experts that this government's actions are likely to make it harder to build affordable housing in HRM. My question is for the Premier. We are going to need over 30,000 affordable units in the next six years. How are we going to get there?

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: We took action as soon as we were elected. In fact, I remember three weeks after being sworn in, meeting and doing what the Opposition has criticized us for doing - that being approving additional appropriations to the budget. What was one of the more significant ones that we approved? It was for housing - millions of dollars for housing. We cannot, unfortunately, build this housing overnight, but we did not wait. We took action. We approved millions of dollars three weeks after being sworn in as the new government. A lot of those investments, we hope, are starting to prove fruitful for people who need them. I can provide all kinds of other examples. This is something that we've taken very seriously, and we responded as soon as we took government.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: The Premier says that the solution to the housing crisis is to build more housing. But instead of making it easier to build affordable housing, he is making it harder. Instead of working with partners, he is steamrolling them, and instead of what non-profit housing providers have asked for - fast access to capital and financing to build truly affordable housing - he is spending millions of appropriated dollars. He's funnelling it to private developers with unclear results. My question is: Why is the Premier making it harder to build desperately needed affordable housing in Halifax?

ALLAN MACMASTER: I reject the premise of the question. I will say that there are all kinds of factors at play here. The government - I believe we've done our part in putting money out there for private developers, but not just for private developers. We've also been open to co-op housing and non-profits. Even more recently, the government has announced - for the first time since, as I understand, about 1995 - an investment in government-owned new housing. That's in addition to, as I recall, \$15 million in the last budget for fixing up existing government-owned affordable housing. I reject the premise of

the question, and I will say that we have been focused on this from as soon as we were elected.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: The government loves to talk about the 200 units that will eventually get built in the face of the need for 30,000. The experts have been clear. Labour shortages, supply chain issues, high interest rates are the stumbling blocks to faster development in HRM. They've also been clear that the government's approach to expediting high-end development will shift the financial burden from the private sector directly onto the backs of Nova Scotians. Our taxes will go up, housing prices will continue to climb, and affordable housing will continue to be out of reach.

We have seen no proof from the Premier that anything he's doing for private developers is going to make an impact for real people who need housing. There's no plan, no timeline, no deliverables for affordable housing for tens of thousands of Nova Scotians who need it. Who is the Premier trying to help?

ALLAN MACMASTER: We can agree that - and the member just mentioned - the three most significant issues to increasing the supply of housing in the province are labour shortages, high interest rates, and supply chain issues. I can tell you, on a positive note, that we've seen at the Department of Finance and Treasury Board that many of the supply chain issues are starting to resolve themselves. That will be helpful.

In terms of labour shortages, no question, but a lot of those issues are outside of the control of the government. We are trying to bring people to the province. We have the More Opportunities for Skilled Trades program. Despite questions last week, we believe that program is certainly working for those who are taking advantage of it. I will also say, in terms of responding to the cost of higher interest rates, we've partnered with the federal government to remove the HST off rental housing.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM.: ANTI-SEMITIC STATEMENTS - EXPLAIN

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Less than one hour ago, the Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration stated in this House, on behalf of the Premier, that there is no place for systemic racism, hate, or inequality in our province. We know that the government has drawn the line when it comes to racism directed toward an African Nova Scotian member of this Chamber, but they have not drawn the line when it comes to anti-Semitism - the statements that were made by the Minister of Labour, Skills Immigration's staff. My question to the minister is: Why is it acceptable for a member of her staff to issue these anti-Semitic statements?

ALLAN MACMASTER: Speaker, it's not acceptable for anybody to make statements like those that were made. We live in a world where we all have a role to play -

including the member who is asking the question here today - to ensure that it's addressed. We want to investigate it. As I said earlier, this is a very recent issue. Before we start making statements about it here in the House, we want to investigate to learn more about what actually happened and who is responsible. On the surface, no question, it looks like somebody who works for government has made the statement. We want to make sure that is the case before I start making comments on behalf of the government here in this Chamber.

ZACH CHURCHILL: It seems pretty clear that is exactly what happened. The Special Advisor to the Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration made a tweet yesterday afternoon before 4:30 p.m. It was removed almost instantly. It seems very unusual, given that this would be a very calculated hack, if it were to be one. Why was the tweet removed and the apology not issued until this morning at 8:45 a.m.? If I look at the apology given, it's not much of an apology. The apology is: I apologize if anyone was offended. Clearly, people are going to be offended by an anti-Semitic statement toward one of our key allies. My question to the Deputy Premier or the minister: Will they please apologize in this House on behalf of that staff person who issued those anti-Semitic statements?

ALLAN MACMASTER: As I've said, this is a matter that deserves investigation and, certainly on the surface of it, it appears to be what it is. Before I make comments here in the House as to what has happened, and after investigating and being able to confirm what has happened - what corrective actions will take place - I am not prepared to offer further commentary at this moment. It's certainly an issue that is sad to hear about. Certainly, for the many people who have been hurt by those comments - whoever made them - we are sorry that anybody has to endure such comments.

ZACH CHURCHILL: We've heard that this was related to a hack. Clearly, the social media bio of this individual states that she works for the minister, that she has conducted government business via social media. Clearly, this is a major privacy breach if it were to happen. We do have protocols in place for privacy breaches of this nature, which I'll table. My question to the minister responsible for cybersecurity: Has a potential hack been reported to his department? Has the appropriate protocol been followed, and the Information and Privacy Commissioner been informed of this potential breach of privacy?

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: I'll echo the comments of the honourable Deputy Premier, that there is an investigation ongoing pertaining to this matter. At an appropriate time, when there is more information to be shared, certainly that commentary will be provided then.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition on another question.

CSDS: PRIVACY BREACH - INFORM

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: If there is an investigation going on here, there are clear protocols that need to be followed if this is a privacy breach. If, as the member has alleged, there is a potential privacy breach here, I certainly hope that the government is following those protocols. The Information and Privacy Commissioner needs to be informed of this. The RCMP need to be informed of this, just like a former Minister of Internal Services did when there was a privacy breach previously.

We need to know: Is there a potential privacy breach related to this situation? Has the government followed the defined procedures and protocols to ensure the Information and Privacy Commissioner and the RCMP have been informed so that Nova Scotians can know that we are protected under the situation?

[2:15 p.m.]

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: Some of the elements that the member is pointing out - if in fact, it was a government device or a government account, that would be pertaining to that policy. However, part of the investigation would be to determine if it is, in fact, a government device or not or if it is a government account - but at a time where it is appropriate to share more commentary on this incident there will be more to be said at a future time.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition on a new question.

EECD: CHILD CARE COMMITMENTS - DELIVER

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, I will look forward to hearing what the results are of that very important investigation.

I do want to move on to another issue affecting many families across this province, and that is that they are scrambling to find child care. Wait-lists are years long, parents are quitting their jobs and not returning to work all because of this government's inability to deliver the Canada-Nova Scotia child care agreement. The government left \$123 million in federal funds for child care on the table because they didn't do their work and submit an action plan, and I will table that.

This has been a common theme with this government. This government consistently fails to work collaboratively with other levels of government and every time they pick a fight, Nova Scotians lose.

My question to the minister is: Why can't this government deliver on the child care commitments that they have made to the people of this province, even considering the fact that so much federal money is sitting on the table waiting to be used?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: Thank you to the member opposite for the opportunity to share with Nova Scotians the progress that we are making in the expansion of child care across Nova Scotia and also to clarify the question around the action plan.

I am happy to report and pleased to report that the Nova Scotia Action Plan has been submitted to the federal government and I want to be very clear, we are leaving no funds on the table and our progress on child care is full steam ahead. This is a sector that has been under-resourced and ignored for decades. If I could snap my fingers and do this work right away, I would absolutely do that. This transformation is taking time but we are moving ahead very rapidly and I look forward to sharing the details in 45 seconds.

ZACH CHURCHILL: The minister can look to this side of the Chamber if she wants to see how you execute on child care spaces just like that when pre-Primary was brought into this province. Thousands of new spaces for four-year-olds.

Here we are, two years into this mandate - this government promised 1,500 new spaces for child care. This is impacting our skilled labour shortage, it's impacting our labour shortages, it's impacting doctor recruitment from one end of the province to the other, and yet we do not see urgent action from this government when it comes to creating new child care spaces. They haven't even hit a fraction of their promised 1,500 new spaces and I want to know why that is the case.

BECKY DRUHAN: Let me say this: For families who are waiting for child care, I understand the challenges around that. Fifteen years ago when I was looking for child care, I was on multiple wait-lists and at that time, also, I was not assured that I would get child care when I needed it. But we have opened over 2,000 new child care spaces. Those are spaces across the province. Those are in places across Nova Scotia that have never had licensed child care before.

There are before and after spaces, there are infant spaces, toddler spaces, pre-school spaces, and school-aged spaces. In addition to that we have decreased fees by one-half for Nova Scotian families, a significant affordability measure that is making improvements for families across the province.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

SNS: HARP CUTS - EXPLAIN

GARY BURRILL: Speaker, the Minister of Service Nova Scotia will be aware that yesterday was a hurtful day for thousands of people in the province with the cut of the

Heating Assistance Rebate Program from \$1,000 to \$600. Six hundred dollars. That is around the minimum that an oil company will come to deliver for and now you are not going to be able to apply to be eligible for any more than that. Our constituency offices yesterday received many, many calls from people asking, Why are they knocking that down? The price of anything else hasn't gone down. I think it is a very fair question.

When this program was set a year ago at \$1,000, the government said they were doing this because they were responding to a need. Does the government think - that that need is any less today?

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: We understand that Nova Scotians are facing tough economic times, and that's why we are responding to their needs in a number of different ways, including the Heating Assistance Rebate Program. That is \$600 that we opened yesterday. Whether it be the Property Tax Rebate for Seniors that's up to \$800, whether it's the Seniors Care Grant that our government created that's up to \$750. There's not just one solution here. We're looking at the broad breadth of services and programs that we're implementing to meet the needs of Nova Scotians. I can also add the \$140 million in energy efficiency programs to support Nova Scotians and to decrease their reliance on home heating oil.

GARY BURRILL: Responding to their needs? To make matters worse, the government has also cut back by \$10,000 the income threshold that makes you eligible for this to \$75,000 a year for a household from the \$85,000 it was last year. It costs \$1,500 to fill your oil tank. Does the minister not realize how much people were counting on receiving the full \$1,000, and how difficult, hard, and hurtful it is to have the government reach out and grab \$400 of it back?

COLTON LEBLANC: As I noted in my previous response, there are a number of ways that we are supporting Nova Scotians. I think if you tally up the rebates that I did list off there, that's more than \$2,000 in eligible rebates for Nova Scotians, and we will continue to look at ways to continue to support them.

The honourable colleague mentioned some of the program differences from last year, but what I would note is that this program, the Heating Assistance Rebate Program, came in under the Rodney MacDonald government at a certain rebate threshold. One year later, the NDP formed government, and guess what they did? They cut the program. I'll table that.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, now we have two . . . (Interruption)

THE SPEAKER: Order. There is a lot of chatter to the left of me. I ask that everyone please refrain from speaking for the remainder of Question Period and let the

member speak. Right now, I would like the honourable Leader of the Official Opposition to stand.

SNS: HARP CUTS - JUSTIFY

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Thank you very much, Speaker. Now we have two governments that have cut this program: the former NDP government, and the current PC government that has cut HARP for Nova Scotians. This program was increased to, according to the Premier, support Nova Scotians who are dealing with inflation. Certainly, Nova Scotians have budgeted their household heating budgets to accommodate this \$1,000 rebate. Now that Nova Scotia has the highest inflation in the country, the highest increase in rents, and with power bills going up by 14 per cent under the PC government, how can the minister justify cutting HARP while many Nova Scotians were expecting this and needed it for their household budgets?

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: As the former Minister of Health and Wellness would know, while he was in government he had every single opportunity to do something with this program, and guess what? While that party was in government, they didn't touch that program. We are the first government in recent history to actually change the program over two years. In 2022 we did a top-up of \$150, last year we did a one-time increase to the threshold and the rebate to \$1,000, and this year we made a change to the program which is three times the original rebate.

ZACH CHURCHILL: You've got to love when this government pats themselves on the back while more Nova Scotians are experiencing food insecurity, while Nova Scotians are experiencing the highest inflation in the country, while Nova Scotians are experiencing a 14 per cent increase in their power bills when they already can't afford to fill their oil tank. You've got to love when the government - all they can do is point the finger and pat themselves on the back. At the same time that they've not only reduced the Heating Assistance Rebate Program, they've reduced the income threshold for it. If you're a Nova Scotian in a household that was making up to \$85,000, you no longer qualify unless you make \$75,000 or more.

This is impacting working families, it's impacting young people and seniors' households alike. How can the minister justify changing the income threshold for this program when people's incomes are going a lot less further nowadays?

COLTON LEBLANC: Speaker, in fact I can say there have been 23,000 applicants that are very happy to be receiving \$600, 23,000 applicants since the program started yesterday.

I do find it bit bizarre that the honourable Leader is saying do more, do more. At the same time, I guess I'll read a quote from a June 5th op-ed that says: "Most Nova Scotians would agree that putting a price on pollution is an effect approach to tide and climate

change,” a.k.a. a carbon tax to gouge Nova Scotians. That quote there, Speaker, is from the Leader of the Official Opposition. Shame for saying we’re not doing enough when we are supporting Nova Scotians.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect.

EECD: CHILD CARE CENTRE DEPOSITS - BAN

HON. IAIN RANKIN: I just want to remind the member that there was a price on pollution for eight years in this province, and it cost everybody one cent a litre at the pump, while we fought climate change, while we invested in efficiency programs, especially for low-income Nova Scotians.

On to daycare. Daycare operators - some of them - are now requiring parents to pay a substantial deposit of \$1,000 per child to secure a child’s place in the wait-list. When the time comes for a child to start their so-called “guaranteed spot,” parents are being told there are no spaces available.

This is a large barrier. Obviously, parents can’t go on to all these wait-lists that have significantly grown under this government and pay \$1,000 to all these operators. This tool is not only making it hard for families with their hard-earned money, but it’s forcing families into not returning to the workplace. I’ll table that.

My question to the minister is: Do you support child care centres taking deposits from families to hold a spot for their children?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: The goals of our expansion of child care in Nova Scotia, under the Canada-wide child care agreement with the federal government, are to create additional spaces, to make inclusive, accessible, affordable quality child care across Nova Scotia. The practices that the member opposite described are absolutely not making things more accessible or more affordable, so we don’t support them.

I can say that the one incident that I understood was taking place in relation to those kinds of practices has come to an end. I haven’t heard from the member opposite in relation to this specific question, so if he has additional details that I’m not aware of, I’d be happy to consider those.

IAIN RANKIN: This is Question Period. That’s our job, to bring it forward to the minister in the public domain. These fees are something the minister herself said are not in line with the goal to inclusive, accessible, affordable child care, as I tabled. We agree. This government has options. Ontario has banned this practice for some years. My question to the minister today is: When will you ban the harmful practice of having parents pay deposits for child care wait-lists that are growing under this government day by day?

BECKY DRUHAN: I fully agree that Question Period is about asking questions, but I would suggest to the member opposite that if he was looking for an answer to the question, or for some work done on the question, that the perfect opportunity to do that is when he learns of the issue, to reach out to the minister directly and not wait for Question Period to raise it at that time.

As I indicated, my understanding is that the one child care centre that was implementing those practices has ceased those practices, so to my knowledge it is not still happening. If the member opposite has other details, I'd be happy to hear about them.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

[2:30 p.m.]

EECD: CHILD CARE CENTRE WAIT-LISTS - DIVULGE

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: We hear from people in communities all the time how challenging it is to find child care, and from operators, how they need support from this government. My question to the minister is: Does this government have any idea how many children are wait-listed at child care centres around the province today?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: Thank you to the member opposite for the further opportunity to talk about the incredible work that we're doing on child care in Nova Scotia. This is a sector that has been neglected for decades. We are very excited and very proud to be doing work to expand access to child care across Nova Scotia. We have created 2,000 new spaces across Nova Scotia. Those are spaces in places that have never had licensed child care before. They are before- and after-school spaces. They are spaces for infants.

We just recently, in the member's area, partnered with a local operator on a demo site that provides child care for health care workers around the clock, Speaker. We are taking innovative steps in child care to improve access for all Nova Scotians.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I'm proud of that announcement, because that's what we talked about when we negotiated the child care deal on this side of the floor. I would ask, Speaker, that the minister table those 2,000 additional seats that she continues to indicate have been filled in the past year.

We've heard from operators that some of their wait-lists are so long that it could be up to four years until some families will get into daycare, which means their kids will actually never be able to go to daycare. This government has failed to deliver on their own goals that they've set out.

My question to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is: Now that we are nearly at the end of 2023, how many new child care spaces have opened this past year?

BECKY DRUHAN: I am proud to say that we have opened over 2,000 new spaces. We will have new numbers for the new spaces opened in the recent months, and I'll be happy to share those with the member opposite, but this work was not just about opening spaces. Transforming a sector is multi-faceted and complex.

In addition to opening spaces, we are supporting operators in a variety of ways. We are fully funding the increased ECE wages - 14 per cent to 43 per cent. We have improved ECE wages. We are providing operator grants to support their operational needs. We, in addition to that, have reduced fees by half. That is significant savings for Nova Scotia families. We have gone from a mortgage payment or a rent payment down to a phone bill or a utility bill, and that is a significant improvement. We'll continue this work.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

RTA: PET EVICTION - STOP

GARY BURRILL: I'd like to ask the minister responsible for the Residential Tenancies Act about pet evictions. This is the issue that pet shelters are speaking about increasingly, whereby landlords are introducing new no-pet clauses to existing rental leases as a way to get around the rent cap, in the words of Linda Felix from the cat shelter Spay Day HRM. Often, of course, the way this works is that tenants will move rather than be separated from their animals, and the result is that the door is opened to a new tenancy to which, by definition, the rent cap won't apply. Will the minister exercise his responsibility, his authority, and the capacity to stop this practice of pet evictions?

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: For the benefit of the House, any time there's such a change to the conditions of the lease, the landlord must provide, at minimum, four months' notice.

What I would also say, pertaining to the member's question with respect to pet evictions, is that a tenant has the right to submit an application to the board to determine if that change is reasonable, and that decision would be made by the program officer. There are provisions within the Act that a change in the condition of the lease can be contested at the Residential Tenancies Board.

GARY BURRILL: Additionally, Speaker, not everybody facing a pet eviction has got a place where they can move. Increasingly, in the housing crisis, people are forfeiting - giving up - their animals so that they don't get evicted themselves. Linda Felix of Spay Day HRM says that she has come to dread the end of the month because at that time of the month they get so many of these kinds of calls.

The minister has indicated that he is unmoved by the experience of those who are being dislocated so that they are able to keep their animals. Will he explain why he doesn't think people in this very difficult situation are deserving of the protections of the Government of Nova Scotia?

COLTON LEBLANC: I simply refute that I am unmoved in my response. In fact, I'm a pet lover myself. I have a cat at home that I'm very proud to have. To imply in whichever way that I don't like animals - that's not the truth.

Again, it's important for both tenants and landlords to understand their rights and responsibilities. That's why, through the department, we will be embarking again this Fall on a public education awareness campaign on a number of topics, including those that are brought to the floor of this Legislature.

Again, it's important for tenants and landlords to know their rights and responsibilities pertaining to pet evictions. I remind members and all Nova Scotians that if there is a landlord who changes the conditions, including with respect to pets, they can apply to the Residential Tenancies Board.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

EECD: CHILD CARE SEATS NET GAIN - DIVULGE

HON. KELLY REGAN: The Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development said failure to do their homework would have "no impact at all on the availability of funding right now for daycare." I'll table that. However, this government has not been able to do its job. They left \$123 million on the table, simply because they couldn't or wouldn't submit their plan to the federal government.

They didn't meet their daycare targets last year, and they've been completely opaque about what progress, if any, has been made this year. My question to the Minister: What is the net gain of child care seats in Nova Scotia since the deal was signed in July 2021?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: I want to be perfectly clear: We are full steam ahead in transforming the child care sector in Nova Scotia. We are continuing to make investments and continuing to make progress. We have submitted our action plan to the federal government, and we will leave no funds on the table.

We have created over 2,000 spaces across Nova Scotia. Those are spaces in areas that have never seen licensed child care before. Those are infant spaces, preschool spaces, before and after child care spaces, because we know the need for child care doesn't end when children start school. In addition to the creation of spaces, this transformation

requires many other things. It requires work on the workforce, it requires support for the operators, it requires investment, and we are making those investments.

KELLY REGAN: From a FOIPOP request, we know that as of May of this year, there was a net gain of only 28 seats since July 2021. That's child care seats, not after school programs and everything else. I will table that. This is completely inadequate, and I can tell you we're all hearing from desperate parents who cannot find infant spaces anywhere in HRM.

How does the Minister expect parents to return to the workforce after having a baby if they have produced a net increase of fewer than 30 spots since they took office two years ago? My question to the Minister: Does she really believe that anyone would describe 28 net new childcare spots in nearly two years as a successful rollout of an important program?

BECKY DRUHAN: I can assure the member opposite that it is not a net of 22 or 32 spaces, whatever she said. We have created over 2,000 new spaces. The member opposite seems to dismiss the importance of before and after child care spaces. I just want to reiterate to the members of this House . . .

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

BECKY DRUHAN: The need for child care does not end when children enter school. We know we need infant spaces, and we've been creating infant spaces. We've provided additional funding to operators to expand the creation of infant spaces. We also need preschool spaces and toddler spaces. In addition, families need care before and after school, and those are part of the spaces we've created too.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

EECD: CHILD CARE DESERT - EXPLAIN

CARMAN KERR: When trying to recruit new doctors and health care professionals to Annapolis, one of the biggest issues we hear is finding child care. Since the government has failed to open new child care spaces, our local communities struggle to recruit young doctors and health professionals. Sixty-one per cent of rural Nova Scotia is a child care desert, leaving more families in rural Nova Scotia unable to find child care. I'll table that information. My question to the Minister: How can you recruit new doctors and health care staff to the Valley when there are no child care spaces for their kids to go to?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: I want to be really clear: I absolutely feel the pain of families who are looking for child care. I have felt that pain myself, and I have family members who have. This is a sector that has needed attention and investment for decades.

Fifteen years ago, I was on wait-lists with very real concern that I would not have a child care space when I needed it.

We know we need child care spaces to enable us to bring in health care workers and support health care workers. One of the things we have done is piloted a site for health care workers specifically - around-the-clock child care to enable our health care workers to get child care when they need it, not just during working hours through the day - 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. - but overnight and on weekends as well.

CARMAN KERR: I recognize when the minister says there was a pilot introduced in Sydney. However, my area has the highest unattached rate for primary care workers, and this doesn't help when we have no new spaces to attract them. We have lost our emergency at Annapolis Royal. We are shut at our emergency in Middleton more than we're open. I think this government should be incentivizing more young families to be working here in health care. Instead, they're failing to open up more child care spaces in the Valley. Middleton only has a 28 per cent coverage rate for child care, and that's tabled in that information.

My question to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development: When will we see more child care spaces in Annapolis, and are these deserts considered when we finally get new child care spots?

BECKY DRUHAN: Speaker, if I could snap my fingers and build those child care spaces immediately, I absolutely would do that. This is a transformation. This is a five-year transformation. I know that for families that are looking for child care and for communities that are waiting for child care, things can't happen fast enough. I very much sympathize with that. I can assure the member opposite that absolutely the availability of current child care is one of the primary factors that we're looking at when we're looking at where we expand and where we provide support to expand. Our goal is to eliminate those deserts so that there's nowhere in Nova Scotia that is uncovered by child care. That is a focus of ours, and I look forward in the coming weeks and months to continue to announce new openings of child care centres.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour.

EECD: ACCESSIBLE CHILD CARE - PROVIDE

HON. TONY INCE: Speaker, welcome to the Chair.

A bilateral agreement was signed in Summer 2021. There were important parts to this agreement to ensure that equitable and accessible child care was provided across the province to all children. The bilateral agreement calls for a central organization to be set up to ensure that inclusive, cultural, and appropriate high-quality care is provided, and I'll

table that. My question to the minister: Why has the central organization not been set up yet?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: One of the things that I'm really proud of that has been very beneficial and helpful in our work on child care that our government took action on when I took office was the creation of our engagement table. It was very clear early on that we needed to work with and connect with folks who are involved in the child care sector as we build forward our plans to transform child care. We created an engagement table that includes folks in the sector. Those are members of - I'm sorry. There's a bit of noise over there.

THE SPEAKER: I have already asked to keep the chatter down. I know sometimes you have to speak, but please be respectful to one another. I don't want to have to mention it again through this Question Period.

[2:45 p.m.]

The honourable Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development has the floor.

BECKY DRUHAN: We have taken the great advice of that engagement table in prioritizing the work that we're doing. We have been taking their lead and guidance as we move forward with this work.

TONY INCE: It is important that daycare operators and ECEs are empowered to provide the best care possible for children, including ensuring that children can have culturally appropriate care. Once again, we are seeing that it appears that this government is not meeting its part of the deal. My question to the minister: Can she commit to a date when the central organization will be set up and support our workers and operators?

BECKY DRUHAN: Our engagement table is comprised of people who are involved in the child care sector. We have operators both from private and not-for-profit centres. We have ECEs. We have family members. We have experts. That table has been invaluable in providing us with guidance around what steps we need to take, how we need to prioritize, and what we need to do to execute on this transformation of child care so that we build a child care system in Nova Scotia that is truly responsive to our needs in Nova Scotia, the families of Nova Scotians.

Speaker, we will continue to take their advice and guidance as we move forward and deliver on the promises under this child care transformation.

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

DCS: POVERTY - ADDRESS

KENDRA COOMBES: Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Community Services. A recent report from Food Banks Canada on the state of poverty gave Nova Scotia the worst grade in the country, stating that a significant portion of the population is struggling to meet their basic needs and the Province has taken minimal steps in 2023 to address these issues. I am sure this failing grade comes as no surprise to thousands of Nova Scotians struggling to get by. When will this government step up and seriously address poverty?

HON. TREVOR BOUDREAU: Certainly our government is concerned about the ongoing impact that inflation, interest rates rising, and new federal taxes are having on Nova Scotians. We have rolled out a number of different targeted supports, especially for those who are in need. We have increased the Nova Scotia Child Benefit for two years in a row. We've targeted supports for income assistance clients. We have created and enhanced the Seniors Care Grant and will continue to do what we - we know this is a topic that is complex and we know that we need to work with our partners and certainly across departments and with other levels of government. We know there is more to do but we will continue to do what we can.

KENDRA COOMBES: While I appreciate the answer about targeted supports, it is not a strategy with timelines attached as well as actual targets attached. Unlike many other provinces, Nova Scotia has not released an updated poverty reduction strategy in 14 years. This was cited by Food Banks Canada as one of the key aspects leading the failing grade, that criticized that Nova Scotia has no updated poverty reduction strategy and does not have a sufficient framework to eliminate poverty and low incomes in the province.

Yes or no: Will this minister commit to releasing a provincial poverty reduction strategy and when?

TREVOR BOUDREAU: Speaker, reports from organizations like Food Banks Canada help kind of shape and frame the responses and ideas that we will look at for those challenges that people are facing. We realize, as highlighted in the report, that there is more to do and as I've said, our government is committed to doing more and certainly we will look at all those opportunities over the next couple of months and over the budget process to support Nova Scotians and certainly our most vulnerable.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

EECD: CHILD CARE DEAL HOLD-UP - EXPLAIN

LORELEI NICOLL: Speaker, not having enough child care spaces disproportionately impacts women being able to go back to work. The \$10-a-day child care

deal is supposed to be equitable and accessible for families to access child care and ensure more women in particular are able to get back to work.

I would like to ask the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development: Does she not see how this government's failure to create enough child care spaces, especially here in HRM, has directly impacted more women from being able to re-enter the work force? Working mothers are asking me, What exactly is the hold-up and when will the \$10-a-day deal be here in Nova Scotia if it is moving at full steam ahead?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: Speaker, I agree with the member opposite about the reality that this transformation in child care absolutely is essential to support women. It is essential to support women in their endeavours in the workplace and going back to school. Having the freedom to access child care when they need it and where they need it.

This is transformational work. This is a five-year agreement and we are taking a sector that has been funded by a patchwork quilt of grants and turning it into a sector that meets Nova Scotian needs across the province. It is tailored and addresses the child care needs of our entire province and this does take time. If I could snap my fingers and do it overnight, I would.

LORELEI NICOLL: I just want to ask: What is the adequate amount of spaces for child care that are needed in HRM currently?

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

The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou on a point of order.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: The Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development multiple times in her responses referenced 2,000-plus new seats into the child care system across the province. She's referenced that number multiple times. I would ask that the minister please table that information by the end of the week for the House.

THE SPEAKER: I'd like to indicate to the member that it really is not a point of order. You can certainly ask when you speak to the minister, but it's not a point of order in the Chamber.

The honourable member for Fairview-Clayton Park on an introduction.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: I would just like the House and the guests in the gallery to realize how popular this group is, because I already got swooped in by the member for beautiful Chester-St. Margaret's, and my leader almost tried to take this away from me. In the West Gallery, we have the class of Grade 12 global politics students from Forest

Heights Community School. This is a school very near and dear to my heart because it was where I taught and was counsellor for six years before I entered into politics. I would like to give a formal introduction to their teacher, Abigail Parker. If she could rise while I say her name and stay standing, please - also her students Grace Brittain, Logan Coulstring, Sean Jollimore, and Charlie McInnes. If you could all rise and receive the warm welcome of the House. (Applause) Tell Mr. Bezeau he sucks when you see him next time.

THE SPEAKER: I hope you enjoy your visit here.

The honourable member for Waverley-Fall River-Beaver Bank on an introduction.

HON. BRIAN WONG: I'd like to draw your attention to this wing . . .

THE SPEAKER: The East.

BRIAN WONG: To the East Wing to my constituents Kerstin and Steve Boyce, and two visitors from Florida who happened to come in on a cruise ship today, who are visiting: Jim and Ann Soble. Welcome to the Legislature. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Welcome.

The honourable Government House Leader.

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

HON. KIM MASLAND: Thank you, Speaker. Would you please call the order of business, Public Bills for Second Reading.

PUBLIC BILLS FOR SECOND READING

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 337.

Bill No. 337 - Electricity Act (amended).

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Service Nova.

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: I move that Bill No. 337, An Act to Amend Chapter 25 of the Acts of 2004, the Electricity Act, be now read a second time.

I'm pleased to rise on behalf of my colleague, the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables, to speak about the intent of this bill. As you know, the Premier and the minister went to Ottawa yesterday, along with our neighbours from New Brunswick. They

shared our clean power plan with federal partners. They've explained why it's the right path to meet our shared climate-change goals.

They're on their way home now, having secured a commitment from the federal government to move our plan forward. That is great news for Nova Scotia. It's good news for our bright and sustainable future, and so is this bill. This bill makes small but important changes to the Electricity Act. They are necessary changes to keep moving our clean power plan forward. While they are small, the world of electricity is technical, so please allow me to outline how these changes fit into the grander scheme of things.

One of the amendments is a simple clarification about an existing provision. This provision is something called a sleeved power purchase agreement. In this kind of agreement, a renewable electricity producer sells power to Nova Scotia Power, and then Nova Scotia Power sells it to a customer, typically a very large industrial customer. What's different here is that the producer and the customer negotiate the price of that power, and then the minister approves it. While it can be any renewable, it's typically wind power that we're talking about. This is a low-cost option for these customers. Nova Scotia Power is just a go-between in this agreement, and they manage the sale and the delivery. This provision gives the minister the authority to direct Nova Scotia Power to enter into this type of agreement.

To be clear, we don't need to force Nova Scotia Power into these agreements. They're working on this willingly for everyone's benefit, including ratepayers. We just need the provision to make these agreements happen. We came to realize that the language about the minister's authority wasn't quite clear enough, so we're fixing that now, because we don't want any impediments to getting more renewable electricity onto the grid. We want to be full steam ahead.

The same is true for the other amendment, Speaker. This Spring, we made a change to help bring more energy storage on our system faster. We need to store excess energy on the windy and sunny days so it could be used during peak demand hours. This reduces renewable energy waste and makes the grid more stable. That's why we created a pathway in the Spring for private companies to bring innovative new options directly to government.

It will allow us to take advantage of innovations that are happening in this field, and to do it quickly. While we work through proposals under that process, we want to give Nova Scotia Power a similar option to move quickly on energy storage projects that benefit all ratepayers. Usually, the utility would bring these projects to the UARB, and we're making an amendment to allow government to consider and approve the storage projects. Our aim is for speed to get all of these critical pieces in place to reach our clean energy goals.

At the same time, we will not sacrifice the necessary due diligence to make sure these projects benefit ratepayers. I want to note that Nova Scotia Power has already more than \$100 million in federal funding to get this project started and keep its costs effective for ratepayers. This amendment will keep it moving quickly. The UARB will continue to play an important role of oversight for Nova Scotia Power as these projects move along.

I'm proud to say that Nova Scotia is home to truly world-class research on battery storage. We have exciting work in this sector, right here at home. We will use it to get our clean energy future right. Speaker, these are small changes, but every step we take, big or small, is one more step closer to reaching our goals. And we are taking lots of big steps too. We know that there is not a lot of time to meet our targets, but we will meet them. We owe it to our children, to our grandchildren to make this transition to clean energy.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

[3:00 p.m.]

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I appreciate the time to stand up and speak on this bill. This is a government that has been in for two years now and obviously Nova Scotia Power has been very topical. It's been several bills that have come forward with regards to Nova Scotia Power. In listening to the minister's speech, what I'm hearing is we want to change over to renewable energy. We want to be able to get the green energy. We want to be able to do the investments with Nova Scotia Power.

But what I will say is the last time that this government introduced a bill when it came to Nova Scotia Power, they said that they were going to protect ratepayers, and that was from the mouth of the Premier. He said that power rates will not go up. That is what he said in this Legislature. And yet power rates went up 14 per cent. There was a massive round of applause every single time that bill was discussed, and anyone on that side of the House stood up and spoke on that bill or spoke about Nova Scotia Power.

They talked about how they were fighting Nova Scotia Power, and they were going to do everything within their power, and this piece of legislation was going to prevent those rates from going up. What we do know is that was not true. It was not true. Rates went up in one year, quicker than any time probably in the last 20 years. A 14 per cent increase. And what this government said was, Nothing we can do, after sitting in the Legislature saying We're going to prevent that; we're going to protect ratepayers.

Forgive me if I don't have faith that this project's going to go through. And the same minister who just stood up and spoke about this massive project that's happening is the same minister who's also in charge of the huge health care infrastructure builds that are happening - that are actually behind schedule. There are no updates on them and we don't know where they're going. How can we have faith that this generational investment into power rates and power is going to be on time, on price, have the resources needed, have the

manpower needed, have the skilled trade labour needed, when right here at home they can't do the projects that they promised? That's what scares me, that there are big numbers that get thrown around, like \$100 million - there's \$100 million from the feds. I didn't hear any type of investment from the province.

This is a government that will attack the federal government non-stop, and yet just stood up and said we're getting \$100 million from the feds. They will attack the federal government and say they're spending too much, and they're throwing money out the door, their federal leader has bashed the spending non-stop, yet they just stood here and said we're getting \$100 million from the feds.

There are a few things we need to be concerned about. We need to be concerned about the environment, obviously, and finding renewable energy sources into this province, but we also have to be able to protect ratepayers. The one thing that I've not heard from that minister, or the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, or the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables on any of these projects is ratepayer protection. We haven't heard anything from them about what the impact is on ratepayers. How much are these power rates going to go up?

In fact, Speaker, when it comes to this project and power rates, we just had a Public Accounts Committee to discuss this - Nova Scotia Power. Actually, Speaker, you were there. Nova Scotia Power was there, I think the Ecology Action Centre was there, the department was there, there was another group there - the Energy Task Force, or something like that.

Some of the ideas we heard, quite frankly from the NDP and the government, are going to increase power rates for working-class and middle-class Nova Scotians. If you don't believe me, go back in Hansard and read the question that I asked the Ecology Action Centre and to the other members there, about renewable energy, bringing renewable energy into this province. One of the questions I asked them was: There was an idea floated around about having a specific rate for low-income Nova Scotians, and part of that will be renewable energy. I asked: Who bears the cost of that? They said, All the other ratepayers and/or taxpayers.

Again, taxpayers are on the hook for \$100 million on this project. Now ratepayers and 99 per cent of the population is going to be on the hook for massive increases. We need renewable energy in this province, yes, but we just need clarity. Nobody on that side of the House - on the government side - nobody in the committee that we were just in, could tell Nova Scotians how much this project is going to increase the power rates for Nova Scotians. Nobody could tell us.

I think Nova Scotians should be very concerned when deals are being signed, when legislation like this is being passed, and nowhere in the legislation does it say anything about protecting Nova Scotians or ratepayers.

Maybe the minister could get up afterwards and give us a little rundown. He said it's very complicated, these are very complicated things. I guess what he's trying to say is that the average Nova Scotian may not be able to understand it, so maybe I won't be able to understand it. Maybe the minister could stand up and explain to us, and promise Nova Scotians here today, where they're spending tens of millions and hundreds of millions of dollars of Nova Scotians' money on these projects: Will they protect ratepayers, and will they do a better job than they did on the last Nova Scotia Power bill? Since then rates have gone up 14 per cent.

When the minister stood up to speak on this, again, we didn't hear the words "Nova Scotians." We didn't hear "the residents of Nova Scotia." We didn't hear "citizens." We heard "private companies." We heard "federal dollars." Again, that sets off alarm bells to me, when we have energy investment in this province, and the ratepayers and the average Nova Scotians are not at the forefront of this.

When we've heard ideas come forward like this, and like the ones we heard from the NDP in Public Accounts Committee and what we've heard from the experts is that this is going to increase power rates for Nova Scotians. We're in an affordability crisis right now. If you're going to get \$100 million from the feds on this project, I would argue that maybe you should also be looking at other things when it comes to renewable energy. There is a certain percentage of Nova Scotians who have the ability to pay for solar panels for their own residential homes. This is all part of the solution when it comes to renewable energy and getting off carbon.

It used to be, when it came to solar panels purchased in Nova Scotia, 50 cents on the dollar. It's all renewable. It used to be 50 cents on the dollar – that's what residents of Nova Scotia got if they purchased solar panels here in Nova Scotia. It's not even remotely close to that. That money has dwindled. There's very little money left because there was such a huge uptake in it.

I would say that if we're looking at finding solutions, we don't have to just look at the private industry and giving massive amounts of money to Nova Scotia Power and to different businesses. What I would say - and I've said it before, and I'll continue to say it - is that Nova Scotians can spend their own money better than anyone in this Chamber can. We like to think that we're in government, or we're elected officials, and we are the wisest people on the planet when it comes to spending Nova Scotians' money. Well, that's not true.

A big part of that money is being spent on power bills. If the government is serious about meeting their targets, if they're serious about greening the system, if they're serious about getting off carbon, they're leaving the biggest stakeholder out of the conversation. That is the people who use the power. That's the residents of Nova Scotia. I would say that when the Premier is - and it was referenced by the minister that the Premier and the minister are up in Ottawa discussing this deal, and it's all part of this piece of legislation. I

wonder if they said, Hey, will you top up or give us some more money for the residential solar panel . . . ?

THE SPEAKER: Order. I'd just like to remind the member to stick to the bill. We're drifting back and forth. Just stick to speaking to the bill.

The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Just for some clarification - I'm allowed to reference solar and wind power, because that's what's being impacted, and greening the system and getting off carbon. This is what this bill is about. Thank you. Just for clarification.

Again, I wonder, Speaker, if the Premier and the minister, when they were in Ottawa, asked the Prime Minister and the minister: Can you do us a favour down here and maybe top up probably the most successful green program this province has ever seen? Or not just top it up - how about you make it so affordable that any Nova Scotian can have it? That is part of the way you're going to meet your green targets.

For some reason, we've become obsessed with thinking that these large for-profit corporations are the answer, and that in order to find the solution, we have to give them tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions, of Nova Scotian taxpayer dollars. They're going to lower the rates, they're going to make the energy greener, and they're going to make less profit doing it. I mean, I guess there's a first time for everything.

The solar industry in Nova Scotia has exploded in a positive way. It really has. The reason why it got so big is because residential solar panels became so affordable at one point. If you ask anyone in the industry - if you just go out tomorrow and purchase solar panels and the equipment that's needed - first of all, the batteries are not affordable. If you purchase the solar panels, the solar equipment that's needed, at full value and you slap it on your home, you're actually not going to get much of a return over the lifetime of those solar panels, because they're so expensive.

That's where government stepped in and created an amazing program. Again, I don't know why this is not part of the solution, why it's not part of the greening of the grid solution. Why every piece of public housing in Nova Scotia, why are they not part of the solution when it comes to greening the grid and the carbon footprint?

One of the things you could be doing is slapping renewable energy on every single one of those properties, creating jobs right across this province and giving power rate breaks to the people who need it the most. That's how you reduce power rates for people who need it the most. You don't transfer the cost onto the rest of Nova Scotia. What you do is you look to wind, and you look to solar for a reduction in power rates for low-income Nova Scotians. It's a pretty novel idea.

I think what has happened with this discussion is - listen, the minister's right. It's an extremely complicated issue. I'm not going to stand up here and pretend like I understand the nuances of the Loop. I'm not going to pretend that I understand the nuances of the power grid. I know that any time there's a more than five-kilometre-an-hour wind in my community, the power goes out, that's what I understand, but I'm not going to stand here and pretend like I know more than the ministers on this, because they have the experts around them.

What I do know is - this could be clipped any way you want to clip it - but we've become so infatuated with greening the grid as fast as possible that we've forgotten the human cost of it. What does that mean? That means if we don't do this in a responsible and meaningful manner - we think we have power poverty now? Our power rates are going to destroy communities and destroy families, and I'm not exaggerating, Speaker, because I see it every day.

[3:15 p.m.]

I looked at my phone after Question Period, and I had somebody reach out to me who's a small business owner who said, "I can't afford my power rates anymore, what do I do?" Yet those people are left out of the conversation when it comes to renewable energy, greening the grid, and carbon-neutral. Humans are left out of it. I know the cost, Speaker. A lot of us in this Chamber have felt the impacts of climate change over the past 12 months. We've felt it personally, not just the last 12 months, the last 10 years. I think the last three or four years, when it comes to climate change, when it comes to the importance of carbon neutrality, I think even the people that didn't believe now believe.

It's important that we bring forward legislation that protects the environment, protects our children, and protects our future, but we have to do it while investing in the people of Nova Scotia. I will say, going through this bill quickly, I don't think I saw a reference to actual people once in this bill.

The government is saying we're going to do full steam ahead. You know what? It's kind of funny. I don't necessarily disagree with some of their stances on full steam ahead. In fact, I applaud it, because I think we need to act differently. I think we need to act immediately. I think the "immediately" part of this bill and "quickly" part of this bill should be achievable. There should be short-term and long-term investments. I don't see the short-term investments.

Again, I will say to anyone who might be listening to this, I truly believe the way to help Nova Scotians to help meet our targets, to help people who need it the most, to help small businesses, to help people who have been struggling - COVID kicked everyone's butt - to help people who are struggling with power rates, and who are going to be the ones who are most impacted by the investments that Nova Scotia Power has to make. Inevitably,

they're going to put it on taxpayers, and inevitably, our rates are going to go up. Give people a true option to go green. Give individuals an affordable option - another option.

I could use an example of a comparison - if you give me a little leeway. I promise I won't go long on this. I'll give you a little bit of comparison. Right now, we obviously know that if you need power, you're one and done. That's it. There's one company to deal with. No other company is going to come into Nova Scotia and compete. There's not going to be a mom and pop power company. We know that. It's going to take vision, innovation, and thinking outside the box. If we continue to go down the same route, which is "We're going to give Nova Scotia Power all the money," then we're going to fight with them. Then the rates are going to go up. Then they're going to tell us they can't meet their goals unless the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board gives them another half billion dollars or . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order. There are plenty of clauses in this bill to stick on, to be discussing. I just remind the member - even though through his analogy here - to stick to speaking on the bill.

The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm getting advice from the other side of the aisle. I think that's the first time I've ever had that.

I'll finish it up. I'm not actually filibustering. This really does concern me because we're seeing everything go up. I just feel like leader after leader and government after government - everybody says they're going to do something, yet here we are doing the same thing. Now we have a potential - who knows - change in the federal government. Who knows what happens in the next two years? I would say that if we are truly concerned, and we truly want to meet our targets, and just as importantly, if we truly want to make people's lives more affordable so they stay in Nova Scotia - so people come to Nova Scotia and people invest in Nova Scotia - I think we have to give them the ability to produce their own power. That's my personal opinion.

The way to do that is to make solar and solar storage truly affordable. Maybe you take a \$10 million, \$15 million, or \$20 million hit on this, but you're doing what's best for Nova Scotians, and that's what we were elected to do, no matter what we think. Some of us may think we were elected to represent a party or a cause or this or that. We were elected by the people of Nova Scotia to represent the people in our communities.

I truly believe when it comes to power, this government needs to step up, reinvest in that residential solar program - and not just reinvest in it, but really top it up to make it affordable. Instead of investing in Nova Scotia Power and depending on large corporations, instead of depending on outside stakeholders like the federal government or even in-province stakeholders like the municipality, step up, make the investment, and do what's right for Nova Scotians.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I am just going to say a few words about this bill to begin with, and say more in Committee of the Whole House on Bills on third reading. We in the NDP caucus agree that this province needs to quickly and urgently look to incorporating more renewables into our energy mix so as to meet our climate change reduction targets. It seems like this is a good move.

It's really nice to hear the minister when he introduced this bill talk about how the Premier and the Minister of Energy returned home from their positive meetings with the federal government. That is great news, especially given the bungled negotiations, I would suggest, with the carbon tax earlier in the year. It's good to see that this government is co-operating again and trying to do what's best for Nova Scotia.

When similar changes were introduced earlier this year to another electricity bill, we expressed concern about the expedition and the ministerial discretion afforded to the capital approval process, bypassing accountability and transparency in the decision-making around these important issues.

We are concerned about the overall trend that we've seen from this government, taking power from independent boards and bodies and other levels of government. For example, yesterday at the Law Amendments Committee we heard from many members of the HRM municipal government about a bill that is being debated in this session which will take away their power and place it in the hands of this government, a single minister or the Cabinet.

This bill says that projects will be approved if the opinion of the minister is that it is in the best interest of ratepayers. That's complicated and concerning. For one person to decide if something is in the best interest of a massive group of people -without the need for consultation or public input or anything or debate of any kind - is deeply concerning. It's not surprising, it's concerning. It's not surprising because we've seen it happen with a number of other pieces of legislation in the last year, and even in this session.

There's no information or direction on how this will be determined. Again, too much is left to the minister's discretion. The bill is lacking in detail as to how the government will ensure affordable energy for ratepayers. Again, we are left wondering what is with the secrecy around all of this.

Before I close, I will also say - and this is a little bit to what my colleague from Halifax Atlantic was saying - that the bill does not contemplate much in and around the use of efficiency as a way of reducing power rates, and as a way of cleaning our grid and reaching our greenhouse gas reduction targets. Efficiency is the number one and cheapest way to meet those targets. Yet we are doing everything we can to put our eggs in the basket

of producing cleaner electricity and more electricity rather than demand-side management and using less.

If we could help people use less, then the province would be using less, we'd be reaching our targets easier, and people's power bills would lower. This would affect so many people in a positive way who are experiencing energy poverty, as my colleague said. I would like to see some real leadership. I know EfficiencyOne does a great job, but they could be doing - and we as a province could be doing - so much more when it comes to efficiency, reducing our usage and our demand on the grid. Let's see a bill about that. We look forward to hearing from stakeholders at Law Amendments.

THE SPEAKER: If recognize the minister it will be to close the debate.

The honourable Minister of Service Nova Scotia.

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: Although it's not contained in the bill - I don't think it needs to be contained in a bill - I'll respond to my colleague, the member for Dartmouth North, on the premise of her question for action. We are a government of action - \$140 million worth of action - to support exactly what the member just stated, to support Nova Scotians with efficiency improvements. (Interruption) Sorry, \$197 million. I stand corrected by the Minister of Environment and Climate Change. We are acting in that respect.

I do want to thank my honourable colleagues for their comments. I appreciate that they want to see clean, affordable, and reliable electricity for all Nova Scotians. So do we on this side of the House. That's why our clean power plan is all about greening our grid in a way that also protects ratepayers in Nova Scotia. There's far more detail in that plan than I can cover here all day. This bill covers two small changes in the much larger picture of moving our plan forward. We will be moving forward for the benefit of all Nova Scotians. With that, I move to close second reading on Bill No. 337.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is for second reading of Bill No. 337.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Ordered that this bill be referred to the Committee on Law Amendments.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 334.

Bill No. 334 - Health Services and Insurance Act (amended).

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister responsible for the Office of Addictions and Mental Health.

HON. BRIAN COMER: Speaker, I move that Bill No. 334, an Act to Amend Chapter 197 of the Revised Statutes of 1989, the Health Services and Insurance Act, be now read a second time.

Two years ago, we made a commitment to Nova Scotians: universal mental health and addictions care. That means no matter where you live in the province, no matter what issue you might be facing or illness you're living with, you can get the mental health and addictions care that you need for free as part of our publicly funded health care system. We were the first in Canada to make this commitment. With this bill, we are making history again as the first province in Canada to cement our commitment to universal mental health and addictions care in legislation.

[3:30 p.m.]

The Health Services and Insurance Act is the legal framework that enables the delivery of many health care services across our province. It is one very important way that we ensure Nova Scotians get the care they need without financial or other barriers - a right guaranteed to all Canadians under the Canada Health Act. The Health Services and Insurance Act enables insured services programs like MSI, just to give an example.

Paying private sector providers for public access to health care is nothing new. We've been doing it in this province for decades. It's how we pay health care providers like doctors, dentists, and pharmacists, among others, for the valuable services they deliver to Nova Scotians every day. Now, with these amendments, it's how we will pay certain mental health and addictions providers for the services they deliver on behalf of Nova Scotians as well.

Mental health and addictions care is health care. Seeing a psychologist or therapist when you need one shouldn't be any different from seeing a doctor, a dentist, or a pharmacist, but it has been different. People who could afford to pay for care are those lucky enough to have private health insurance. They have had more access to mental health and addictions care than people who do not. We need to remove any barrier that we can - every barrier - and make these important health care services available to all Nova Scotians.

Tapping into the capacity that exists in our private sector is one very important way for connecting Nova Scotians to health care, but it's only one of the ways. We're also working with community-based organizations across the province, which as many of my colleagues in this Chamber know, play a valuable role in our communities. Through CBOs, Nova Scotians have access to so many excellent resources, tools, and programs, delivered by people they know and trust, right in their communities that they call home. We have

provided millions in funding to CBOs across the province in the last two years so they could continue to do this important work and do more of it.

Another way we are connecting people to care is by leveraging the capacity in our post-secondary institutions. A great example of that is a new pilot project launched in September to establish the Dalhousie Centre for Psychological Health, where people from the community who face significant barriers to access can get the mental health care they need. The services are provided by clinical psychology PhD students, with supervision by experienced, registered psychologists.

Projects like this allow us to fill a gap in our system while also shoring up our future by training the next generation of health care providers. We are also leveraging virtual care options, which has allowed us to offer brand new services and supports to Nova Scotians, ones that were not available before. For example, counselling is available by phone or in person through Access Wellness and cognitive behavioural therapy with Tranquility. Both these services and many more are available right now for free and can be accessed from anywhere in the province.

We are tapping into all those areas - private sector, community-based organizations, universities, and virtual care. In doing so, we are helping to address the gaps in care while also taking some pressure off the public system. A great example of our work with the private sector will look into an insured service program as our pilot project with clinical psychologists. Through this pilot, we are contracting registered psychologists to complete diagnostic assessments for autism and ADHD for children and youth who are on wait-lists for these services.

There are more than 1,700 children and adolescents waiting for assessment for autism and ADHD right now, and that list continues to grow every month. We have incredible public sector psychologists doing this work right now with the IWK Health Centre and the Nova Scotia Health Authority. We ask a lot of them every day, and they too watch those wait-lists grow.

We are working hard to recruit health care workers to this province, but it is not easy and it takes time - time these children and their families don't have. They need these assessments now, and we have psychologists out there who can do them. Why wouldn't we tap into that capacity? We have worked closely with the Association of Psychologists of Nova Scotia and other partners to design a program that would let us test the use of service codes as a way to deliver mental health and addictions care, while also addressing this long-standing need in our health care system for diagnostic assessment.

The pilot is limited in scope, both in terms of provider and service - the diagnostic assessment. It is time-bound for one year. Integration is key to this pilot and to our work overall as we expand the system. Our approach brings private sector resources into the public system.

The wait-list for services is managed by the IWK Health Centre and the Nova Scotia Health Authority. When a child's name comes up on the list for assessment, the central coordinator can refer them to whomever is available. It might be in the public sector, or it might be in the private sector. Either way, the assessment is the same, the process is the same, and the price for the family is the same - nothing. There are no financial barriers, just more access for more people more quickly.

Leveraging the capacity that exists in our province, in the private sector, and beyond is key. At the same time, government is making record investments to expand the health care system, like our two new mental health acute day hospitals in Dartmouth and in Cape Breton, our recovery support centres - five are now open and there are more to come - and our expanding Integrated Youth Services across the province.

The work is well under way now. Once it is fully implemented, we will have a total of eight community-based sites across Nova Scotia. These are just some of the examples, but each of them supports the same end goal: universal mental health and addictions care.

The amendments we are making to the Health Services and Insurance Act support that goal, too, but they do something else that is just as important. They position mental health care alongside physical health care, where it belongs, because mental health and addictions care is health care. Treating depression is no less important than treating diabetes. Treating bipolar disorder is no less important than treating high blood pressure. Treating addiction is no less important than treating asthma.

These legislative amendments help chip away at the wall that still separates mental health and physical health. Once passed, it will give us another tool in our toolbox to connect Nova Scotians to the mental health, addictions, and health care they need. (Applause)

SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Speaker, I'm happy to stand and speak to Bill No. 334, Health Services and Insurance Act (amended).

We're happy to see this bill, as long as it takes us closer to universal mental health care, which is in the minister's mandate. However, I'm quite disappointed that there are very few details in this bill. We have many questions that I hope the minister will have an opportunity to address today or in his third reading of Bill No. 334.

Some of these questions are, What does universal mental health mean? and What is the dollar value that this government is prepared to spend on universal addiction and mental health? I didn't see any dollar value. How many hours of therapy will each Nova Scotia patient be allocated? When you say universal mental health, is it going to be just like the insurance company offering so many hours and that's all you're allowed per year? We

would like some details of what universal mental health is to you, and to the department, please.

Second, in the minister's mandate letter it states, "Introduce universal addictions and mental coverage through legislation that guarantees every Nova Scotian access to allied mental health professionals." I do not see this in this bill. When can we expect to see that mentioned in your bill, Minister?

Another question also in your mandate is, "Establish mechanisms to allow private practitioners to take on clients knowing that the MSI will pay them a fair rate for services rendered." That wasn't mentioned in Bill 334. We would like to know when and which allied - actually, is this going to be psychologists, preventive services - again, this is not in this bill and there are no details whatsoever. Which mental health professionals will now have the opportunity to bill? Psychologists, registered therapists, psychiatrists - no mention of how we're going to offer those services at all.

Speaker, we were contacted by the Nova Scotia College of Counselling Therapists this past year, who told us there are 491 active therapists in the province who could fill the gap of those looking for mental health help. We know the importance of timely intervention when it comes to mental health.

I'm really pleased that the minister mentioned the new pilot with Dalhousie University with the psychologists, but there is also another opportunity of 491 therapists who are available right now. They are students who need to get their hours and they're willing to do it for free as long as we help them with some operational things. But it is, again, another pilot that the minister could look at, and I have discussed that timely intervention when it comes to mental health is very important. In April 2023, in HRM, the wait times for access were 127 days. In 2021, two years ago, when this government took over, it was 75 days - so the wait times have almost doubled.

I would hope that the minister is listening to the therapists who are available to fill the gap now. This is kind of sad to bring this, but had this service been available it would have helped Nancy Saunders's son. My colleague Brendan Maguire and I met with Nancy, who lost her son, Ben, to suicide in April of this year. It really breaks my heart to hear her speak about the challenges he faced in the mental health system. Ben had asked for help and . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order. I would just ask that the member refer to members here not by their name. You referred to the member for Halifax Atlantic by his name as opposed to the member for Halifax Atlantic.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Yes, I apologize.

The member for Halifax Atlantic and I met with Nancy Saunders. It was very difficult to listen to her and the fact that she lost her son. He was asking for help, and she tried to get him help, but he had to wait four months to see someone. Unfortunately, he took his life. I know there are many stories similar to Ben's story. He never made it to his appointment. If only we had quicker access, we might be speaking differently.

I know the minister has experience in the mental health system, and I do believe that he and the department are working hard to fix the system, and I'm so grateful for that. If this bill will do that so that Nova Scotians like Ben do not have to wait longer than - well, it shouldn't be 127 days - then we are in support of this bill.

[3:45 p.m.]

I also wanted to ask - I had some notes here from the minister as well - about virtual care. He mentioned it in his speech. Is that the one with one hour per patient? I would love to hear the results of this. Where did the information go? How many of them were referred in this system and had to wait 100 or 127 days to see someone? If the minister can give us an update on that virtual care one-hour session and how that money was spent and how useful that has been, I would really appreciate it.

I spoke to the minister as well about Couch of HOPE, with whom I met earlier this year. What a fantastic concept, having the students who are graduating as counsellors be able to use their practicum time providing early intervention for those who may just need someone to speak with. This program could be expanded to other areas outside of HRM, and they are eager to do that for us. I do believe that it takes more than one solution. I am so hopeful that this bill will get us one step closer to that reality of universal mental health care.

I look forward to the minister's answers to our questions and to hearing from the stakeholders at the Law Amendments Committee.

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

LISA LACHANCE: I rise to offer our preliminary comments on this bill. Our caucus greatly supports improving access to mental health services, but we do have many questions about this approach.

The minister talked about a couple of the interesting pilots which are under way, one in terms of supporting private practice psychologists to perform autism spectrum and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder assessments, and another pilot where Ph.D. students from Dalhousie University's clinical psychology program are providing services. I know that there are other initiatives funded in the last two budgets. It would be great to see the results of those pilots, to understand what has been learned from those pilots and how they

are being used to develop this proposed approach. I invite the minister to share the evidence that's being gathered.

I think the main question I have with this approach at this point is how it will actually meet the demands. The minister referred to 1,700 folks, children, on the wait-list for ASD and ADHD assessments. That's obviously just one piece of the wait for mental health services in the province.

In that case, we know what the demand is. We have a sense of what the demand is. What is the actual system capacity that we're getting from what's proposed in this bill to actually respond? I know that psychologists have shared a number of concerns with this bill. I look forward to Law Amendments Committee, where they will be able to present their concerns in greater detail.

I think one of the concerns is, by doing this, by opening up billing codes, who is actually available to do the work? I think that's a really important part of the question. A skeptic could say that this is fulfilling an election promise, a platform promise, but the actual fulfilling of that promise is in the outcomes, and it's in people having improved access to mental health services.

In terms of expanding access to autism and ADHD assessments, I think we can talk about the 1,700 people on the wait-list - and that's a big number, for sure. But I think it's really important to consider the family's experience and the child's experience when they're in that waiting period. When a young person is in school or in the community or at home and starts to have challenges with self-regulation or integration - different types of signs that maybe would cause teachers or parents or clinicians to start to wonder if this young person needs additional support, and what's going on - there can be lots of meetings between parents and teachers about the challenges a young person, for instance, might be facing in the classroom, but without a diagnosis or without an assessment, in fact, there are no services available.

The services are already stretched in schools. It often takes years for people to have their assessments, and what those years look like for six-year-olds and seven-year-olds and ten-year-olds and thirteen-year-olds - those are really important years. I would argue that those younger years pass in a different way than, perhaps, our adult years pass.

If a young person is having trouble functioning at school, it really starts to create a pattern of discipline, shame, school exclusion, class exclusion - and that exclusion can result in diminished academic results. It really becomes quite circular. When we ask children to wait for these assessments, we're really putting their lives on hold and we're really compounding challenges.

My question about this is: How is this actually going to solve that challenge? What's the planning being put in place between the demand and the service capacity? What

I hear from a lot of psychologists, for instance, is there is no capacity in the private sector right now in Nova Scotia. If you try, for instance, to get a psychologist appointment throughout the Annapolis Valley, you're actually on a wait-list. If you try to book with a psychologist here in Halifax to do a private ADHD assessment - by the way, those are thousands of dollars; that's why people don't pay for them privately - in the past you could often get booked in with a psychologist within a quarter of a year. That's not the case anymore. Even if you are desperate, and your child's school experience is diminishing so greatly that you need to have this assessment done and can't wait for the school-based assessment, you're often still waiting months and months, if not years and years, for assessments.

I'm just not convinced that we actually have the service capacity. I think this bill has the intent to start the road toward universal mental health, but I don't think we have the capacity.

I have a few other questions. It's also interesting to consider what's been budgeted for this program over the next couple of years - that would be interesting for the minister to share - and how we think that that budgeted amount into a private system where government would have less control over ensuring the services are available - recruitment, for instance. I assume that the government won't be going out to recruit private practitioners.

What is the cost benefit to doing this work versus actually building a more robust public service that the government would have more control over in terms of understanding where the need is - recruitment, retention, and those sorts of things?

I also know that people feel pretty left out. This is a pretty common theme with this government. I literally don't even know what to say about it anymore, about tabling bills where you don't go talk to the people who the bill is about and who do the work. I know psychologists feel completely left out of these discussions, and they don't understand the bill is tabled. I do think it's imperative for the minister to provide greater detail so that stakeholders, who are the people who are supposed to be doing the work for whom this is targeted, are part of the conversation.

With that, I'll take my seat.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I rise to speak in second reading on this newest piece of legislation, Bill No. 334 - An Act to Amend Chapter 197 of the Revised Statutes, 1989, the Health Services and Insurance Act. It's really an exciting piece of legislation, and I really look forward to learning more about the changes that are coming.

We all know here in this Chamber - the minister included - you know, when we talk to our constituents, the deficits and the deficiencies in our health care system, especially around services to help people struggling with mental health illness and addictions - I really look forward to seeing positive changes in this.

Some of the questions that I had in reading through the bill were similar to what some of my other colleagues and Opposition have already asked. Things like, "What is the budget?" "What is the definition of universal mental health care?"

For example, in 5, it says 11.1, there are some points there - A, B, C, D, and E under 5 - that I had some really specific questions around, like A. It says, "the Minister may determine the insured services to which residents are entitled." For example, "the types or classes of insured services to which residents are entitled." My question is: What are they going to be? There's no real clear definition or explanation of the extent to which residents are entitled to have an insured service.

In universal health care, traditional medicine, like with our physicians and nurse practitioners, "universal" means there are no limits. Here when it says, "the extent to which residents are entitled to an insured service," I'm curious as to what the limitations might be. If you see a physician with a cancer diagnosis, it's up to the physician or nurse practitioner as a primary care provider to determine how often they need to see that patient. I am concerned about whether there will be limitations if a provider who's helping someone with a mental illness or an addiction - will they be limited in how many times they're able to see a patient?

I think what really draws attention to this is when I received in the mail a while ago - and I think all Nova Scotians did - a little card that told us we were eligible for one counselling session. I think it was a good gesture, but most people whom I have met in my capacity as a registered nurse, if they are seeking counselling, one session is very rarely enough. I was concerned, and I had other concerns as well that there may be even more of a push to private care.

For example, right now, Nova Scotia Health - if you use virtual health care and if you do not get access to those very few appointments that are available through the government, there's something that comes up and says to the patient, you can access care by paying so many dollars. You can access it privately through Maple. One of the concerns I have is that it won't be truly universal, I guess, Speaker. If somebody is in need of ongoing mental sessions for a mental illness or addiction, that it will be limited, and then they'll be encouraged to use private sector pay.

This little recipe-size card that I received in the mail, letting me and all Nova Scotians know that they had access to one free counselling session, it was through a private provider, TELUS Health.

We all know the situation that we're in with the private company that's providing emergency ambulance services here in the province. I am very nervous, Speaker, about the province, the government getting into another relationship with a private provider that, if we're not holding them accountable, are not going to be able to meet the needs of Nova Scotians. Just some questions around that: 11(b), "the extent." What does that actually mean, "the extent?" What are the limitations?

The circumstances and conditions under which residents are entitled to an insured service - in Cumberland County, we have a lot of limitations and conditions. My question to the minister is: What are these conditions? Will rural Nova Scotia receive the same level of care as urban Nova Scotia?

Right now, there is a mental health crisis line in Nova Scotia, which is a great thing to have. However, the next level of care isn't there. We have situations in Cumberland County where someone might call the mental health crisis line, and too often there's another level of care that's needed, and the counsellor on the other end of the mental health crisis line will say, "Gee, I'm really sorry, but you live in rural Nova Scotia and we don't have a mental health crisis mobile unit in Cumberland County, or really anywhere outside of Halifax, the HRM, so there's nothing I can do to help you." That's very discouraging for Nova Scotians who live outside the HRM.

My question to the minister is: What are these circumstances and conditions under which residents will be entitled to the insured service? Certainly, I'm hoping that geography and where people live will not be one of the conditions and circumstances that limit access to universal mental health care.

Again, under (d), "the extent to which insured services are insured under this Act" - again, universal should mean universal. If there's a person who should decide if somebody is done receiving care, it should be the patient and their health care provider, in this case a therapist or a counsellor, not the government program.

My question to the minister is: Who will qualify for providing care under this Act? Will they be licensed health care providers, such as psychotherapists and psychologists, or not? Whoever the providers are, will they be regulated? If so, who will be overseeing that regulation?

What will happen? I'm asking the minister to consider what will happen to the current staff who work in Mental Health and Addictions? For example, in Cumberland County, we have Cumberland Mental Health and Addictions. There's an office downtown. Will those staff who are currently employed by the province continue to be employed by the province, and that service offered? Or will that be removed, and will they be moved into a more private sector that will be accessed through this program?

There's a couple of other questions I had on the bill. One is under 5(11). I believe it's (3). It says: "A determination under subsection (1) may be made retroactive to a date not earlier than September 1, 1973." I'm just curious about that: What does that mean? So it's retroactive for 50 years?

THE SPEAKER: Order. I just want to remind the honourable member for Cumberland North that we will be discussing subsections later on.

The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: My question to the minister is: Why does this bill have something in it that is making it retroactive, or this section retroactive 50 years? Also, a question about why the Ombudsman Act is involved, and how - I know there's nothing - there's never anything in an Act by accident. For some reason, the Ombudsman Act is included in this bill. I'm curious as to why that is and how that why that is relevant.

There's another section in the bill that's referring to the Chief Justice of Nova Scotia. Again, I'm curious as to why that is part of a bill around mental health and addictions, as opposed to someone from the Department of Health and Wellness, or from the Office of Addictions and Mental Health.

There's another part of the bill that talks about compensation, and I think it's really important for those details to be shared. It also talks about different compensation for different types of providers. Who will actually be providing universal mental health care, and what will their qualifications be?

In Cumberland County - and from what I'm hearing from other people across the province - there is a strong need for improvements in mental health care and addiction services. I do certainly hope that this bill is only the beginning of making improvements. We need improvements in the Adult Protection Act as well. We have too many people in our area who cannot access the mental health care services that they need.

We do not have psychiatrists who are providing 24/7 calls, like any other specialty. The minister speaks about how mental health care should be valued and is just as important as physical health care. I would agree 100 per cent, but we don't see that reflected in the care that's available to our patients.

I know with previous governments the response that I would get is that there is 24/7 psychiatric care and mental health care for your patients, because there are acute care beds and psychiatrists on call in Truro, in Colchester. But the fact is that those beds are often full or there's no access for our patients, and our patients are being left behind in Cumberland County.

We have family members who call my office and ask for help because they have family members who have lost capacity - cannot take care of themselves - and they have no way to access the care they need for their loved one. Too often, they have to go to a court and get a court order from a judge. Law enforcement will take that, go to the home, and take the family member to the emergency department.

The emergency room physician - again, not having consistent access to psychiatric care in another hospital such as Colchester or another area in the province - often leads to the patient being discharged back home without receiving the appropriate medical care that they need. Then the family members are feeling completely distraught and, again, calling my office asking, what are we to do?

[4:00 p.m.]

I know that this bill will hopefully help people have direct access to universal care when they need counselling, but we need so much more. We need psychiatrists. We need specialists for mental health care available who can make proper diagnoses and treatment for patients when they are in need. Right now, we do not have that. We do not have that in Cumberland County.

There are too many people falling through the cracks. There are too many people in need. They literally have lost their jobs. They've lost their ability to take care of themselves due to mental health and addictions. The effect that's having on families in our community is detrimental. We're seeing a rise in domestic violence and other serious issues as well. With those few words, I will take my seat. I look forward to learning more about the details of this bill, and we'll have more to say in third reading of the bill.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

LORELEI NICOLL: I just wanted to speak quickly on this. It's a great bill. I'm glad to see it come forward. I know that the minister referenced the fact that mental health needs to be treated as well as physical health. A lot of times, you go to your doctor - I presume this is going to be the same intake - and the doctor just says it's in your head. Naturally, that's where mental health sits.

I just wonder - because sometimes it takes repeated visits to a doctor to actually get the help you need - how this bill was going to assist people who need the help at the critical time that they need it. That's all I have to say.

THE SPEAKER: If I recognize the minister, it will be to close the debate.

The honourable Minister responsible for the Office of Addictions and Mental Health.

HON. BRIAN COMER: Thank you to my colleagues for some thoughtful comments and questions. I'll try to address some higher-level questions. I made some notes for third reading to answer the specific questions. At its core, this is enabling legislation fulfilling an election promise for universal access. It's certainly not the last step. I think it's the first and a significant milestone for the government and for the province. I heard support across the aisle, which is really great to hear for this important issue.

There are a lot of questions about specific services and disciplines. We are in the process of finishing up a service code manual which will identify the specific disciplines, outcomes, and specific services with each specific service. That's forthcoming in the very near future. We have had engagements with registered counselling therapists. I think that was brought up earlier by a member opposite. We have also had significant conversations with psychologists, social workers, and a host of other allied health care professionals, so there is more to come with specific disciplines that will be included in the service code manual.

Outcomes will be a critical part of any kind of pilot. The Centre for Psychological Health at Dalhousie University, for example, has the outcome scientist embedded within the clinic itself. There is significant work under way across the province. We continue to invest significantly in our formal health care system in terms of psychiatric recruitment, acute mental health day hospitals, opening up recovery support centres across the province, and really supporting those living with addiction issues through comprehensive addiction supports across the province.

Ultimately, this is really about removing barriers to access, whether that's geography, cost of service, or ability to pay. I am looking forward to the Law Amendments Committee and the Committee of the Whole House on Bills. I will address the remaining questions in third reading. With those few remarks, I rise to close debate on Bill No. 334.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is for second reading of Bill No. 334.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Ordered that this bill be referred to the Committee on Law Amendments.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 332.

Bill No. 332 - Workers' Compensation Act (amended).

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

HON. JILL BALSER: Speaker, I move that Bill No. 332, An Act to Amend Chapter 10 of the Acts of 1994-95, the Workers' Compensation Act, now be read a second time.

On Friday, I introduced a bill to amend the Workers' Compensation Act to allow gradual onset stress to be a compensable injury. While I believe people deserve to work in a healthy, supportive work environment, unfortunately that's not the case for everyone. We know there are Nova Scotians who experience significant stress from their work. I hear from them, my department hears from them, and I know members in this House hear from them too.

Today there are appeals in the system awaiting a decision on receiving compensation for prolonged stress claims. They are waiting for this anticipated amendment to the Workers' Compensation Act. These appeals are particularly concerning to me, as minister, because these are individuals who are dealing with serious mental health injury. We want to make sure these workers get the benefit and support they need. This legislation will make sure the workers' compensation system has clear guidelines to support these claims.

Currently, workers covered by the Workers' Compensation Act can only be compensated for a psychological injury when it is an acute reaction to a traumatic event, and that's not good enough. Significant stress can accumulate over time for workers that can lead to a psychological injury that gets in the way of an individual being able to perform their work. This bill would amend the Workers' Compensation Act to make ongoing psychological stressors enabled for compensation, ensuring that the workplace insurance system has supports in place when people need them.

I have heard from both Nova Scotian employees and businesses that they are looking for a better approach to workers' compensation insurance, including enhancing supports and benefits for psychological injuries. This change will ensure that workers get the benefits they need, and will benefit employers, too, by ensuring that they can return to work in a safe and healthy way.

The proposed amendment includes parameters that identify what is and is not considered compensable workplace stress. For example, claims for issues such as labour relations, performance management, a change in job description, and termination of employment may not be considered eligible for compensation. Businesses have policies and internal procedures to handle these matters.

Gradual onset stress is prolonged; it is a prolonged stress outside of the terms and conditions of employment. Those parameters allow the WCB to set policy that relates to workplace injury, not everyday workplace matters. These parameters are in line with other jurisdictions.

Costs for the changes related to gradual onset stress will be based on the actual number and value of claims. Other provinces have not seen an influx in claims when benefits for gradual onset stress were introduced.

These amendments would come into force on September 1, 2024 giving the Workers' Compensation Board the time they need to prepare. The bill also increases funeral benefits for workers who have died on the job, from \$4,000 to \$15,000 - one of the highest in Canada - and indexing those benefits to the Consumer Price Index. This is the right thing to do for these families who are suffering a significant loss. It has no financial implication to the system.

[4:15 p.m.]

The department is currently leading a review of the workers' compensation system that will identify further improvements for the system. The last time it was reviewed was more than two decades ago, and workplaces are changing. The time is now for a comprehensive review to modernize the system, and make it the best that Nova Scotians deserve.

In addition, the department will also be launching a public consultation soon on the workers' compensation system and, in particular, workers' experience with harassment at work. Nova Scotia workplaces and workers will have their say on how the system can be modernized and how workplaces can be safer physically and psychologically. Adding coverage for gradual onset stress before the consultation was an easy decision for us. We have been hearing from Nova Scotians that they need protection for psychological injuries, and we have been falling behind other provinces.

This government - our government - is committed to mental health, and this is another way that we are showing we support mental health workers, and that we're listening. Nova Scotians deserve to have supportive and healthy workplaces. When this isn't the case, we want to ensure they have a workplace injury system that supports them when they need it, for both physical injuries and psychological injuries too.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

LORELEI NICOLL: Speaker, so much work needs to be done in mental health in Nova Scotia. I'm glad to see that this conversation is here today. The need is growing rapidly.

I understand the intent of the bill is to allow people dealing with gradual onset or traumatic stress from work to claim coverage under workers' compensation. It will come into force on September 1, 2024. This bill also raises the maximum amount allowed to be claimed for funeral expenses from \$4,000 to \$15,000 to be adjusted annually for the CPI.

This will come into force on September 1, 2024. The bill also updates the name of the department - it's about time - to the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

The intent of the bill is good. We need to cover the costs for people dealing with gradual onset mental health or traumatic stress from work. This bill only takes effect in September 2024. It shouldn't take that long. I understand it's to get the board to do the work, but it needs to get the coverage that people need right now as soon as possible. Can it be sooner? That's what I would ask the minister. Could the board work faster?

The bill does not provide clarity as to what mental health services will be covered. The bill does not define what "gradual onset" means, so it's unclear what will be eligible for coverage. People deserve certainty as to what can and cannot be claimed. This provides anything but.

It's good that the government is raising the amount allowed for funeral expenses, but this should not be delayed for a year again to 2024. Is there any chance it could be sooner? If we are adjusting the amount allowed for funeral expenses for CPI, why are we not doing the same for initiatives like income assistance? I direct that question because I know the Minister of Community Services is listening.

To those diagnosed with mental health conditions not associated with workplace trauma, will this bill protect them? Sometimes harassment at work is due to having a mental health condition. What I really want to know is if this bill is going to protect them as well. As the Minister responsible for the Office of Addictions and Mental Health said, treating bipolar is no different than a physical condition. I hope that those with a mental health condition can continue to work and be productive in our society.

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

KENDRA COOMBES: WCB is one of those areas that is near and dear to my heart, and the minister is right when she talks about it needing a comprehensive review. This is one step forward that our caucus is very glad to see. I want to thank the minister and the staff for the work on this.

We are the only province in the country that doesn't have these protections. These changes are going to be meaningful for so many people in the workplace. But there is lots of work to do, and I'm glad this government has taken this step. I do hope to see those bigger changes in WCB that the minister talked about with a full comprehensive review. There is an array of issues with WCB, and they're not limited to what I'm going to list.

These are a few of those problems that many face with WCB: gaps in support and mandate for psychological health and safety; as we're about to deal with this, the onset stress claims; inadequate subcontractor coverage; lengthy appeals processes; interactions

with other benefits such as private insurance and the GIS/OAS; time limits for submitting claims; assessable earning caps; and conflicting medical expertise.

As the minister alluded to in her conversation about a full comprehensive review, these are some of the things that need to be changed in WCB. These are some of the problems that are facing so many and that are causing a number of our constituents to consider MAiD. I have a few in my constituency - who are no longer in my constituency because they live in Dominion - who are dealing with this on an everyday basis, if they can take one more step, if they can deal with the WCB problems one more day and how it's affecting their health, physical and mental. Their bodies are breaking down because of these issues and many of them are just choosing MAiD and it is sad. They are changes we could make. We have opened it up. Here we are - we've got another amendment to WCB. We could open it up and we could fix these issues.

While I have the minister's ear here - I know the minister listens often to these issues - I also want to draw her attention to a bill that I present in this Legislature on automatic assumption for PTSD for child welfare frontline workers, and I hope she brings that back as well at some point.

THE SPEAKER: Order. I would like to remind the member from Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier that your comments are to be around this bill, not a previous bill that was put forward.

The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

KENDRA COOMBES: I assumed it was related, considering the minister also alluded to this in her speech as well. I was answering back to the minister on it. I am very sorry for that.

The other thing I would like to talk about with regards to this bill is that the bill is discussing issues. I believe it says, "unless the conflict constitutes harassment or bullying," so that is dealing with things that are excluded from the workplace. The one thing I would also say creates a healthy workplace and can avoid the gradual stress as well as traumatic experiences would be to not allow the misuse of NDAs in the workplace.

The bill also says it will exclude workplace stress stemming from performance management, termination of employment, change to job description, and interpersonal conflict, unless that conflict constitutes harassment or bullying.

The minister might correct me, but I don't think we have dealt with psychological harm in a bill yet. My question is: Why were these things exempt when they cause a lot of stress and trauma for many people when you are having interpersonal conflicts with people in your workplace, and yet we still don't really have a definition for bullying and harassment in the workplace?

How do we exclude workplace stress stemming from performance management, termination of employment, change in job description, and interpersonal conflict, unless that conflict constitutes harassment or bullying, when we don't have a full scope of what psychological harm bullying in the workplace is? I am hoping that the minister can explain in her closing statements how these exemptions in the bill were arrived at, how they are going to deal with the other exemption of harassment or bullying in the workplace, and who was consulted on them.

I also want to say that I look forward to hearing from more stakeholders from the Law Amendments Committee on this bill, and I don't want to be seated until I reiterate that this is a good step forward and I look forward to seeing more steps on WCB to make positive change for the constituents that I represent, as well as for all workers in Nova Scotia.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I just want to add a couple of comments to this bill in second reading. First of all, I want to say thank you to the minister for bringing this bill forward and I applaud her work. I know this has come up many times here in this Legislature and it is so needed.

I am sure I am not alone in this House. I have constituents right now who are going through very difficult times in their employment through WCB because the trauma they have experienced in the workplace is not recognized, not being honoured, and steps are not being taken to provide them with the support of the workplace. I am hoping that this is going to change with this bill passing.

What steps will the minister take in the department to ensure that there is education around trauma to help people better understand - managers, in particular, who are managing staff - help them to better understand the definition of trauma, the effects of trauma, and how that can impact people in the workplace?

We all know here in this Legislature that we can put forward the best legislation and policy possible, but then if the strategy is not put in place to ensure that education is done once the bill leaves this House, and the proper strategy and steps are not put in place, then it doesn't create the positive changes that we want to see. I'm hoping that education will be a very big part of this bill after it passes.

My last comment is that I will agree with the member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth. I echo her comments in that if there is any way possible of expediting this bill and moving the dates forward so that we're not waiting a year before this bill takes effect - again, I'm sure I'm not alone. I can assure the minister that I have people right now who are going through a very difficult time in their lives because this legislation is not in place right now, and the trauma that they've experienced in the workplace is not being recognized by WCB.

They're expected to go into workplace situations that actually trigger past trauma, and that makes their mental illness - their mental health – worse. That's not helpful. We need to be doing all that we can to provide supportive, healthy workplaces. I would love to see this bill happen sooner, as would the member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

With those few words, I'll take my seat.

THE SPEAKER: If I recognize the minister, it will be to close debate.

The honourable Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

HON. JILL BALSER: I want to thank all my colleagues for their comments and remarks on this bill, and for their support. We know that, as has been mentioned, WCB is a complicated system. It's time that we take the time to look into it and make further changes.

It has been said that this is the first step. This is the first step to be able to make this particular change to include gradual-onset stress as a compensable injury, knowing that it is following consultations that will be happening.

I will make sure that the members with their questions get the answers into third reading, but I just think it's important that we acknowledge that again, this is a system that hasn't been looked at in over two decades, in 2002. I hear from Nova Scotians and I know everyone in this room also hears from folks who have experienced gradual-onset stress, and now is the time to be able to introduce this as a compensable injury. I do appreciate the support.

We also have to work closely with WCB, so I do acknowledge, of course, that the timeline is a concern for some folks, as it's not fast enough. But we do have to work with WCB. Being able to enable this to happen - now they can do their work. They have to hire staff. They have their own consultations to put policies in place, to really tighten up what happens next. Being able to work with them - that's really where the timeline came from.

I just want to close with some of those remarks. It is the time for change. We've got new leadership at the WCB. The department is listening. It's time that we go where this government wants to go and support Nova Scotians and mental health.

With those remarks, Speaker, I close debate on Bill No. 332.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is for second reading of Bill No. 332.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Ordered that this bill be referred to the Committee on Law Amendments Committee.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 339.

[4:30 p.m.]

Bill No. 339 - Financial Measures (Fall 2023) Act.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Finance and Treasury Board.

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: I move that Bill No. 339, the Financial Measures (Fall 2023) Act, be now read a second time.

The Financial Measures Act includes a range of solutions to increase the supply of housing, grow the economy, and provide employers an option to improve the financial security of their employees in their retirement. The honourable Premier has committed to reduce the provincial tax burden on new rental housing, with an aim of encouraging more construction, faster. This bill delivers on that commitment.

Sales tax is an added cost to construction of new rental buildings. With passage of this legislation, there will be a combined GST and PST rental rebate for purpose-built housing such as apartments, student housing, and senior residences built specifically for use as long-term rentals, and incentive for property developers to lower their costs.

The success of a growing economy has brought the challenge of finding housing for anyone who is starting out on their own right now, or for people who have to be in transition. We've already invested close to \$300 million to increase supply, enhance affordability, and provide more housing for Nova Scotians. We hope this measure will also spur more housing supply.

Speaker, to grow the Nova Scotia economy, we are expanding the Capital Investment Tax Credit to include emerging sectors in our economy. The Capital Investment Tax Credit is an important tool. It is also an incentive that businesses can use to invest in new equipment and expand their operations in our province. Our government is focused on nurturing innovation and local economies, and expanding this tax credit to include emerging industries advances our province on both fronts.

Nova Scotia already attracts globally recognized companies, and these employers will create good jobs, create research and education opportunities, and help to grow our economy. This bill will make it easier for more workers to access a pension plan so more Nova Scotians have peace of mind in their retirement years.

Private companies will now have the option to join or transfer their pension plans into the Public Service Superannuation Plan - or as I think many of us call it, the government pension plan. They will be able to provide their workers with the opportunity to earn and receive a pension from a large, existing, defined benefit pension plan. The trustee of the Public Service Superannuation Plan has recommended opening the public service plan to any qualified employer in Nova Scotia to grow plan membership and to continue to keep that plan healthy for years to come.

Giving employers the option to join or transfer into the Public Service Superannuation Plan - which is a large, cost-effective pension plan - will make it easier for those employers to offer a defined benefit pension to their employees and help people plan for their retirement. The security that comes with a pension is something the private sector can offer to attract and retain workers.

This is not the first time eligibility for the Public Service Superannuation Plan has been expanded. This Legislature previously passed the University Pension Plan Transfer Act, which permitted post-secondary institutions to join the plan, and the Municipal and Other Authorities Pension Plan Transfer Act, which permitted municipalities to do the same. These two acts formed the basis of many of the amendments presented in this bill.

Something important to note: The Public Service Superannuation Plan is independent of the government. Let me assure this Chamber that this bill does not create risk to existing members or benefits. In fact, the plan's trustees will ensure protections and oversight are in place to ensure that any new employer who proposes to join or transfer an existing plan would not negatively impact current public sector pension plan membership.

Finally, the last item that will be accomplished through this legislation is the extension of a tax agreement between municipalities and Eastward Energy, which some people may be more familiar with as Heritage Gas. Well, they are now called Eastward Energy. This will extend a tax agreement between municipalities and Eastward Energy with respect to municipal taxation of natural gas distribution systems. Extending the agreement for five years means several municipalities will continue to receive the tax revenue while negotiating a new agreement.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings South.

HON. KEITH IRVING: It's a pleasure to stand and make a few comments on Bill No. 339, the Financial Measures (Fall 2023) Act.

This is fairly straightforward with respect to the four items outlined in this bill. The most straightforward, as the minister just touched on, was the extension from 20 to 25 years for the Gas Distribution System Municipal Taxation Act. I think there are no concerns with respect to that. The other straightforward element, of course, is the expansion of sectors for

the capital investment tax - much needed in terms of updating other industries, such as aerospace, hydrogen, et cetera.

The third item - opening the pension to the private sector - on the surface, that appears to be reasonable and the minister just assured this would not have any negative impacts on existing members. I would be interested to know if government did perhaps consult with the unions that represent the majority of the members who would be in that pension plan. Perhaps they will have something to say at the Law Amendments Committee, or perhaps they're happy with it. I would be interested to see if there was any consultation to ensure there are no concerns from current members through the representatives in the union.

The fourth item, of course - the most substantive with respect to dealing with the important issue of the day, with respect to housing - is the rebate on the provincial portion of HST on rental housing, which is something we in Opposition advocated to the government once the federal government made the announcement. We were a bit disappointed that the government did not follow colleagues in other provinces and immediately come to the table with that. I guess there is a reason for Opposition, in which we raised our voices and encouraged the government to follow Minister Fraser and Prime Minister Trudeau with respect to this important action, with respect to the HST rebate on rental housing.

This is one of the initiatives governments can take that is meaningful. I think it is substantive and something that will increase housing supply in Nova Scotia. I'll leave it at that for now. We'll see if there are any concerns that come up in Law Amendments. I may have more to add in third reading.

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

LISA LACHANCE: I will start my comments on this bill with what's not included. This is another session where we come back to the FMA in the Fall sitting, which is great, except that these would be perfect opportunities to have a chance to also review the spending decisions that the government has been making. I think we're at something like \$600,000-plus that has been spent without appropriate oversight from this Legislature. A Fall Financial Measures Act would be really appropriate in this - \$600 million, sorry. I was thinking, I hope I put enough zeroes in there, because that just wasn't enough. Six hundred thousand we should even know about but \$600 million we should really know about.

We're well on our way to meeting last year's record amount of spending without coming to the House for appropriations. I know the minister will perhaps wonder if I don't want spending to happen for emergencies or natural disasters. That's simply not the case. There is actually a provision within the Finance Act, under Special Warrant, where government is able to act but then also be accountable for the money that is spent.

I've seen other models in the federal government with the creation of Canada's Crisis Pool, which was created exactly for this purpose - recognizing that there are times when government needs to act quickly. It's in the best interests of whomever their constituents are - in this case, Nova Scotians - to act quickly to mobilize resources but still be accountable for that funding. If we are going to keep coming back to the Financial Measures Act, Part 2, in the Fall session, I would really advocate that we have a chance to review the spending that government is doing.

The Auditor General has certainly made the point that the amount of spending outside of appropriations is quite extraordinary. I actually wasn't around when this government was in opposition, but I understand the members were really enthusiastic about accountability and transparency. I guess I'd welcome some of that energy around transparency and accountability back, because the type of financial management is actually quite extraordinary.

As noted, the bill would also allow private employers to join the public sector pension plan, with an aim to better the health of the pension plan. I understand that perhaps public sector unions have not been fully engaged and do have some issues and concerns that they want to bring forward. We do look forward to hearing from them at Law Amendments.

One other piece of the bill that is concerning is that the bill would scrap a provision that requires a provincial referendum before the provincial portion of the HST can be added back to essentials like home energy, children's diapers, children's clothing, children's footwear, books, feminine hygiene products, first-time home purchases, new vehicles for the physiologically impaired, computers for the visually impaired and hearing-impaired and mentally and physically challenged, and firefighting equipment used by the municipalities. I would assume this is not a time when government wants to put the HST back on these critical issues. I would invite the minister to clarify yes or no whether he is considering changes to these rebates, and if not, then why this amendment is present in this FMA.

With that, I will take my seat and will have more comments in the future.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Thank you, Speaker, and thank you to the minister for bringing forth this bill. It is always great to hear the minister speak about financial issues. I have just a couple of comments.

The first one is around the changes to the Income Tax Act - no concerns there, but I can't help myself but add in there - it is a great opportunity, if we are going to open up the Income Tax Act, to increase basic personal tax exemption and start indexing income tax brackets. These are two things both the Premier and, I believe, the minister had shared,

when they were in opposition, that were important things for the government of the day to consider.

[4:45 p.m.]

Affordability is a huge issue facing all Nova Scotians. One of the ways we can help Nova Scotians is to allow them to keep more of their hard-earned money. Increasing the basic personal tax exemption is one of the easiest things we can do. We have the lowest basic personal tax exemption in the entire country, which means people are taxed here in Nova Scotia before anywhere else in the country on their income. We are one of only two provinces that continue to not index income tax brackets in line with inflation. It is simply unfair that Nova Scotians continue to not have the income tax brackets indexed. I wanted to make those comments around the Income Tax Act in relation to this bill.

Also under the pension plan section, I am curious what led to this change. I am assuming that there are some private companies that are interested in transferring, and I am curious if there are any concerns or anything that we should be aware of in opposition around that.

I believe the government had campaigned that physicians were going to be starting to receive a pension. I believe that was part of their campaign platform. I'm just wondering if that's going to be part of what we're going to be seeing in the future.

I'm curious about our paramedics as well. I know that they are employed through a private company, but is that something that our paramedics can look forward to - being included in the government pension plan?

My last comments are around Part V, the Sales Tax Act. Again, I support my colleagues and support the government in this change. Certainly, we were happy to see the federal government come out with this reduction in HST to help spur on more housing. We all know that there is desperate need for more housing. I support this.

I also - can't help myself - suggest to the minister that maybe if he's opening up the Sales Tax Act, he could also be looking at other things with HST, such as fuel. I know the excuse in previous governments - and I have heard it here as well - that we can't do that because of the federal legislation. But here's an opportunity to work with our federal partners. We all know that Nova Scotians are paying tax on tax. HST - 15 per cent is charged on top of federal excise tax - 10 cents per litre; the provincial motive fuel tax, 15.5 cents per litre; and carbon tax now, over 8 cents per litre. It's wrong. It's fundamentally wrong that Nova Scotians are paying tax on tax. I believe it's something that the government should be looking at closely.

Also, something that people in this government have talked about before is the tax on used vehicles. I believe that the government should also be looking at that when you're

looking at the Sales Tax Act - removing the sales tax and HST on used vehicles that are sold here in the province of Nova Scotia.

Just a couple of ideas if the minister wants to make some amendments during Committee of the Whole House on Bills. I think it would be a great idea to add those changes that I just brought up here at this time.

I guess my only other comment with regard to tax would also be property taxes. People are paying higher and higher property taxes here in this province, especially with the increased market value assessments. They're paying tax on that. They're paying income tax on top of money that they have already paid out in property taxes. That's also something that I would encourage the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board to look at in fairness to Nova Scotians. People pay enough tax. They should not have to pay tax on tax.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: I rise to speak in favour of this bill. This is a bill that we called for as an Opposition party. It is a bill that the province has taken the lead on from the federal government, which first announced that they would reduce the federal portion of the HST on new apartment builds.

First, I want to say that I am thankful the provincial government has followed the lead of the federal government on this particular issue. I am thankful that they followed our call to introduce this piece of legislation, because I think this could have an impact on building more affordable and attainable apartments here in Nova Scotia. We will not be able to do that unless we reduce the costs to building, and this is one way that the provincial government can do that. There are also other ways as well.

I do want to echo what I have said previously in this House. This is an example of what can be achieved when orders of government are actually working together to solve an issue of this magnitude that's affecting thousands of Nova Scotians. It is creating real generational stress on the Millennial generation, on Gen-Xers, who are growing up in Nova Scotia who don't know if they'll be able to find an attainable, affordable place to live. Many of them - one-third, according to polls - are giving up on the dream even of owning a home here in this province.

I will encourage the government to take this sort of disposition when it comes to working with other orders of government, because this is when this government has actually done their very best. This is when they have achieved things for Nova Scotians, and when they have moved forward in a productive way that, I believe, can achieve results.

One concern I do have with this legislation is that it's only happening for two years. I don't know if that's going to be long enough. The Canada Mortgage and Housing

Corporation has said that we have to build 70,000 units in Nova Scotia - and again, those numbers might even be higher - if we're going to keep up with current pressures.

I know that all of us are getting this in every single riding across this province, from our urban centres to our rural areas. We are seeing it with the exponential growth in homelessness in parts across the province. That used to only be an issue here in Halifax, and in the last few years the amount of homelessness has actually doubled as a result of this.

I do not know if two years is going to be sufficient. It's probably going to take longer than that to build a lot of these units. Again, all the costs associated with building - whether it's taxes, the public infrastructure that needs to be put in like pipes and wastewater that are borne by builders, costs of labour insurance, the interest that is carried by developers - these are all then borne by folks who are buying homes, who are trying to find apartments to rent.

We really do have to look at what the costs are with building in Nova Scotia and find ways to lower them. That is the best sustainable way that we can, at the same time, incentivize growth and development when we need it and ensure that the products that are being built on the other end can be purchased in the market for reasonable prices so that they're attainable.

I am very interested to hear what the NDP has to say on this, because I do have to say there does not seem to be a recognition from the third party that the cost of building is part of this equation or problem. In fact, many of the policies that have been brought forward by the NDP actually increase costs to building, which are then borne by the renter, or the taxpayer, or the individual or family trying to purchase a home.

I am very interested to know what the status is with the NDP support for this, because I don't believe, like the NDP, that we can just arbitrarily intervene in the free market and think there won't be consequences. Nor that if we tax people more, that that is somehow going to incentivize development or get affordable housing brought to market. I do think the position of the third party needs to be made clear on this issue.

I do think more work needs to be done by the provincial government as well. One concern I have with how this came about - and with how a number of the housing announcements have come about in recent weeks as we've come into Legislature - is it seems very haphazard. It seems very reactive to the headlines of the day or pressures from either the Opposition, or the public, or the federal government.

If we are going to tackle this housing crisis - and again, this is a crisis. This is a generational crisis, and we are experiencing it in the most acute form, with the rapid rate of homelessness from one end of the province to the other. We see it whether we're in Sydney, Halifax, Yarmouth, or everywhere in between.

We are also seeing it with the number of seniors who can't downsize and get out of their family homes if they want to. They are punished financially if they try to leave their homes, because they're no longer protected by the property assessment cap, or they can't find an affordable place to rent, or there are no other smaller units that are on the market to purchase or rent.

We are seeing it in this next generation of young people who are falling further behind than generations who have come before us. That is demonstrable in the statistics and what these folks are telling us at the doors.

If we are going to deal with this generational crisis, we can't be dealing with it in this haphazard, reactive way, where the incentive seems to be to capture the headline of the day and to win the politics of the week.

This needs to take careful thought, consideration, and strategy. We've got a number of challenges that are impacting our housing supply. Housing starts under this government have gone down 50 per cent, year over year, at a time when the population is increasing.

It's this government - it's this Premier who said he is going to double the population of Nova Scotia.

Everybody supports growth. We want to see that. It's key to our future success, but when you can't answer questions on how to house people who are living here today - what's the plan to double the population? We have got housing that is collapsing under the current demographic pressures of the system. We've got schools that - despite the fact there have been new ones and there have been expansions - are now becoming overcrowded very rapidly. That's something that all parties can take responsibility for.

We've got wastewater and sewage capacity reaching its limit in many communities that are prone and set for very rapid growth. Despite all these pressures - this wall that we're starting to hit with population growth - we have not really seen a robust strategy from the province. The Premier has stood up and said that we don't need strategies, we need action. Certainly, we need action on this. Reducing costs of building is important, reducing red tape for development is important.

Good, impactful action is informed by good strategy. The generals who go to war without a strategy and are only focused on the action on the field - those generals lose. They don't achieve their goals. You have to have a plan. I think this government has even demonstrated in its own record that the best actions they take are when they formulate plans with other orders of government. That is how we're going to get somewhere. Instead, we haven't seen the housing strategy. This was due last Spring. The Premier has said they are not going to release it. I believe the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing has said today or yesterday that they are going to release it. That's something that we certainly eagerly await.

This government hasn't released the housing needs assessment, which informs us of what the deficit is for housing in each of our municipalities. Why aren't we releasing this information? The student housing strategy that the government said they were going to do according to the minister now isn't even going to be released either.

I do support this bill. I think it's a good bill, and again, we called for this, as did the federal government. My concern is that this is all about politics. It's not about achieving what needs to happen in the housing market or the rental market. I think that without having further details on what this government's strategy is, what the plan is, I don't know that we're going to get where we need to be.

Again, we've seen this government take sweeping authority over HRM, saying it's going to reduce the timeline for development. If that works and we do, kudos to the government, but we have a lot of concerns about that bill as well because it doesn't seem to be well-thought-through. The government cannot answer simple questions on if that's actually going to reduce the timeline for building and development or how many more units are going to be built as a result. The HRM has come out and said there are 11,000 units, I think, that have already been approved. Is this just to take credit for the work that HRM has done, or is this actually going to see more units than that actually come into the market?

Again, there are a lot more conversations that need to happen on this. Reducing the HST is good. I do not think it is for long enough. We are not going to get these units built in two years. Again, we've got to build 70,000 at least in the next five years to keep up with demand.

I don't know how limiting this to two years is going to prove to be all that effective when we're going to need building after those two years as well to keep up with population growth, particularly if the government does eventually produce a plan that suggests we can double the population here in Nova Scotia.

Again, I don't think it's long enough. I think this is part of a suite of very reactionary policies that the government has brought forward that haven't necessarily been well-thought-through or informed by good strategy or planning. I certainly think that we're going to need to see more initiative and well-thought-out planning if the government is even going to achieve its own objective of not just reducing current rates of homelessness but by ensuring that the next generation of Nova Scotians will be able to afford a home, afford a place to rent, and so that seniors can actually downsize when they need to.

Again, this is what Nova Scotians are faced with right now - the highest inflation in the country under this government, and the highest increase to rents in the whole country.

We are leading in these areas: highest inflation, highest increase in rents, and our housing starts have gone down and we're not developing or producing apartments as quickly as we needed to keep up with pressure. It's not just about the apartments

themselves or the houses themselves. It's about the infrastructure that supports them, and we have not seen anything from the government to address that particular issue as well.

With those few words, I'll take my seat.

[5:00 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: If I recognize the minister, it will be to close debate.

The honourable Minister of Finance and Treasury Board.

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: I would like to thank the members opposite for their comments. I now move to close debate on Bill No. 339.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is for second reading of Bill No. 339.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Ordered that this bill be referred to the Committee on Law Amendments.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: That concludes government business for the day. I move the House do now rise to meet again on Wednesday, October 18th between the hours of 1:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m., and since tomorrow is Liberal Opposition Day, I'll turn it over to my colleague, the Official Opposition House Leader.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Official Opposition House Leader.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: For Opposition Business tomorrow, we'll be calling Bill No. 345, the Working Families Power Bill Reduction Act; Bill No. 335, the Income Tax Act (amended); and Bill No. 324, the Rental Supplements Act.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is that the House rise to meet again tomorrow, Wednesday, from 1:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Before we adjourn, I would like to recognize the honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm saying this to address everyone in the room. Tomorrow is Persons Day, which celebrates the Act that brought enfranchisement to some women to allow them to vote and to allow them to run for public office. To celebrate that, the CWP provincial secretariat, Cara Locke, our assistant clerk, and I have planned to invite all women and non-binary members to the steps, either inside if it's raining or outside if it's nice, to have a photo done, and we will be making a special presentation to our new female Speaker at the time.

We would love everyone to gather at 12:30 p.m. We'll figure out what steps at the time, and we'll do a picture, and we'll post it.

THE SPEAKER: Thank you.

We stand adjourned.

[The House adjourned at 5:04 p.m.]