



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

DEBATES AND PROCEEDINGS

Speaker: Honourable Karla MacFarlane

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First Session

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS	PAGE
TABLING REPORTS, REGULATIONS AND OTHER PAPERS:	
Surplus Crown Property Disposal Report for April 1, 2022 to March 31, 2023, Hon. K. Masland	6856
Progress Report on French Language Services Provided by the Government of Nova Scotia, 2022-23, Hon. C. LeBlanc	6856
GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION:	
Res. 768, Gourley, Betty: Christmas Tree for Boston - Thanks, Hon. T. Rushton	6856
Vote - Affirmative	6857
Res. 769, Stevens, Heather: Mi'kmaw Regalia Return - Thanks, Hon. T. Boudreau	6857
Vote - Affirmative	6858
Res. 770, FFANE: 40th Anniv. - Recog., Hon. C. LeBlanc	6858
Vote - Affirmative	6859
Res. 771, Winter Driving: Time to Prepare - Recog.,	

Hon. K. Masland.....	6859
Vote - Affirmative.....	6860
INTRODUCTION OF BILLS:	
No. 394, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Commitment Act, L. Lachance.....	6860
No. 395, Lead Awareness and Public Safety Act, F. Tilley.....	6860
STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS:	
Firefighters: Dedicated Service - Thanks, The Premier.....	6862
Lebanese Heritage Mo.: Contribs. to Culture - Recog., Hon. Z. Churchill.....	6863
Mateo Vaca Talbot: Visit to Legislature - Welcome, C. Chender.....	6864
Cumminger, Joanne: Comfort Station - Thanks, The Premier.....	6864
Odeniyi, Funmi: MichNat Fashion - Recog., L. Nicoll.....	6865
Organizers: Coal Dust Days Festival - Congrats., K. Coombes.....	6866
Snow, Bob: Death of - Tribute, J. White.....	6866
Moment of Silence.....	6866
Nova Church: Backpacks Donation - Thanks, R. DiCostanzo.....	6867
Armbrae Academy: Inclusion Efforts - Thanks, S. Hansen.....	6867
MacPherson, Wayne: Com. Serv. - Thanks, C. Palmer.....	6868
KOC: Donations to Community - Thanks, F. Tilley.....	6869
Nguyen, Mai: <i>Sunshine Nails</i> Publication - Congrats., G. Burrill.....	6870
CCFT: Acadian Day 2023 - Congrats., D. Ritcey.....	6870
Daughter, Mattea: Birthday Wishes, R. LeBlanc.....	6870
Pete's Frootique Workers: Contract Fight - Support, L. Lachance.....	6871
Kentville Fire Dept.: 135 th Anniv. - Congrats., Hon. J. Lohr.....	6871
Beals, Dorothy: Teacher and Author - Recog., C. Kerr.....	6872
Woofingtons: Dog Daycare - Recog., S. Leblanc.....	6872

Wyse, Lillian: Death of - Tribute, Hon. B. Wong	6873
Route 333 Lifesavers: Blood Donation - Thanks, Hon. I. Rankin.....	6873
McLennan, Barbara “Bub”: Death of - Tribute, C. Chender	6874
Take Our Kids to Work Day: Partics. - Thanks, Hon. J. Balsler.....	6874
Downey, Dorothy: 90 th Birthday - Congrats., Hon. K. Regan.....	6875
Polish Her. Mo.: Events in CBRM - Congrats., K. Coombes.....	6875
MacDonald, Clare: Horse Racing Career - Congrats., Hon. M. Thompson.....	6876
Cuzner, Rodger: Appointed Senator - Recog., Hon. D. Mombourquette.....	6876
Hfx. Leb. Fest.: Celeb. of Her. - Congrats., S. Hansen	6876
Sandy Point Com. Rec. Grp.: Com. Serv. - Thanks, N. Young.....	6877
Vols.: Halloween Street Party - Thanks, Hon. B. Maguire	6877
Students: Nat’l Science Fair Partic. - Congrats., G. Burrill.....	6877
Firefighters: Wildfire Efforts - Thanks, Hon. B. Johns.....	6878
Ricketts, Dr. Peter: Retirement - Best Wishes, Hon. K. Irving.....	6878
St. James, Patrick: Bldg. Mgr. Work - Thanks, L. Lachance.....	6879
ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS:	
No. 1,265, Prem.: Homeless in Winter - Help, Hon. Z. Churchill	6879
No. 1,266, Prem.: Hunger in Schools - Explain, C. Chender	6880
No. 1,267, DCS: Increase in Homelessness - Stop, Hon. Z. Churchill	6882
No. 1,268, NRR: Power Rates - Lower, Hon. Z. Churchill	6883
No. 1,269, MAH: African Nova Scotian Housing - Consult, Hon. T. Ince	6884
No. 1,270, EECD: Child Care Wait-List Fees - End, S. Hansen	6885
No. 1,271, DOJ: Crown Attorneys - Hire, Hon. I. Rankin.....	6886
No. 1,272, DCS: Nova Scotians - Support,	

Hon. B. Maguire	6887
No. 1,273, DCS: Struggling Nova Scotians - Support, Hon. K. Regan.....	6887
No. 1,274, FTB: Income Supp. Pgm. for Seniors - Implement, G. Burrill.....	6889
No. 1,275, DCS: Income Assistance - Increase, Hon. K. Irving.....	6890
No. 1,276, DCS: Increase Income Assistance - Commit, Hon. I. Rankin.....	6891
No. 1,277, DAE: Student Housing Plan - Commit, L. Nicoll	6892
No. 1,278, ECC: Sacrificing Environ. for Profits - Explain, L. Lachance.....	6893
No. 1,279, EECD: Universal Lunch Program - Implement, Hon. D. Mombourquette.....	6894
No. 1,280, DAE: Univ. Students Struggling - Address, B. Clark.....	6895
No. 1,281, DAE: Housing Strategy - Improve, F. Tilley.....	6896
OPPOSITION MEMBERS' BUSINESS:	
PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BILLS FOR SECOND READING:	
No. 391, Income Tax Act (amended), G. Burrill.....	6897
F. Tilley.....	6901
T. Taggart.....	6904
C. Chender	6908
No. 363, Early Learning and Child Care Act, C. Chender	6912
Hon. K. Regan.....	6916
M. Sheehy-Richard	6919
S. Hansen	6923
No. 342, Universal School Food Program Act, C. Chender	6926
Hon. D. Mombourquette.....	6929
Hon. S. Craig.....	6933
K. Coombes.....	6937
ADJOURNMENT:	
MOTION UNDER RULE 5(5):	
Gov't. (N.S.): Homelessness Crisis - Action Required, C. Chender	6939
B. Clark.....	6941
D. Ritcey	6944
HOUSE RESOLVED INTO CWH ON BILLS AT 6:01 P.M.	6947
HOUSE RECONVENED AT 11:59 P.M.	6947
ADJOURNMENT, House rose to meet again on Thurs., Nov. 2 nd at 1:00 p.m.	6947
NOTICES OF MOTION UNDER RULE 32(3):	

Res. 772, Annapolis Valley Produce: Contribs. to Com. - Recog., Hon. P. Arab	6948
Res. 773, Fougere, Emily: Centennial Arena Leadership - Recog., Hon. P. Arab	6948
Res. 774, Fairview-Clayton Park Farmers Market: 3 rd Year - Congrats., Hon. P. Arab	6949
Res. 775, Team N.S. Girls U14 Baseball: Ch'ship Win - Congrats., Hon. P. Arab	6949
Res. 776, Hfx. West Ecum. Food Bank: Com. Serv. - Recog., Hon. P. Arab	6950
Res. 777, Hello Pets: 1 st Anniv. - Recog., Hon. P. Arab	6951
Res. 778, Garnier, Jane: Com. Serv. - Recog., Hon. P. Arab	6951
Res. 779, Farrow, Lauren: Pharmacist Service - Recog., Hon. P. Arab	6952
Res. 780, Famillaran, Erik & Misty: Macao Imperial Tea - Congrats., Hon. P. Arab	6952
Res. 781, MSVU: Fall 2023 Graduates - Congrats., Hon. P. Arab	6953
Res. 782, Fitch, Sheree: Order of Canada Recip. - Recog., Hon. P. Arab	6953
Res. 783, Flynn, Jamie: Medicine Shoppe Pharmacy - Congrats., Hon. P. Arab	6954
Res. 784, Noel, Yvonne: Com. Serv. - Thanks, Hon. P. Arab	6955



HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2023

Sixty-fourth General Assembly

First Session

1:00 P.M.

SPEAKER

Hon. Karla MacFarlane

DEPUTY SPEAKERS

Lisa Lachance, Danielle Barkhouse, Nolan Young

THE SPEAKER: Order. Before we begin the daily routine, I will read the subject matter for late debate, submitted by the member for Dartmouth South:

Whereas the number of people who are homeless and without access to shelter in Nova Scotia is exploding - in Halifax the By Name List that tracks people in need of housing has reached over a thousand people - this level has never been seen since the list was kept;

Whereas this is an issue felt in every community across our province and below-freezing temperatures are now upon us;

Whereas shelters are full, modular housing units are full, the public housing wait-list is in the thousands, for the first time, there is simply nowhere for people to go, and this government has not provided any plan or assurance that people will not be wintering outside;

Therefore, be it resolved that this government's inaction to provide housing will have dangerous and life-threatening impacts this Winter.

That will be the subject matter at the moment of interruption later today.

Starting the daily routine.

PRESENTING AND READING PETITIONS

PRESENTING REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

TABLING REPORTS, REGULATIONS AND OTHER PAPERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Public Works.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Pursuant to Section 12 of the Surplus Crown Property Disposal Act, I beg leave to table the report *Surplus Crown Properties Disposal Report for the Period April 1, 2022 to March 31, 2023*.

THE SPEAKER: The report is tabled.

The honourable Minister of Acadian Affairs and Francophonie.

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: En français, je désire présenter le rapport d'étape 2022-2023 : *Services en français offerts par le gouvernement de la Nouvelle-Écosse*.

Speaker, I beg leave to table a report entitled *Progress Report on French-language Services Provided by the Government of Nova Scotia 2022-23*.

THE SPEAKER: The report is tabled.

STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS

GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables.

RESOLUTION NO. 768

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

Whereas every year, Nova Scotia sends a beautiful Christmas tree to the people of Boston in thanks for their immediate and generous aid after the Halifax Explosion; and

Whereas this year, Betty Gourley of Stewiacke is donating a white spruce that stands nearly 14 metres tall and that her family decorated for Christmas every year until it got too tall; and

Whereas we invite the community to come out on November 15th as we cut the tree and send it first to the Parade of Lights and then on its way to Boston Common at the end of the month;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House join me in thanking the people of Boston for their support in our time of need and the family for their heartfelt donation of this Christmas tree.

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

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable Minister responsible for L'nu Affairs.

RESOLUTION NO. 769

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

Whereas historic Mi'kmaw regalia were recently returned to Mi'kma'ki from a museum in Australia thanks to the commitment of Heather Stevens, manager of the Millbrook Cultural & Heritage Centre, and others who have helped along the way; and

Whereas the story of the historic regalia is well known to Mi'kmaq, the beaded and carved works are an important part of the Mi'kmaw history, and having the pieces in community and displayed at the Millbrook Centre honours the artists who created them so long ago; and

Whereas important conversations are happening here in Nova Scotia, in Canada, and around the world about repatriation of cultural property; those discussions aren't easy but they are necessary and an important step towards reconciliation, a path we walk together;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of the House of Assembly join me in thanking Heather Stevens and everyone involved in this project for their hard work to bring the regalia back to its rightful place after more than 130 years and recognizing the importance of these and other important artifacts to the Mi'kmaq and our shared history.

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

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable Minister of Acadian Affairs and Francophonie.

RESOLUTION NO. 770

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: Madame la présidente, à une date ultérieure je demanderai l'adoption de la résolution suivante :

Attendu que la Fédération des femmes acadiennes de la Nouvelle-Écosse est un organisme provincial à but non lucratif dévoué au développement personnel et social des femmes acadiennes et francophones de la Nouvelle-Écosse; et

Attendu qu'en avril, la fédération a tenu un forum provincial en personne au sujet du renforcement du leadership par et pour toutes les filles et les femmes; et

Attendu que la fédération a célébré les initiatives passées et actuelles visant à éliminer l'isolement et faciliter les liens, à offrir des ressources aux personnes qui en ont besoin, et à promouvoir la confiance en soi pour les filles et les femmes;

Par conséquent, qu'il soit résolu que tous les membres de l'Assemblée législative se joignent à moi pour reconnaître le dévouement exceptionnel du conseil d'administration bénévole de la Fédération des femmes acadiennes de la Nouvelle-Écosse dans le cadre de la célébration du 40^e anniversaire de l'organisme.

Madame la présidente, je demande l'adoption de cette résolution sans préavis et sans débat.

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

Whereas the Fédération des femmes acadiennes de la Nouvelle-Écosse is a provincial non-profit organization dedicated to the personal and social development of Acadian and francophone women in Nova Scotia; and

Whereas the Fédération held a provincial in-person forum in April on strengthening leadership by and for girls and women; and

Whereas the Fédération celebrated past and ongoing initiatives to eliminate isolation, facilitate connections, make resources available to those in need, and promote girls' and women's self-confidence;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of the House of Assembly join me in recognizing the outstanding commitment of the volunteer board of directors and employees of the Fédération des femmes acadiennes de la Nouvelle-Écosse as they celebrate the organization's 40th anniversary.

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

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable Minister of Public Works.

RESOLUTION NO. 771

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

Whereas the weather in Nova Scotia is about to change, with colder temperatures and, dare I say, the snow has returned to our province; and

Whereas the province's Winter maintenance equipment and expert staff are prepared and ready to roll as the Department of Public Works continues to make sure our roads are safe for all users; and

Whereas the province maintains more than 400 pieces of snow- and ice-clearing equipment and during storms they are operational 24/7 until the roads are safe for travel;

Therefore be it resolved that now is the time for Nova Scotians to prepare for safe Winter driving too. This includes installing Winter tires, checking road conditions before you head out, driving to conditions, slowing down, and leaving extra space between your vehicle and the one in front of you.

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

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill No. 394 - An Act Respecting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. (Lisa Lachance)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

FRED TILLEY: Speaker, I beg leave to make an introduction. In the West Gallery, we have members of two different groups who are here supporting a bill that I'm presenting today. I'll ask them to stand.

We have Jeff McNeil, president of the Port Morien Wildlife Association; Stan Peach, the treasurer of the Port Morien Wildlife Association; Murdo Messer, the co-founder of the Cobequid Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre; and Brenda Boates, the wildlife operations manager at the Cobequid Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Welcome to the House. It's a pleasure to have you.

The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

Bill No. 395 - An Act to Raise Awareness of the Harmful Impacts of Lead and Enhance Public Safety. (Fred Tilley)

[1:15 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: Ordered that the bill be read a second time on a future day.

NOTICES OF MOTION

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Premier.

HON. TIM HOUSTON (THE PREMIER): Before I begin, I beg leave to make some introductions.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

THE PREMIER: I'm honoured to introduce several people who are joining us today from Pictou East. They're in the Speaker's Gallery. I ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the House as I introduce them. I've spoken a lot in this Chamber over the 10 years I've been here, but I'm pretty nervous right now. With us today are firefighters and community members who are being recognized as the true heroes they are for their significant contributions to our communities.

Like so many people across Nova Scotia, these heroes have faced extraordinary natural disasters head-on over the past two years. They have gone above and beyond, and we are so grateful for their tremendous expertise, their courage, and their dedication to our communities. It is my honour to introduce Joanne Cumming. Joanne is the treasurer of the Plymouth Fire Department Ladies Auxiliary. Kenny Dunn - Kenny is the Chief of the Westville Fire Department, whose members are always available to assist whenever and whatever is needed to be done. Kenny? Did I miss him? Did you stand up? He was up and down? He's quick.

Evan Hale - Evan is the director of the Fire Service for the Municipality of Pictou County and the Deputy Fire Chief in Alma who assisted many of our vulnerable seniors and other volunteers. Thank you, Evan. Megan Kenny - Megan, who works for the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, was on the front lines fighting fires in Barrington, and I've seen her on many fire scenes across the community.

Jason La Greca - Jason is the inspector for the Municipality of Pictou County and a volunteer firefighter in Alma who helped a senior who was living in unsafe conditions move to a new home. Rod is a volunteer with the Plymouth Fire Department who spent weeks following Hurricane Fiona cutting down trees and bringing water to residents with no power. Thank you, Rod.

Wayne van Veen - Wayne is a volunteer firefighter in Plymouth who immediately following Hurricane Fiona thought only of helping those in need. Despite his own vehicles being blocked by fallen trees, he borrowed a neighbour's car to assist an elderly man who had suffered a very serious injury. Thank you, Wayne.

Everyone is accompanied by some friends and family and support networks. I would just ask the House to give them a very warm welcome. (Standing ovation)

THE SPEAKER: Welcome. It's a pleasure to have you here.

The honourable Premier.

FIREFIGHTERS: DEDICATED SERVICE - THANKS

THE PREMIER: As all Nova Scotians are aware, for the past two years we have faced some devastating natural disasters in our province. We have had heroes across our province who have made a tremendous difference in the lives of neighbours, friends, and strangers too. Today I would like to recognize just a few of the firefighters in Pictou East who are joining us here today: Evan Hale, Jason La Greca, Kenny Dunn, Megan Kenny, Rod Livingston, and Wayne van Veen are just a handful of the thousands of heroes we pay tribute to in our province.

Each and every Nova Scotian is grateful for their dedicated service. Whether it's facing a fire, flood, or the aftermath of hurricanes and tropical storms, our first responders are always available to help people in need. That is why it is so important that we as Nova Scotians reach out to say thank you for what you do for us.

On behalf of the residents of Pictou East who are so well served by all of our first responders, I want to say a very big thank you for all of your dedicated service to our province.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Yarmouth.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: I beg leave to make a couple of introductions.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

ZACH CHURCHILL: The first: With your permission, I'd like to welcome to the Chamber Maya, a Grade 9 student from Fairview Junior High, which is in the riding of my honourable colleague the member for Fairview-Clayton Park.

Maya is a bright young student who also happens to be of Lebanese descent. Maya's very engaged in the political process and hopes to be sitting in this Chamber one

day. Maya, I'm sure you will be. I'd ask the House to join me in welcoming Maya to the Chamber.

I'd also like to welcome to the Chamber Mr. Raymond El Chater, the President of the Canadian Lebanon Society of Halifax. He is here today in recognition of November being the celebrated Lebanese Heritage Month. Please, I'd ask the House in joining me in welcoming the President Raymond El Chater to the House. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Welcome to the House everyone.

The honourable member for Yarmouth.

LEBANESE HERITAGE MO.: CONTRIBS. TO CULTURE - RECOG.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Nova Scotia was the first province in Canada to designate a month in which Lebanese culture and heritage would be celebrated. In 2018, I was incredibly humbled to be at Pier 21, where so many of our ancestors arrived to our province, where our Liberal government officially proclaimed November as Lebanese Heritage Month.

This month is about recognizing the Lebanese community's significant contributions to the cultural, economic, and political landscape of Nova Scotia. The vision, work ethic, and strong community and family ties of Lebanese Nova Scotians have made our province more diverse and vibrant, and have helped to drive our economy, particularly our housing and development in a major way.

Lebanese immigrants first began arriving in Nova Scotia during the 1800s. Ever since their arrival, Lebanese communities have spread across Nova Scotia and have played a significant role in fostering growth, prosperity, and innovation in this province.

I'm proud to be of Lebanese heritage myself. I'm third-generation Canadian. My great-grandparents came here at the turn of the 20th century. My grandparents were born here, and they were merchants in the south end of Yarmouth. My parents' generation became servicemen and -women, particularly in education. We are very proud to be a part of this great Lebanese community in Nova Scotia.

This year the Canadian Lebanon Society is also celebrating 85 years of existence. I'd like to ask the House to please join me in recognizing the role of this organization in helping to preserve and promote the Lebanese culture in our province.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I would draw the members' attention to the gallery opposite where we also have a Grade 9 student in the gallery, Mateo Vaca Talbot, who is coming to work with our caucus today. I ask all members to welcome Mateo today. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Welcome.

The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

MATEO VACA TALBOT: VISIT TO LEGISLATURE - WELCOME

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Today it has been the honour of the NDP caucus to bring Mateo Vaca Talbot to Province House. November 1st is Take Our Kids To Work Day for many students, including Mateo, who is in Grade 9 at École Mer et Monde. Instead of going off to work with his parents, Mateo wanted to come to work with us.

Like our MLAs, Mateo shares a deep sense of justice, fairness, and equity. Even at the young age of 14, he has shown a keen interest in politics. He has been known to treat elections like his own personal Super Bowl, often complete with themed snacks. Most recently he celebrated Wab Kinew's historic win in Manitoba.

While Mateo still isn't quite sure what he wants to study after school, it's clear that the path will include politics in some form, whether it is law, policy, or journalism. When he isn't watching election results from across the world in all levels of government, he also enjoys speed skating and Capoeira. I would ask all members to please join me in welcoming Mateo again to the House.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Premier.

CUMMINGER, JOANNE: COMFORT STATION - THANKS

THE PREMIER: In the days following Hurricane Fiona, when so many Nova Scotians were without power, Joanne Cumminger and her team opened a comfort station at the Plymouth Fire Hall. They worked day and night providing delicious meals to residents, from not just Pictou East and not just Pictou County, but some residents even from as far as Port Hawkesbury arrived at the comfort centre.

Anyone who came to the fire hall was offered breakfast, lunch and supper over a course of several days. Joanne worked hard to ensure that each morning they continued to have fresh eggs, not just muffins and biscuits.

During this time of isolation, residents came not just for the warm food but also for the companionship. The volunteers took time to ensure everyone felt welcome. Joanne and her husband, Cammie, have been great leaders for our community for a long time, and we are so grateful for all they do.

Speaker, I ask all members of the Legislature to thank Joanne and her team for opening this comfort centre and ensuring our residents were well-cared-for.

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

ODENIYI, FUNMI: MICHNAT FASHION - RECOG.

LORELEI NICOLL: I rise today to recognize Funmi Odeniyi, owner and founder of the fashion brand MichNat Fashion. I am proudly wearing one of her creations today. Funmi describes herself as wife, mother, lover of God, chartered accountant, and MBA holder in finance management. After 13 years as a chartered accountant, she made the decision to fulfill a lifelong desire to become a fashion designer. Funmi wanted to fill the gap for the demand for African designs within our city and province. Her clothing is trendy and versatile, with a mix of vibrant colours, all combined with western and Afro flair.

On March 15th of this year, the Odeniyi family took their Canadian citizenship oath at a ceremony in Halifax. Canada officially welcomed Funmi and her husband Akin, and their four children: Tim, Tom, Bu-sa-Your, and Fola.

Speaker, please join me in welcoming Funmi Odeniyi and her family to our community and country and in wishing her continued success. She'd be here today but she's busy sewing in her new shop on Spring Garden Road.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: Speaker, may I introduce some guests?

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

GARY BURRILL: Thank you. I'd like to introduce to the House two guests we have with us this afternoon, Doris MacDonald and Paul Jenkinson, up in the corner of our West Gallery. Doris and Paul are here with us this afternoon in connection with some legislative initiatives that will be brought forward by our party later in the afternoon's debates.

We welcome you to the House and are grateful to have you here.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre.

ORGANIZERS: COAL DUST DAYS FESTIVAL - CONGRATS.

KENDRA COOMBES: And Whitney Pier. Thank you, Speaker. Don't forget that Whitney Pier - it's very important.

I wish to congratulate the new Coal Dust Days committee on a successful week-long festival. When the former committee disbanded, a new committee was formed, chaired by Alexis McDonald. The hard work of planning and coordinating the week-long event is immense. Creating a festival event for all ages requires a lot of effort and skill. There were plenty of fun-filled family events, children and youth events, and the 19+ events.

The nine-day festival is jam-packed every day. My highlights include the Kay Macsween Memorial Walk, Plummer Avenue Day, the evening street dance, the Susan Coombes Memorial Teddy Bear Picnic, the annual pet show, the library teddy bear sleepover, and of course, the fireworks and closing party. So much fun was had by all, and I want to congratulate the committee on a successful Coal Dust Days.

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

SNOW, BOB: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

JOHN WHITE: Speaker, regretfully, I rise to pay my respects to retired 30-year Glace Bay volunteer firefighter Bob Snow. Bob passed away on Friday, October 27th, at the Glace Bay Hospital, surrounded by his family and friends. His celebration of life is this evening at the Glace Bay Fire Hall.

Years after he retired, Bob continued to show up at the fire department to check in on members and make sure we were okay. Although we retire from the fire services, we forever remain brothers. I can assure you that Glace Bay fire service members, both past and present, are grieving his loss.

Bob is survived by his wife of 61 years, Jackie; his son, John and his wife, Nancy; daughters Tanya and Jennifer, and Jennifer's husband, Allan. His pride and joy were his grandchildren Hannah, Robert, and Brooke.

Rest easy, brother. We'll take it from here.

Speaker, I ask for a moment of silence for Bob and all past firefighters.

THE SPEAKER: Please stand for a moment of silence.

[A moment of silence was observed.]

THE SPEAKER: Please be seated.

[1:30 p.m.]

The honourable Minister for Service Nova Scotia.

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: Speaker, I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

COLTON LEBLANC: Thank you, Speaker. It's my pleasure to welcome to the House special guests Maya Wilkie, who is a Grade 9 student at Fairview Junior High. She's here with her mom for a Take Our Kids to Work Day. Her mom, Rachel Wilkie, is my Director of Communications. I ask all members to join me in welcoming Maya and her mom to the House today. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Welcome. The honourable member for Clayton Park West, who is joining us virtually.

NOVA CHURCH: BACKPACKS DONATION - THANKS

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Today I would like to applaud the Nova Church for their efforts to provide school supplies and backpacks this Fall. The Nova Church congregation meets at the Bella Rose Theatre in the Halifax West High School. Each year, the church gathers around 200 backpacks to give out to families in need, but due to the increasing needs in our community, they raised their goal to 500.

Due to the affordability crisis, many families are struggling to afford the bare necessities for their children. September can be an extremely difficult time of the year for families. Imagine, the Nova Church was able to gather and give out 700 backpacks, and still had to turn people away.

Speaker, I would like to ask the House to join me in thanking the Nova Church, and all the organizations and people who donated to this great cause. You help make things a little easier for the families in Clayton Park West.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

ARMBRAE ACADEMY: INCLUSION EFFORTS - THANKS

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, I stand here today to acknowledge Armbræ Academy for all the hard work they are doing to create a more equitable and fair world where kids of all backgrounds can thrive. In particular, I'd like to recognize the amazing work led by Board Chair Jill Hennigar, Head of School Steve Clarke, Director of Admissions Suzanne

Morrison, Athletic Director Susan Beazley as well as the entire board, staff, and administration at Armbrae Academy for creating an environment where everyone belongs.

Armbrae has made diversity and inclusion a core part of the school's mission. The entire Armbrae community, as well as the south end of Halifax, greatly benefits from the inclusive leadership philosophy that the school embodies. Kids are thriving there in all aspects, with access to scholarships and post-secondary opportunities now available to them from all over the world.

The school has provided extensive resources to ensure all children are supported, but especially to those who have been historically left out of these privileged environments.

I would like all members of this House to join me in thanking Armbrae Academy for all the amazing work they do to foster brilliance and develop well-rounded citizens. Hope to see you at the Amazing Shake competition.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland South, on an introduction.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Thank you very much, Speaker, and I appreciate the leave to make an introduction. Sitting in your gallery, I'd ask my son Cooper to rise. (Applause) It's also his Grade 9 Take Our Kids to Work Day. I don't know whether it's Take Your Father to Work, but he's been involved in some briefings today, a couple of meetings, a media update, now here for Question Period. He's been representing Cumberland South very well today.

He is accompanied by my brother Trevor - living in Moncton now, originally from Oxford. I think it's Trevor's first time in the gallery since my grandfather stood down here, so it's quite a family honour today. Thank you very much for your patience. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Welcome. Always nice to see you, Cooper.

The honourable member for Kings West.

MACPHERSON, WAYNE: COM. SERV. - THANKS

CHRIS PALMER: Today I would like to recognize Wayne MacPherson, a long-time educator and volunteer who has made a tremendous impact on the youth of Kings West over the last five decades.

Originally from Glace Bay, Wayne is a retired teacher who was in the education system for 34 years prior to his retirement in 2006. Wayne was in the classroom for 15 years at the elementary level, and he worked as a guidance counsellor for 19 years at West

Kings High School. He worked with students, preparing them for their post-secondary education, and helping them through challenges during their high school years.

Wayne was a long-time president for the Valley Wild Cats Major Triple A Hockey Program in the 1980s and 1990s, and involved in various hockey schools and player development. He has also been a long-time member of the Kings West PC Association, last year completing a four-year term as secretary.

One of Wayne's lasting legacies in our area are the hundreds of people, young and old alike, he has taught to drive through his driving school, Maritime Driver Education, which he wrapped up after 48 years.

I'd like to thank Wayne for his years of dedication to our communities, and personally for his friendship and support to me and my family. As my neighbour in Aylesford, I hope we don't lose him back to Glace Bay anytime soon.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

KOC: DONATIONS TO COMMUNITY - THANKS

FRED TILLEY: Speaker, in June of 2014, the Knights of Columbus building on View Street in Sydney Mines was destroyed by fire. The KOC was a place where there were lots of weddings and dances. It became infamous to the neighbourhood.

Three years ago, certain members of the Knights of Columbus, notably George Walker and Hector G. DiPersio, realized that the dream of building a new KOC would not happen, and that it was time for the group to give back to the community.

I'm going to read off some of the investments that they've made in the community since. The Columbian Club has donated \$80,000 to Holy Family Parish; \$30,000 to the Sydney Mines and District Community Centre; \$25,000 to the Sydney Mines Volunteer Fire Department; \$25,000 to the Sydney Mines & Area Food Bank; \$25,000 to the Sydney Mines and Bras d'Or Combined Christmas Cheer; \$10,000 to Branch No. 8 Royal Canadian Legion in Sydney Mines; \$10,000 to Branch No. 83 Royal Canadian Legion; \$10,000 to the Atlantic Memorial Park project; \$10,000 to Sydney Mines Community Cares, and most recently, they just gave \$10,000 to the Florence Fire Department, for a total of \$273,000 back into our community. We thank them for their service.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

NGUYEN, MAI: *SUNSHINE NAILS* PUBLICATION - CONGRATS.

GARY BURRILL: Lee's Nails, the familiar nail salon on Quinpool Road, is the source of the inspiration for an important new novel, *Sunshine Nails* by Mai Nguyen, released by Simon & Schuster in July.

Nguyen grew up in and around Lee's Nails, which has been operated by her parents, Lan and Phai Nguyen, since 1997. Now a National Magazine Award-nominated journalist in Toronto, she has written for *Wired*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Toronto Star*. In *Sunshine Nails*, her debut novel, Nguyen explores the fascinating world of nail salons, a world where the Vietnamese community in Halifax, as elsewhere, has a pronounced presence. The book tackles matters from gentrification to levels of privilege in a way that gives voice to the complex and full-hearted lives of the nail techs who are the subject of the story.

Mai Nguyen describes *Sunshine Nails* as "my love letter to nail techs" and so it is.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Truro-Bible Hill-Millbrook-Salmon River.

CCFT: ACADIAN DAY 2023 - CONGRATS.

DAVE RITCEY: Speaker, I rise today to offer congratulations to the Centre Communautaire francophone de Truro on their vibrant celebration of Acadian Day 2023. This organization's dedication to preserving and sharing the rich Acadian culture is truly commendable.

Acadian Day has become a cherished tradition in our region, bringing the community together to honour Acadian heritage, music, cuisine, and traditions. It also serves as a testament to the resilience and enduring spirit of the Acadian people. This annual festival provides the opportunity to not only celebrate past traditions but also inspire future generations to embrace their roots.

I would like to thank everyone involved for another successful and joy-filled Acadian Day Festival. Merci, Madame la présidente. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clare.

DAUGHTER, MATTEA - BIRTHDAY WISHES

RONNIE LEBLANC: Speaker, this week is an important week for my daughter Mattea. This past Sunday was her 24th birthday. Today is her last day of her classroom work placement as part of her B.A. B.Ed. at Université Sainte-Anne. She'll be starting a

teaching job with the CSAP. Her mother and I want to wish her a belated happy birthday and tell her we love her and we're very proud of her.

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

PETE'S FROOTIQUE WORKERS: CONTRACT FIGHT - SUPPORT

LISA LACHANCE: The workers at the Pete's Frootique location on Dresden Row held an information picket on Saturday, October 28th. The staff formed a union 18 months ago and are still waiting to reach a contract with Sobeys. At that Pete's location, all staff are making minimum wage, even those with more than 10 years' experience. They also do not have access to paid sick days.

As Nicholle Savoie, a union member, said, "Pete's workers struggle to afford the bare essentials of life. We work sick because we have no sick days, and can't afford unpaid time off. We have been waiting for a fair contract since we voted to unionize in May 2022. We have waited long enough."

On Saturday, union members spoke with Pete's customers and passers-by. They displayed a large banner signed by dozens of Pete's customers urging Sobeys to sign a contract with the workers. I send our support to the workers at Pete's Frootique on Dresden Row.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings North.

KENTVILLE FIRE DEPT.: 135TH ANNIV. - CONGRATS.

HON. JOHN LOHR: Speaker, I rise today to congratulate the Kentville Volunteer Fire Department on its 135th anniversary of serving our community.

The Kentville Volunteer Fire Department was founded on February 22, 1888, and was originally called the Kentville Volunteer Fire and Protection Company. The rich history of our fire department has evolved from a two-wheeled, man-powered hose reel to state-of-the-art equipment responding to approximately 400 calls per year.

At any time, firefighters may respond to motor vehicle accidents, fire alarms, water rescue, medical emergencies, hazardous materials incidents, and more. The dedication of our volunteer firefighters is incredible and is deeply appreciated within our community.

Please join me today in recognizing and congratulating the Kentville Volunteer Fire Department on its 135th anniversary.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Queens on an introduction.

HON. KIM MASLAND: In the West Gallery today - I'm just so excited to do this introduction. I've been a member of this Legislature since 2017. This is the first time I've had any family members here. I'm over the Moon. It's nice to know someone loves me. (Laughter)

Joining us from Ottawa today is my brother Shawn Fancy, his lovely wife - my sister-in-law Dr. Karla Randell, and her brother Chad Randell. Welcome to the Legislature. (Standing ovation)

THE SPEAKER: What a lovely surprise. Nice to see you. Enjoy your visit.

The honourable member for Annapolis.

BEALS, DOROTHY: TEACHER AND AUTHOR - RECOG.

CARMAN KERR: It's an honour today to rise to recognize Dorothy Beals of Moshers Corner. Dorothy is as tough and resilient as they come. After losing her father at a young age, her mother, along with Dorothy and her five young siblings, rose up to run the family farm through wartime and other challenging situations. She went on to train and thrive as a teacher and shape young minds at the Mount Hanley Schoolhouse, the Victoria Vale School, and in Nictaux.

How did I discover all this? Well, Dorothy is also an author and a few years back, at the age of 90, she wrote her latest book, called *My First Twenty-One Years*. Dot's family has recently reached out to me as their MLA to tell me that Dorothy is currently in the Mayflower unit at Soldiers Memorial Hospital in Middleton. She is anxiously awaiting her transition to a local nursing home, where she'll have more opportunities for meaningful social and intellectual interactions.

I ask that all members of the House of Assembly join me in wishing Dorothy Beals congratulations on her success as a teacher and author, and best wishes as she waits to transition from the Soldiers Memorial Hospital to a more appropriate long-term care home.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

WOOFINGTONS: DOG DAYCARE - RECOG.

SUSAN LEBLANC: My three-year-old springerdoodle, Gregory Jack Leblanc, is very excited about the latest opportunity to meet new friends in Dartmouth North.

Woofingtons of LakeCity is a new doggie daycare catering to the needs of small dogs that's being run as a social enterprise by LakeCity Works. LakeCity has been in Dartmouth North for over 40 years, and is famous for its beautiful furniture. The organization is looking to expand into more service-based offerings. This, and the

increased demand for pet services since the onset of COVID, has driven the opening of Woofingtons of LakeCity.

LakeCity Works provides work experience and skill-building opportunities to individuals living with mental illness. Giving participants and supported employees the opportunity to work with animals will be a valuable skill-building opportunity and therapeutic experience. Woofingtons is taking a quality over quantity approach catering to a number of small dogs under 30 pounds.

I ask all members of the House to join me in congratulating LakeCity Works on this new venture and in wishing all the doggies great days ahead.

[1:45 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Waverley-Fall River-Beaver Bank.

WYSE, LILLIAN: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

HON. BRIAN WONG: Speaker, today I would like to honour the memory of a Waverley resident who has impacted the lives of so many people. Mrs. Lillian Wyse passed in 2021 but her contributions to our community live on.

Lillian was a member of the Friendly Circle, president of the parents group for Brownies, and was the treasurer for the Waverley Firemen's Ladies Auxiliary. She also was heavily involved with the Anglican church, now in Fall River.

This past July, construction finished on a new gazebo in McDonald Sports Park by Waverley resident Cam McDonald. It bears a beautiful plaque dedicating the gazebo to Mrs. Lillian Wyse.

Please join me in honouring the wonderful contributions Lillian made in our community.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect.

ROUTE 333 LIFESAVERS: BLOOD DONATION - THANKS

HON. IAIN RANKIN: Speaker, I rise today to recognize the Route 333 Lifesavers. Formed in March of 2023 and led by Hayden Martin and his mother Patti, the 333 Lifesavers is a way for graduating Halifax West High School students to mark their graduation for a good cause. The group meets regularly for blood donations and now consists of over 100 people from the Prospect area.

As a recent blood donor myself, I understand the importance of donating blood. I want to encourage everyone who can to donate when able to. Thank you to the many people involved in this wonderful initiative and all those who donate blood in Nova Scotia.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

MCLENNAN, BARBARA “BUB”: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I rise today to honour the life of Barbara “Bub” McLennan.

After moving around the Atlantic Provinces and Ontario, Bub and Bruce finally put down roots in Oat Hill Lake in Dartmouth in 1970 with six children in tow.

Over the next 50 years, they grew a huge and loving family that includes 13 grandchildren, their partners, six great-grandchildren, and many nieces and nephews. Bub’s family extended out into the neighbourhood as well. Her daily walks around Oat Hill Lake and her genuine warmth meant that she knew and was adored by many.

She was also very creative, taking up traditional rug hooking in the 1980s and finding that she had a real passion for the craft which she would practice for 40 years. She produced many colourful works and earned even more long-lasting friendships in the process.

Bub was witty, creative, and loving. She will be deeply missed by her community. Please join me in honouring the memory of Barbara “Bub” McLennan.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Digby-Annapolis.

TAKE OUR KIDS TO WORK DAY: PARTICS. - THANKS

HON. JILL BALSER: I rise today to recognize that today, November 1, 2023, is Take Our Kids to Work Day.

To all the students going to work, and especially those in Digby-Annapolis, I wish everyone a fun-filled day full of inspiration, a little bit of hard work, and long-lasting memories. Remember to dream big, work hard, be kind to yourself and others, and don’t take no for an answer because anything is possible.

Speaker, each year on this day I enjoy reminiscing on my experience of Take Our Kids to Work Day when I went to work with my dad, the Honourable Gordon Balser. It was 22 years ago and I still have the tie to prove it. These days at my office, it’s more like Take Your Dad to Work Day. (Laughter)

I'd like to thank all the students, parents, teachers, and schools across the province who are supporting, and participating in, this special day. I also want to acknowledge and thank the 100 youth who are working with the Public Service who joined us here today at the Legislature. I also hope that they have a wonderful day, too.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

DOWNEY, DOROTHY: 90TH BIRTHDAY - CONGRATS.

HON. KELLY REGAN: I'd like to congratulate Bedford resident Dorothy Downey on celebrating her 90th birthday recently.

Dorothy is still sharp as all get-out. Her daughters say that she still looks after her home and up until not long ago, she was still volunteering doing taxes at the Bedford Public Library.

When I mentioned to Dorothy how grateful I was that she had spent her 82nd birthday with me volunteering at my election headquarters, she said she was happy to. Then she corrected me and pointed out that it was, in fact, her 80th birthday. You know what? She was right. It was a pleasure to be with her on that day, as her friends and family celebrated her last month. Happy birthday, Dorothy. I look forward to celebrating many, many more with you.

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

POLISH HER. MO.: EVENTS IN CBRM - CONGRATS.

KENDRA COOMBES: Speaker, September was Polish Heritage Month in Nova Scotia. In Whitney Pier, there was much to celebrate. On September 10th, we celebrated the 110th anniversary of the St. Mary's Polish Church with a special mass and lunch. I also had the privilege to attend the blessing of the coal train in Whitney Pier's pocket park next to the Polish Village Hall. There were events around the CBRM, including after-school activities for youth, Polish presentations at Cape Breton University, and many other activities to honour Polish Heritage Month. There was an open house as well at the Polish Village Hall, with Polish music, dance, and food - which was another highlight which apparently has gone viral on my Facebook.

I want to congratulate all the organizers of Polish Heritage Month on a very successful month.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Antigonish.

MACDONALD, CLARE: HORSE RACING CAREER - CONGRATS.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Speaker, the Truro Raceway recently held Clare MacDonald Day, where the accomplishments of Clare, a talented horsewoman and the winningest active female driver in North America, were celebrated. This was also a fundraiser for the Alzheimer Society of Nova Scotia, an important cause for Clare.

Clare grew up in the business. Her father, Ed Haley, established West River Stock Farm over 60 years ago, and Clare and her husband Kenny now run the farm. She became a licensed driver at 16 years of age and has not looked back. Over her career, Clare has set many records and achieved many impressive milestones, one of which was reaching the 1,500-win mark on July 13, 2021. Clare's work ethic, determination, and grit - not that Grit - have led to her success.

I ask all members of this House to join me in congratulating Clare on her stellar career and wish her continued success on the race circuit.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

CUZNER, RODGER: APPOINTED SENATOR - RECOG.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Speaker, I rise in my place to recognize someone that many folks would be familiar with in here. As we know, there were appointments to the Senate of Canada that happened this week. I do want to recognize my friend Rodger Cuzner, who is no stranger to many, on being appointed Senator. I met Rodger way back when, in my student government days at Cape Breton University. Rodger was a mentor to me and to many other politicians who have come through the system. Rodger also had a big impact on kids all over the Island and beyond in his time, with a great game of hockey and the time he was working with the CBRM.

I rise in my place to recognize Rodger - so well-deserved. Rodger has served Cape Breton well over a long political career, and I'm sure the Senate won't be the same now that Rodger has been appointed to the Senate of Canada. Congratulations, Rodger.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

HFX. LEB. FEST.: CELEB. OF HER. - CONGRATS.

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, on September 8th I was honoured to attend the Halifax Lebanese Festival. My family and I were warmly welcomed by the organizing committee, who made me feel like family with lots of delicious food, bouncy castles for the kids - they really loved that - treats, and folkloric music. There was music and dancing to showcase their proud heritage. It was such a good start to the weekend, a weekend filled with

community festivities where the Lebanese culture is embraced while celebrating the vibrant and beautiful province of Nova Scotia, which they're all proud to call home.

I would like all members of this assembly to join me in congratulating the organizing committee for celebrating 22 years of the Halifax Lebanese Festival. I thank them all for such a lovely time.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Shelburne.

SANDY POINT COM. REC. GRP.: COM. SERV. - THANKS

NOLAN YOUNG: Speaker, I rise today to recognize the Sandy Point Community Recreation Group. The Sandy Point Lighthouse, located at the mouth of Shelburne Harbour, is one of the most significant tourist locations in the province. Although it's no longer used for navigational purposes, the lighthouse - located at the end of the sand spit that can be walked down at low tide - provides an incredible backdrop for the many events at the Community Centre, including weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, public events, et cetera. I respectfully ask that all members join me in thanking the Sandy Point Community Recreation Group for their community service in maintaining this unique piece of history for all to enjoy.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

VOLS.: HALLOWEEN STREET PARTY - THANKS

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Halloween night is one of the scariest nights of the year. Among the ghouls and goblins are two very amazing shining stars, Jacob Rafuse and Steven MacLeod. Jacob and Steven spent countless hours on their annual Halloween street party. This year, they used the street party to raise awareness and funds for the Youth Project. Jacob and Steven are two people I truly admire and love. Thank you to all the volunteers, including the J.L. Ilsley High football team, who made this a successful and fun event for all.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

STUDENTS: NAT'L SCIENCE FAIR PARTIC. - CONGRATS.

GARY BURRILL: I'd like to extend the congratulations of the Legislature to Chloe Dafoe and Harry Nickerson of the Halifax Independent School, who were among six students chosen from 70 participants at the Halifax Sci-Tech Expo to attend the Canada-Wide Science Fair in May held in Edmonton.

Judging at the Canada-Wide Science Fair is held at grade level categories: 7 and 8, Junior; 9 and 10, Intermediate; and 11 and 12, Senior. Chloe's project, Mercury

Contamination Around the Bedford Basin, was presented as an Intermediate. Harry's, Do You Really See What Eye See, a Junior category entry, received the Excellence Award Gold Medal.

Over 400 students present their projects at the Canada-Wide Science Fair, and the Halifax Sci-Tech Expo Association is to be commended for organizing and administering the regional science fair from which the national participants are selected. Congratulations across the board.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sackville-Uniacke.

FIREFIGHTERS: WILDFIRE EFFORTS - THANKS

HON. BRAD JOHNS: I'd like to take the opportunity to show my utmost admiration and appreciation for the dedicated firefighters of Sackville-Uniacke and beyond for their tremendous efforts in containing the wildfires that engulfed our neighbouring community of Tantallon. All first responders put their lives at risk every day to fight and preserve our land, our businesses, our homes, and in some cases, save lives too.

Notably, I'd like to recognize Halifax Regional Fire & Emergency Captain Kevin Corkum and firefighter Conor Scott, who braved the raging wildfires to rescue an elderly resident who had been trapped in his home. Fortunately, they were successful and returned him safely. I ask all the members of this House to join me in thanking our first responders for their hard work during these unprecedented times.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings South.

RICKETTS, DR. PETER: RETIREMENT - BEST WISHES

HON. KEITH IRVING: It's with great appreciation that I acknowledge the retirement of Dr. Peter Ricketts as president and vice-chancellor of Acadia University in Wolfville. Throughout his tenure, Dr. Ricketts has exemplified unwavering dedication to academic excellence, innovation, sustainability, and building a strong Acadia community.

His commitment to inclusivity and diversity has enriched the university's cultural fabric, creating a welcoming space for individuals from all backgrounds to thrive. Under Dr. Ricketts's guidance, Acadia University has forged meaningful partnerships that extend the institution's influence beyond the campus boundaries.

Dr. Ricketts led Acadia's response to the many challenges posed during COVID-19, when our learning environments had to pivot quickly and dramatically. I ask all members of the Nova Scotia Legislative Assembly to join me in thanking Dr. Peter Ricketts for his outstanding contribution to Acadia University and wishing him a fulfilling retirement.

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

ST. JAMES, PATRICK: BLDG. MGR. WORK - THANKS

LISA LACHANCE: Everyone knows how much work goes into maintaining a constituency office, and this includes the building staff that our constituents might not get the chance to meet. Today, I'm very happy to rise and recognize the property manager for our building on Spring Garden Road, Patrick St. James. Patrick does Sport Nova Scotia's name proud in maintaining and keeping an eye on the building. Thanks to his watchful eye and helpful support staff, my staff and I can rest knowing that our space is in good hands.

When Patrick comes to visit or work on something, you can always count on some fun and honest banter about life, the neighbourhood, and the world. He is appreciated by tenants throughout the building and truly makes it a special place to work. I ask that my fellow members join me in thanking Patrick St. James for all that he does to keep the Sport Nova Scotia building running smoothly and extend the same to folks who do that work at their own offices.

THE SPEAKER: Just a quick friendly reminder too, that no props are to be used during statements. Earlier - just in reference to another person. Order.

We will now begin Oral Questions Put by Members to Ministers. The time is 2:00 p.m. We will finish at 2:50.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM: HOMELESS IN WINTER - HELP

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, Winter is here. It's snowing outside. My question to the Premier is: We've got over a thousand people who are homeless in Halifax today. Where does he expect them to stay?

THE PREMIER: The air is definitely changing, and snow is flying. There's no question that Fall is in the air.

There's also no question there are several Nova Scotians who are experiencing homelessness, underhousing, and living rough. I know that as it gets colder, this becomes a bigger concern. What I would say to the member is that we understand the urgency in getting the shelters up and running. The Department of Community Services is working with the municipalities - HRM and others - to finalize and open Winter shelters.

[2:00 p.m.]

We've also seen an increase in year-round shelters - a lot that were seasonal shelters that are year-round now - and of course the minister has spoken about the plans around Pallet homes and some of the other innovative ways to support people.

There's work to be done - no question about that. We welcome some ideas from the member opposite in how we might support these Nova Scotians.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, Winter is here. Temperatures are going below freezing. We've got people in tents - if they're lucky. They're going to need help tonight, or people are going to get desperate. My question to the Premier is: Where does he advise those folks to stay tonight?

THE PREMIER: There are several shelters. I encourage people to work with the Department of Community Services, work with some of the social workers, and work with some of the municipality representatives. We know this is an issue facing many Nova Scotians. This government has worked hard to support those. Those wraparound supports are extensive - not just a roof but all kinds of supports we have to offer Nova Scotians. We're working hard to do that.

ZACH CHURCHILL: People are in danger tonight. Where are they going to stay when temperatures go below freezing?

THE PREMIER: As I said, the Department of Community Services is working with several non-profit organizations. There are many Nova Scotians in several organizations who are stepping up to support Nova Scotians. We work with those organizations. We like to partner with those organizations to make sure we have safe housing, safe accommodations, and wraparound supports for Nova Scotians.

There is significant work to be done - there's no question - not only in Halifax but across the province and across the entire country. This is a challenge that's facing many Canadians, but our Province will continue to invest in ways to support all Nova Scotians.

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

PREM: HUNGER IN SCHOOLS - EXPLAIN

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Speaker, I'd like to ask the Premier a few questions about the situation in Nova Scotian schools. Last week, the Premier stated, "Nobody in this House . . . would be satisfied with a child being hungry. That's not something that we accept." I'll table that. We know that children across our province and in our schools are going hungry every single day, and we know that existing programs are not reaching the

children who need them. Why is the Premier allowing children to continue to go hungry in our schools?

THE PREMIER: It is not acceptable that there are children - that there are families - going hungry in this province. We'll continue as a Province to invest, and we'll continue to support those working in the school system. I know teachers across this province are doing everything they can every single day to support students. They're not making them raise their hand up in front of a class and say, "We need food." They are just sitting down, talking to them, and doing what they can.

As a government, we are supporting those teachers. We are supporting those working in the school system. We know there's lots of work to be done, but as a government, we'll continue to invest in Nova Scotians, invest in our schools, and invest in our students and teachers.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: What I hear from teachers is that they're tired of picking up the pieces and filling the gaps that the government refuses to do. The Premier is leaving children at risk in our schools with lead-contaminated water across HRM. The minister has told this House that she believes that students deserve and are entitled to safe schools, which includes the safety of the water. I'll table that. In many cases, testing has not happened in years, and the only remediation work the government has taken is to put up temporary hand-wash signs and bottled water. There is lead in the water, there is no remediation, no testing and we don't know how that water is being used.

My question to the Premier is: Why is the Premier allowing children and teachers to continue being exposed to lead toxins every day in our schools?

THE PREMIER: This is a very serious issue. I want to assure all Nova Scotians that despite the rhetoric you might hear in an environment like this, there are no children in this province who are drinking lead-contaminated water in their schools. There are alternative water sources available for drinking. The drinking water that is being provided by the school system to students in the schools is safe. That drinking water that is being provided is safe. There are certainly situations where they can't drink the water from the taps. Alternative water is provided in those situations.

The drinking water in our schools is safe, I want to assure all Nova Scotians of that.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Just to be clear, that is what I said in my question, that the water coming out of the taps that young children are with in the washrooms, all day and all the time unsupervised, has lead in it and we're not doing anything about it.

The Premier is also allowing unacceptable levels of violence to continue in our schools. The President of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union recently stated that people

should be shocked by the increase in school violence and that it is incumbent on the government to do something about it. I will table that.

Unfortunately, we have a government that continues to ignore the rising school violence and to ignore the warning flags raised by teachers and families. My question to the Premier is: When will this government take action to ensure that our schools are safe for students and teachers?

THE PREMIER: I want to assure the member that nobody is ignoring these things. We're certainly not a government that looks away from issues. We are a government that acts on issues. We're working with schools, administrators, and people working in the education system and teachers. We're working with anyone who will join us in supporting our students to make sure that they get the best possible education.

We have incredible people working in our school system, absolutely incredible people investing their lives in the students and the children of this province, I'm so proud of that. We as a government will continue to look for ways to support them in every way possible.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

DCS: INCREASE IN HOMELESSNESS - STOP

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, homelessness has doubled under this government. This Summer, when that was announced, the government brushed it off, comparing the increase in homelessness to Summer camping, saying it was a natural evolution and the government took no action.

My question to the Premier is: We have below-freezing temperatures tonight. Why did he wait until late Fall to develop a plan to deal with the increasing amount of homelessness in this province?

HON. TREVOR BOUDREAU: We feel the urgency. We recognize that people are struggling and there are people who are experiencing homelessness and living rough. As a department and as a government, we have certainly invested significantly over the last two years. To put it in perspective, we have created 417 units over the last two years. That's 71 per cent of supportive housing units in the province that have been created in the last two years.

We absolutely know there's more to do and we feel the urgency. We'll continue to do what we can to support our most vulnerable.

ZACH CHURCHILL: The government is not taking this seriously. When you call an increase in homelessness in Summer a natural evolution, you are not taking it seriously.

When you freeze income supports for the most financially vulnerable for two years in a row, you are not taking it seriously. When you cut rental supplements for people who need support to pay for the highest rents in the country, you are not taking it seriously.

I'll tell you who is taking it seriously: the senior women who are knitting socks for people out on the streets so they can keep their feet warm, the 95-year-old lady in Nova Scotia - in Sackville - who is baking goods for them.

My question to the minister is: There are people suffering tonight who don't know what they are going to do with temperatures below zero - what is the government going to do to help?

TREVOR BOUDREAU: We have been working really hard to secure a shelter locally, here in the HRM. I am happy to say that we have secured a shelter here in the HRM.

Our government has been very committed to supporting people who are experiencing homelessness. We have invested in a number of innovative opportunities. Certainly The Bridge and The Overlook are two great examples of things this government has done. We can talk about the two announcements that we've had recently - certainly with respect to the Pallet shelters and with respect to the tiny homes. We know there's more to do, and we'll continue to do what we can to support our most vulnerable.

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

NRR: POWER RATES - LOWER

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Every day, Nova Scotians are now dealing with Winter temperatures. Their power rates are going up 14 per cent under this government. This government has also cut the Heating Assistance Rebate Program to many Nova Scotians. The minister responsible for energy promised this House that he would keep power rates low for Nova Scotians. My question to the minister is: Why has he failed to do that?

HON. TORY RUSHTON: If I recall correctly, the speaker bragged about his eight years in the previous government of capping the rate at 3.8 per cent. Well, the UARB - not me, the UARB - recognized this government capped those rates at non-fuel cost at 1.6 per cent.

ZACH CHURCHILL: I'm sure people who are paying 14 per cent on their power bills care about that information that the minister just tabled. I'm sure the people who got cut \$400 from the Heating Assistance Rebate that they were promised and that they budgeted for care about what the minister tabled.

The fact is, there are options to regulate power in this province. The minister actually stood up in this House, along with the Premier, and they promised members of this Chamber and the public that they were going to do that, and they failed. What's their plan now to make sure energy poverty does not increase in Nova Scotia as people start facing Winter temperatures?

TORY RUSHTON: As we've had the conversation over the last few weeks in this government, I would like to share the plan. It is Nova Scotia's 2030 Clean Power Plan.

How is this going to affect the users? It's going to reduce the energy usages within their homes. How are we going to do that? Batteries on the grid, Speaker. Installation of up-to-date heat pumps, reducing their own electricity uses in their homes with efficiency programs. And I would bounce the question back to the Opposition: How many kilowatts of hours have been used for the bell-ringing this session?

THE SPEAKER: Order. The honourable member for Cole Harbour.

MAH: AFRICAN NOVA SCOTIAN HOUSING - CONSULT

HON. TONY INCE: Yesterday, the Premier said in a scrum that they did significant consultations with the African Nova Scotian community regarding their plan for housing in HRM, and I'll table that. My question to the minister is: Who did they consult with?

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

HON. JOHN LOHR: I probably should get clarification. I do have three bills before the House. Which bill are we talking about?

TONY INCE: Knowing that we can't talk about bills, I'm talking about consultations. I have heard from the community myself that they were not consulted, and we continue to see the government put the African Nova Scotian community second in their thoughts. Will the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing please table the list of who you consulted with and what they asked for?

JOHN LOHR: What I can say is that actions speak louder words. We have invested in the African Nova Scotian community through projects in Preston. We are investing in a national community housing transformation organization here called the Black Communities Technical Housing Resource Centre. We have invested in that last Summer, in partnership with CMHC. We will invest more in that. That's a national organization for Black communities.

We're very proud of our connection with all our communities here in the province. We will continue to work with them.

[2:15 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

EECD: CHILD CARE WAIT-LIST FEES - END

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, it's now been one week since the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development stated that her department is looking into the question of wait-list fees. While we believe the minister has had all the information needed for months, we've been anxiously waiting to hear what the minister is going to do. Can the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development table her department's report and explain what actions she'll be taking to end child care wait-list fees?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: As we work to transform child care in Nova Scotia, and create an affordable system of child care that is accessible, inclusive, and provides quality care to Nova Scotians when and where they need it, we have a number of steps along that journey. We do understand that recently there are a limited number of operators who are requiring certain types of fees. The department is looking into steps that we can take to address that on this \$645 million five-year transformation. We will be taking steps in the near future to address that issue.

SUZY HANSEN: That wasn't really an answer to the question I had about banning wait-list fees. The minister does have the power to do so. Parents are desperate to find child care - like Jessica Conrad, who recently reported that she lost count of the number of child care centres she has contacted. She calls anywhere that she can get their number.

This is a very straightforward issue with a very straightforward solution. Families are being forced to pay unfair fees, and the minister has the ability to put a stop to it. I don't know what other options the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is looking for. I can give one. She needs to ban the fees. Will the minister ban the fees?

BECKY DRUHAN: The member opposite may not be aware but our child care centres are individually operated organizations. They're private organizations. They're not-for-profit organizations. (Interruptions)

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

BECKY DRUHAN: This is really a patchwork quilt. We are building a system. We don't currently have a system. We have a group of devoted, independently operated centres.

What I can say that might be helpful for the member opposite to understand is the funding agreements that are in place with all those operators are legally binding contracts.

When we change terms and conditions of those, there's work to be done. We can't just sign a paper in this House here and make it happen.

We have a path to addressing this issue to ensure that we have affordable, quality, and inclusive child care for Nova Scotians.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect.

DOJ: CROWN ATTORNEYS - HIRE

HON. IAIN RANKIN: The Minister of Justice admitted his department has a report from the Public Prosecution Service but has not yet read it himself. Curiously, he knows that the most germane part of that report says that there's a recommendation to hire 44 new Crown attorneys. That sounds about right, given New Brunswick is hiring about 30.

This government pats themselves on the back for budgeting for seven new Crown attorneys, which we don't even know are filled yet. Experts are saying we need five times that number to keep Nova Scotia safe and protect victims.

How can Nova Scotians be assured this government is taking our justice system seriously with this reactive approach?

HON. BRAD JOHNS: What I would say is that part of responsible government is making sure we're taking the right steps for the right reasons. That's why I asked for a report from the Director of Public Prosecutions. I have looked at that report. Staff are breaking down and analyzing the report to see what the exact needs are.

IAIN RANKIN: When asked by reporters if this department will hire more Crown attorneys, the Minister of Justice said, "The department is analyzing what the facts are that are in there to see whether or not there's a legitimate need." I'll table that.

Isn't the record number of case days in this province exploding enough? Is the head of the Crown Prosecution saying that the justice system is on fire not enough to act? When will he act on the recommendations from his own acting director to hire more Crown attorneys?

BRAD JOHNS: I did say previously in the House that in this budget year, 2022-23, we put almost \$800,000 in, hired seven Crowns. I did say in this House that we're looking at the coming budget and that we're intending on hiring more Crowns at that time.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

DCS: NOVA SCOTIANS - SUPPORT

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: We know the cost of living has gone up for all Nova Scotians. There are more people working who can't make ends meet and are relying on food banks. This government has tabled 12 pieces of legislation, none to address the cost of living. My question to the minister is: Why have there been no financial supports from this government to support Nova Scotians during this time of need?

HON. TREVOR BOUDREAU: We are absolutely concerned about the cost of living, inflation and high interest rates, and what they're doing to impact Nova Scotians. As a government, over the last two years we've increased supports to food banks - \$3 million last December, another \$2 million again in June of this year.

Again, we've had a number of targeted investments to support Nova Scotians, including increasing the Nova Scotia Child Benefit, increased targeted supports for income assistance clients, reducing child care fees, as well, for parents. We know there's more to do, and we'll continue to do what we can to support Nova Scotians.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Nova Scotia is the only province in the country that got an F on poverty reduction. I will once again quote: "It really is a result of a lack of action, a stagnation around any sort of policy advancements to address poverty, to address food insecurity," said the Food Banks Canada CEO. I'll table that.

Here's an idea that the minister may want: Could the minister at least commit to looking into indexing the current supports to inflation to help more Nova Scotians during this time of need?

TREVOR BOUDREAU: As we've said before, we recognize that the cost of living is impacting Nova Scotians and certainly our most vulnerable. I just highlighted a couple of investments to support food banks and support food insecurity in Nova Scotia. We've also created collaborative food networks in three communities in the province that are supporting Nova Scotians. Again, those three communities were given funding up to \$100,000 each to work within their networks to make sure that not only are we providing food security opportunities, but also things like mental health and addictions supports. We'll continue to work as best we can to support Nova Scotians.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

DCS: STRUGGLING NOVA SCOTIANS - SUPPORT

HON. KELLY REGAN: Nova Scotians all over this province are struggling, and our community food banks are feeling the pressure too, including in the Premier's own backyard. The Pictou County Food Bank East saw 259 clients register for the food bank up

to the end of September, but in October, the number shot up when 395 families came in for food. That was before the month was over. I'll table that.

Most of the food bank clients are working but can't afford to make ends meet. Lia LeClair, who works at the food bank, said that people from all walks of life are accessing the food bank - the unhoused, young families, seniors. My question to the Minister of Community Services is: Where are the supports to help people pay for groceries during this time of high costs, when pretty much everybody is struggling to get by?

HON. TREVOR BOUDREAU: As we've said, we recognize that the cost of living is increasing and has very much been impacting Nova Scotians - certainly our most vulnerable and those people who are struggling to make ends meet. As I said before, we have recognized that, and had investments and supports for food banks twice in the last year - \$3 million in December and \$2 million in the Summer.

I did also mention the collaborative food networks. Again, across departments, we're working to support people with food insecurity. We will continue to do what we can as a province to support our most vulnerable.

KELLY REGAN: Unfortunately, it's not working. That was a 50 per cent increase in the number of people who are registering for help at that food bank in just one month.

Danielle Fraser, the Humble Harvest representative for Westville, also talked about the impacts of food insecurity in the Pictou region. The organization hosts a pop-up at their pantry on Fridays to offer perishable goods to people, things like bread and milk. She said the response has been overwhelming, with crowds of people lining up well before the pop-up starts at 10:00 a.m. Speaker, everything is gone within 20 minutes. Non-profits and community organizations are doing their best to step up to meet the needs of people struggling with food insecurity.

My question for the Minister of Community Services is: When will this government step up with new supports too?

TREVOR BOUDREAU: We're very grateful as a government for the support that we have from our service providers that are working really hard to support us, and support our most vulnerable Nova Scotians. As a government, we've committed to targeted supports to support our most vulnerable. I think of increasing the Nova Scotia Child Benefit the last two budgets, and the increases to the Seniors Care Grant. I think of reducing child care fees. Again, these are all in an effort to support our most vulnerable, and to support Nova Scotians through a very challenging time.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

FTB: INCOME SUPP. PGM. FOR SENIORS - IMPLEMENT

GARY BURRILL: My question is for the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board. Across Canada, provincial programs that supplement the incomes of seniors pay their benefits automatically, based on last year's income tax return. In B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador, if you're over 65, and your income is under the program's threshold, then the money is advanced to your account. A cheque is mailed to you. In Nova Scotia, by contrast, in order to get the Seniors Care Grant, you have to make an application.

Will the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board table for this House the number of seniors in Nova Scotia who were eligible for the Seniors Care Grant last year but who did not receive it because they didn't make an application?

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Speaker, if I can, I will. I know that people have to apply to get it. Typically, what I would say for the benefit of the House is that whenever we can, we try to partner with the federal government so that we can use the Canada Revenue Agency to distribute whatever the benefit is, because then we don't have to do it. We don't have to spend the resources and the time to do it. It's usually a more efficient means of getting the benefit to them. But I will certainly look at that for the member.

GARY BURRILL: Thank you. Chebucto Links, a seniors' organization in the constituency that I serve, regularly puts on what they call "seniors application assistance drop-ins" because, as their brochure says, navigating complex online applications can be daunting. That's for sure, and that's not to speak of the thousands of seniors who don't have lots of family connections or big circles of friends, who don't watch the news or maybe don't see a paper, and who in the normal context of their living would not hear about the Seniors Care Grant, but who are eligible for it and who really need the money.

Wouldn't it be better to have a provincial income support program for low-income seniors that all eligible seniors actually receive?

ALLAN MACMASTER: I think it's a good question, because I think what the member is getting to the heart of is if there is a way to make it easier on people to get these benefits - which we want them to get - then we should try to take efforts to ensure that they can get them without having to apply all the time. Some improvements I've seen. I know, with the Seniors Care Grant and the Heating Assistance Rebate Program, where people - if they have applied online in the previous year - can get a reminder that it's available to them again. I think those things are good.

I'm not suggesting this in the case the member is asking about here, but there are sometimes issues of fraud as well. We want to make sure that when we have funds - when we're trying to get them to the people who need them - that there are not people out there

who are getting some kind of automatic payment made to them if they're no longer eligible for it, if such a case would arise.

[2:30 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings South.

DCS: INCOME ASSISTANCE - INCREASE

HON. KEITH IRVING: My question is for the Minister of Community Services, but he may need some assistance since he is new - maybe from the Chair of the Treasury Board. My question is: How much did the income assistance budget need to increase in this year's budget from last year for the government to increase income assistance rates by the 7.5 per cent rate of inflation?

HON. TREVOR BOUDREAU: We know poverty is complex and certainly we know there are intergenerational issues sometimes or systemic issues, and we recognize that it takes all levels of government and across departments to support our most vulnerable. Employment supports and income assistance are certainly programs that support our most vulnerable. In terms of the actual question with respect to numbers, I don't have those, but I can have a conversation with my department, and we can have a conversation after.

KEITH IRVING: The answer to the question is zero. A 7.5 per cent increase in income assistance would have cost \$20 million, but the government actually decreased the income assistance budget by \$23 million.

Now the government has taken in \$2.3 billion more than two years ago. That's a 19 per cent increase in revenue. They say they are focused on targeted supports, but there's just as many targeted supports - like the Heating Assistance Rebate Program - cut; the Seniors Care Grant, no change for inflation; cuts to food voucher programs; seniors care benefit, no change for inflation.

These targeted supports are failing our most vulnerable; they are not working. The government is taking in \$125 million more this year.

Does the minister not believe that we have a moral obligation for our most vulnerable? Will he increase income assistance now?

TREVOR BOUDREAU: We recognize that the cost of living and affordability has been an impact on Nova Scotians and across Canada, and as I said before, Employment Support and Income Assistance is the program that the government has to support some of our most vulnerable.

As a government, as I said before, we've created a number of targeted supports that we've provided to support some of our most vulnerable. We've increased supports for foster families, Speaker. We've increased supports for children with disabilities. We've increased the Nova Scotia Child Benefit. We'll continue to look at ways we can support our most vulnerable. We'll take a look at programs that we provide.

Again, I will continue to do what I can, and we'll continue to do what we can, to support our most vulnerable.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect.

DCS: INCREASE INCOME ASSISTANCE - COMMIT

HON. IAIN RANKIN: I want to table the report from Feed Nova Scotia where they responded to the last budget. They said 42 per cent of their clients are on income assistance. I think the most important part of that report for the minister is the highest percentage of food bank visitors is single adults without children.

None of those programs he just mentioned for targeted supports will help those people. The government made the conscious decision to not increase income assistance for Nova Scotians who need it most during record spending in this province. We continue to ask the government to reverse the freeze on income assistance and, in fact, cuts to the program.

I will ask the Minister of Community Services one more time: Will the government reverse course and increase income assistance so that all people who need the support will get that sustained support?

HON. TREVOR BOUDREAU: As we've said, poverty is certainly a significant, long-term, and complex issue. We know that the cost of living and affordability are impacting Nova Scotians.

As I said before, Employment Support and Income Assistance - the program is there to support some of those people who are struggling. We continue to look at our programming. We continue to look at opportunities. Again, targeted supports, and I can think of - we had several targeted supports for income assistance clients last year and in the year before, and we'll continue to look at ways to support our most vulnerable.

IAIN RANKIN: You can't get a more targeted support system for Nova Scotians than the income assistance program in the province. The fact of the matter is, these one-off, one-time supports clearly aren't working when they get an F for poverty reduction, the only province in the country that received that grade, Speaker.

My question to the minister is: What is the rationale - I haven't heard one reason yet, just a myriad of different programs - why this government chose not to increase income assistance?

TREVOR BOUDREAU: We recognize as a government that there are challenges that Nova Scotians and Canadians are facing with affordability and cost of living. Again, as I said, Employment Support and Income Assistance is a tool and a program that we use to support our most vulnerable.

On the employment support side of things, we recognize if we can support people in getting out of poverty and provide training and education and supports in that way to help lift people out of poverty, that's a very important component. As a government we're also very interested and invested in early intervention programming. We'll continue to look at programming and supports that we can provide.

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

DAE: STUDENT HOUSING PLAN - COMMIT

LORELEI NICOLL: On Page 114 of *Nova Scotia's Provincial Housing Needs Assessment Report*, it's calling for the government to stand up for student housing needs. According to the assessment, 71 per cent of students are spending more than 30 per cent of their before-tax income on housing, and almost 50 per cent of students have gone without groceries to pay for this housing. Yet this government waffles on if it has a plan, when it will release the student housing plan. My question to the Minister of Advanced Education: Will the government at least commit to releasing the student housing plan during its mandate?

HON. BRIAN WONG: We didn't wait. As a government we got right to it. In the first few months of our mandate, we announced the first three Nova Scotia student housing projects. We have one right across the harbour. You can listen to them bang the steel into the ground.

Akerley Campus - which is just over in Dartmouth - I had the pleasure this Summer of several times on my way to Preston in the evenings and on weekends to go out to Preston and look at the progress at Akerley Campus. The one in Stellarton - I believe it's ahead of schedule. We didn't wait for the plan because we'd be starting right now. We're already in progress.

LORELEI NICOLL: I'd like to take it closer to Province House and beyond the Nova Scotia Community College, because instead of offering solutions, this government talks about Happipad, which has no availability near the universities in the downtown core. Most of the rooms are all over \$1,000, and I'll table that. Speaker, 95 per cent of students felt they could not find a suitable housing alternative on short notice. That has been tabled.

My question to the minister: Where is the urgency in providing students with the housing that they need and deserve right here on the peninsula of Halifax?

BRIAN WONG: It gives me an opportunity to talk about options for Nova Scotia students. Around Nova Scotia we also have another sector that the Opposition never talks about, but Nova Scotia Community College is vital to post-secondary education in Nova Scotia. As a matter of fact, my son is able to live at home and go to school at Nova Scotia Community College and do their 2+2 program and then go on to get a university education. That is certainly a way to help with the housing crisis, to help with affordability for students. That's an option we have in communities all across this province.

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

ECC: SACRIFICING ENVIRON. FOR PROFITS - EXPLAIN

LISA LACHANCE: My question is for the Minister of Environment and Climate Change. Last month, Nova Scotians were shocked to discover that the government had quietly made changes that would make it easier for developers to build on fragile wetlands. We've heard concerns that these changes place too much control and discretion in the hands of the minister and developers, something which is becoming a pattern of this government. Why is this government so willing to sacrifice our environment for the sake of private profits?

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: Speaker, I reject the premise of that question. This is a government that highly values the protection and conservation of land. Despite what the Opposition has heard, there have been absolutely no changes to the Nova Scotia Wetland Conservation Policy - not a single change to a sentence and not a single change to a paragraph. I'm happy to table that wetland policy.

LISA LACHANCE: Speaker, we've also looked at policy changes and we've heard from advocates. In fact, they are described by one advocate as a "decision to develop land and to push big industrial projects through for short-term economic gain." I'll table that.

It's more important than ever to protect our limited and invaluable wetlands. They protect communities against flooding and storms. They store massive amounts of carbon and are home to thousands of diverse species.

We, like all Nova Scotians, know how desperately we need housing to be built, but why does this government act like it's not possible to protect the environment and build housing?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: Speaker, it's more important than ever to view housing as a necessary public function in the context of sustainable development, and that's exactly

what this government is doing. We believe we can build homes responsibly, sustainably, and in an environmentally sustainable way.

This is a government committed to protecting our wetlands. We have it through the guidance book and the policy on wetlands. We have it through legislation at the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables and at my department. We have it through regulations. We have it through a 20 per cent land-conservation target and the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act. We've invested \$20 million for the Nova Scotia Crown Share Land Legacy Trust and \$28 million from the federal government for land conservation.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

EECD: UNIVERSAL LUNCH PROGRAM - IMPLEMENT

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Speaker, food insecurity is a serious issue that is continuously challenging people from all different backgrounds. As Nourish Nova Scotia has outlined, there are more students in schools who are coming without having had breakfast, are coming without a packed lunch, or don't have the funds to purchase lunch at school. This issue is increasing exponentially. I'll table the statistics.

The people who are working and supporting delivery of programs in our schools are saying this problem is getting worse. My question to the minister today is: Has she met with the federal minister about implementing a universal lunch program?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: We know how important it is that students have access to healthy, nutritious food in schools. That's why we invest millions of dollars in supporting our educators and our staff in schools so they have access to programming to enable them to support students and to provide food, which we do through universal breakfast programs - which we do through a variety of ways in schools across the province. We have schools that have access to pantries. We have schools that have snack carts. We have rolled out pilots this year to extend access to food in schools. Those include programs that we've partnered with the Department of Agriculture on, like salad carts and fruit bowls, as well food vouchers.

Speaker, I can say that I have connected with the minister - my federal colleague - and we will be meeting to discuss universal food in schools.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I appreciate some of the information from the minister. I was there, and I can understand that these challenges pop up. I know how hard the teachers work to support those kids.

What does concern me is that the minister indicated that she's going to meet with the minister when we've been asking this question for over two years about a universal

lunch program. I've tabled multiple bills over the last 2.5 years, and we've been advocating hard as a caucus because this is where the students are. Go to where the kids are. You can feed them there, you can support them there, and we know they are going there.

Nourish Nova Scotia has said that if the province were to ensure that every student in Nova Scotia was getting a full balanced meal with three to four food groups per day, that would be a huge step in the right direction. My question to the minister is: After 2.5 years of questions and advocacy, when is this government finally going to do the right thing and implement a universal lunch program for our kids?

BECKY DRUHAN: Thank you to the member opposite for the question. I just wanted to pick up on a couple things he had said. First, I do want to clarify that I've connected with the new minister but there has been a change at the federal level. I have had many conversations with the prior minister on food in schools. I would like to table two of the letters we've exchanged on that exact issue. This is not a new conversation between the Province and the federal government. This has been a conversation we've been having all along.

I would also like to pick up on the member opposite's comment - and thanks to the educators and the staff in the system. Everyone in the system is working to ensure that students have access to the food they need. We can always do more. We are working daily on doing more, and we look forward to our federal partners pitching in with us and supporting that. We call upon the members opposite to join our voices, and encourage those federal partners to step up.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

DAE: UNIV. STUDENTS STRUGGLING - ADDRESS

BRAEDON CLARK: We know that many students are struggling with the housing and cost of living crises, and we can't ignore what we are hearing from students. A CBC article from this Fall talked to those running a food bank at Mount Saint Vincent University: "I was amazed because this Friday was the day that I have seen the most people ever." That's a quote from Devora Goldberg, who manages the food bank at MSVU. "We have around 15 volunteers involved here and we couldn't catch up with the demand of people coming."

My question to the minister is: Where should our university students go when food bank shelves are empty?

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Advanced Education.

HON. BRIAN WONG: We have one of the most generous student assistance programs across this country. Of course, we know that students are struggling. It's always

at the forefront of trying to find ways that we can have students go to post-secondary, get the education they need, have a place to live, have transportation, and have food.

[2:45 p.m.]

Two years ago, we gave \$875 to every student who had student assistance, and last year it was \$550. We will continue to look for ways to support students to get the education that they want and deserve.

BRAEDON CLARK: In the government's own housing needs assessment, it finds that 48 per cent - almost half - of student respondents had gone without groceries to pay for their housing costs. The minister in an earlier answer talked about options for students, when the fact is that half of the students in our province are choosing the option of paying for rent instead of eating, and that is something that I think is unacceptable.

At MSVU, the group who runs the food bank receives donations from Feed Nova Scotia and is also particularly funded by the Student Union. The food is free, of course, for students in need, but there is often not enough to go around. I will ask the minister again: What is this government doing to ensure that students are not having to choose between feeding themselves and having a roof over their heads?

BRIAN WONG: I do want to acknowledge all of the volunteers who are working at our food banks to support Nova Scotians and support students. It is vitally important.

As I mentioned earlier, we do have the most generous student assistance program throughout the country, and we will continue to look for ways to support students in addition to the funding we are giving students who are on Nova Scotia Student Assistance. We continue to have our loan forgiveness program for students studying in Nova Scotia who are staying in Nova Scotia afterwards. We will continue to look for ways to support students, because we know that students are important to the future of this province.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

DAE: HOUSING STRATEGY - IMPROVE

FRED TILLEY: Moments ago, we heard the Minister of Advanced Education talk about the strategy for homelessness for university students being that they should stay at home and crash at their own house or on their parents' couch. I'm wondering if the minister is willing to give his number for all of the homeless students who could crash on his couch? Does the minister really believe that a strategy of university students who are not from the area staying at home is a good housing strategy?

HON. BRIAN WONG: I think there may have been a misunderstanding. I was really referring to the option for students to go to Nova Scotia Community College. You

could live in Yarmouth, for example, because the Nova Scotia Community College offers more than 70 programs where you can do one or two years at Nova Scotia Community College while you are living at home, and then maybe in your next two years you can go to a university in order to get your university education . . . (Interruption)

THE SPEAKER: Order. The honourable Minister of Advanced Education has the floor.

The honourable Minister of Advanced Education.

BRIAN WONG: Thank you, Speaker. I have heard the member opposite talk about our new Marconi Campus - our new NSCC in Cape Breton - and how it was their government, it was their idea. Where is the housing strategy to go along with the NSCC in Sydney?

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

OPPOSITION MEMBERS' BUSINESS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable House Leader for the New Democratic Party.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, would you please call the order of business, Private Members' Public Bills for Second Reading.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BILLS FOR SECOND READING

THE SPEAKER: The honourable House Leader for the New Democratic Party.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 391.

Bill No. 391 - Income Tax Act (amended).

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: I'm very glad that we are turning to the subject of the Seniors Income Benefit Act, Bill No. 391, today, which contains the NDP's plan for a provincial income supplement to the GIS of low-income seniors in our province, a plan of the sort that exists in the vast majority of provinces in Canada today.

It's important to begin and to place at the centre of this discussion the incontrovertible fact that our province does have the highest rate of poverty amongst those 65 and over of any province in the country. I think we should begin by recognizing that this isn't anything to minimize. This isn't anything to sidestep or in any way to gloss over. I do

think that this kind of sidestepping and glossing over is what we often hear in the government's responses to questions that are based in this core fact about our economy, that we have the worst seniors poverty in the country.

So often, whenever this central fact is asserted to the government, members of the government respond, "Oh, we've got so many programs on this and that we're so proud of, let us tell you about X, Y, and Z piece of wonderfulness and we're so excited about what we're doing for seniors, et cetera, blah blah and so on," but no, Speaker: That's not the appropriate response when we talk about a province with the worst level of seniors' poverty in the country.

The appropriate response is to begin by solemnly taking the measure of the situation - that is to say, registering its scope, registering what a severe matter this is. That's Step 1. Step 2 would be for the government to acknowledge and to recognize and stop trying to evade a second very important fact, namely that a primary reason why seniors poverty levels in Nova Scotia are the highest in Canada is that the Government of Nova Scotia today does less in terms of direct cash payments for the seniors of our province than is done by the government of any other Canadian jurisdiction.

There is one other province besides Nova Scotia that doesn't have a provincial direct monetary transfer program to augment low-income seniors benefits from the federal supplement. That one province is Prince Edward Island, but in Prince Edward Island, the program they have is the Seniors Independence Initiative, which reimburses more than double the expenses that are reimbursed to seniors than in the Seniors Care Grant in Nova Scotia.

This, too, is not something that should at all be evaded. Number one: the worst level of poverty in the country for those 65 and over. Two: the government doing the least to address it of any province in the country. This is not in any way to be papered over. I found it hurtful to hear, in the closing days of last week, the superficiality of the Premier's response to criticism from the leaders of our party of the Seniors Care Grant when he said that how in his view - I'll table it - members of other legislatures of other provinces, he said, are probably debating about why their province doesn't have innovative programs like the Seniors Care Grant in Nova Scotia. This is to not grasp the scope and severity of the problem and the core role of the government having the least response to the problem and continuing the problem in its present state.

What is absent here is any kind of taking in, having the proper measure of the severity of the issue of seniors' poverty in this province. What is absent here is any recognition of how profoundly out of step with best practices on seniors' income policy that the Government of Nova Scotia today is.

What is required, Speaker, is a response to seniors' poverty that is both (a) commensurate to the size of the problem in this province, and (b) adequate in the way that it functions to address it.

[3:00 p.m.]

The problem with the Seniors Care Grant is that it isn't either, to begin with. The Seniors Care Grant, unlike the Senior's Supplement in British Columbia, unlike the Alberta Seniors Benefit, unlike the Saskatchewan Seniors Income Plan, unlike Manitoba's 55 PLUS Program, unlike Ontario's Guaranteed Annual Income System, unlike Quebec's retirement pension supplement, unlike New Brunswick's Low-income Seniors' Benefit, unlike the Newfoundland and Labrador Seniors' Benefit or Nunavut's Senior Citizen Supplementary Benefit or the Northwest Territories' program of the same name, or the Yukon Seniors Income Supplement, unlike all of these 11 income supplementing programs that address low income amongst seniors, the Seniors Care Grant does not come into the hands of the senior who needs it unless they fill out a form and make an application.

To be more specific, unless they have the \$750 worth of expenses in the certain, very particular defined areas, unless they get and fill out and return the application, unless they get and file all of the relevant receipts, unless all those things happen, Nova Scotia's senior income supplementing program is of no benefit to the people who need it, which we have the highest proportion of, of any province in the country.

Imagine if the federal government were to do such a thing with the old age pension. In fact, the government of Nova Scotia does not do this with its other programs. The government doesn't do this with the Nova Scotia Child Benefit. You don't only receive the Nova Scotia Child Benefit if you manage to get the form, fill it out and get it back in on time. You don't only get the Affordable Living Tax Credit if you've got the receipts in the right place and got them all filed and you bring them out at the proper time and fill out a form. You don't get the poverty reduction credit if that's the case.

A person's eligibility for any of these programs or the federal programs is determined 100 per cent by your eligibility, as it is made plain in your last year's tax return. If the last year's tax return says that you are below the eligibility threshold for those programs, then the cheque is in the mailbox or it is deposited in your account. This is the case with all of the other low-income senior income supplement programs that I've listed.

There's a good reason why all these other jurisdictions do this and why Nova Scotia does it with so many of its other income-supporting programs - that's because we know perfectly well and the government knows perfectly well that the benefits of a program, if you make it dependent on filling out an application, will only reach a proportion, a fraction or part of the people who need it. This is an enormous drawback and limitation in Nova Scotia, the province with the worst seniors poverty in the country, the province where the

government is doing the least to address this. This is an enormous drawback of the primary program with which the government addresses this problem, the Seniors Care Grant.

Related to this are the Seniors Care Grant's real restrictions to access the grants that are created by the application process itself. The government recommends - I suppose MLAs would all know this, through the work of their constituency office - that people apply for the Seniors Care Grant online. It's quite an incentive for you to do that because the delivery of the benefits is much quicker if you apply online.

Of course, there are many, many seniors who are not used to working with computers, who don't have an email address. But in Nova Scotia, the Seniors Care Grant, as it is currently designed, if you are applying online, it will not allow the online application to even proceed unless you fill in your email address while you're filling out the application.

So of course, a senior is zapped if they don't have an email address. They're not used to getting computers. You get someone to help you do the application: a family member, or a friend, or some helping agency. Of course, then the friend or the agency - wanting you to get the benefits as quickly as possible - is likely to put down their own email address, because you can't fill out the application without an email address. They're having to do that.

But even that doesn't solve the problem because the government still insists - with this meagre, paltry program to begin with - that the application, which only in Nova Scotia do you have to make, that you cannot complete it. You've not only got to have an email address, but you cannot complete it - the population with the least facilities in computers - until the senior affixes their e-signature to the application - I'm not making this up - by means of manipulating the mouse on the screen of the person who's helping them fill out the application. Good night, Matilda. (Laughter)

There are quite a number of us seniors in the House at the moment. I'm pretty sure I'm not the only senior in the Legislature here who would need quite a bit of support in order to access a program - if I had to sign my name by means of manipulating a mouse on somebody else's screen. I don't think so.

So great big problems accessing the program. Beyond the fact that you have to make an application to even get there alone in Canada, you have to make that. Then the application itself - I don't know how you could design an application less friendly to seniors, to the least computer-using population. But all of that is not even to speak at all of the things that are essential, particularly for the population this program is supposed to be directed at.

Those people who live below the program's threshold of \$37,500 - those things which they are apt to struggle to be able to afford are excluded from the criteria of what

you're able to apply to have covered. Might not a government have thought, for example, that the \$750 for seniors making less than \$37,500 a year might helpfully be used for seniors to get glasses? Apparently not, because glasses are ineligible - X - not as Seniors Care Grant expenses.

Might a government not have thought, for example, that the \$750 Seniors Care Grant for seniors living on \$37,500 or less, might be useful to have that applicable to dentures? No. Dentures are not eligible Seniors Care Grant expenses either. Might not the government have figured, amongst this particular population, that seniors below \$37,500 income - those to whom this program is supposed to be targeted - might not they have figured that orthotics might have been a helpful and useful area of expenses? But no.

Orthotics, out. Glasses, out. Dentures, out. This is made worse by the fact that these are also things that are out from Seniors' Pharmacare. There are many inadequacies of the Seniors Care Grant program, but the core inadequacy, the most egregious, is what a piffling, paltry small potatoes program it is, relative to the scope and severity of the seniors poverty problem in Nova Scotia.

In Alberta, the Alberta Seniors Benefit supplements people's GIS, and if you qualify for that you'll receive \$3,600 a year. The Saskatchewan Seniors Income Plan does the very same thing. If you qualify for that by being a person who receives GIS, you get \$4,300 a year. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the Newfoundland and Labrador Seniors' Benefit pays those who receive GIS over \$6,000 a year automatically. What is needed in Nova Scotia is a seniors' income program - a benefit program that will supplement the GIS of lower income seniors in Nova Scotia, in a way that is at least comparable with the support provided to seniors in all these other jurisdictions.

Glib government self-satisfaction is not appropriate here. Governmental sidestepping or evasion is not called for here. What is called for is for the government to recognize - in a way that today they are failing to do - that addressing seniors' poverty in Nova Scotia calls for a provincial government supplement to seniors' GIS in our province as it is received by seniors elsewhere in the country.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

FRED TILLEY: I'm very pleased to get up and support the bill put forward by the NDP on improving the lives of seniors. Coming from my district, my office sees hundreds of seniors over the course of a calendar year. The stories that we hear of poverty in our office would really break your heart. We have people lining up outside our door as soon as a program is announced. We have our waiting room full, and we are constantly filling out forms because it's so cumbersome for seniors to do this, and nobody is there. There are so many seniors living alone, so many seniors who don't have access to computers, and so many seniors who are struggling to make ends meet.

We've taken it upon ourselves in our office to be the advocate for seniors, and help them get what's out there and what they deserve. However, not everybody is getting the message. My CA is so diligent with grants for seniors that she always has them with her in her purse. She's at the grocery store - it doesn't matter if they live in Northside-Westmount, Glace Bay, or Halifax. It doesn't matter. It's for the seniors. She is there to help them, and she's always talking about the programs that are available to them, but it's not enough.

In our office alone - that's one MLA office out of 55 - at last count, we had processed well over \$300,000 just in Seniors Care Grant applications. (Applause) Absolutely. We're there to help seniors, but it's not enough. The reason we're doing that is because it's an application process and seniors are intimidated by forms. In two weeks, I'm going to be a senior myself. I will help in whatever way I can to get seniors through this Winter.

You heard the member from the NDP talk about other provinces and programs that are available to seniors. I commend this government on making a great start with the Seniors Care Grant. It's a very welcome program in our community. However, changes to the program are needed. It needs to be more money. There's no question about that. I love the idea of a Nova Scotia-based GIS program similar to the federal program that comes every year based on your income. It's so simple to do. You look at their income in Canada Revenue Agency for the previous year, and they either meet or do not meet - if they're getting GIS.

You do it with property tax rebates. You still have to apply, but if you meet the GIS criteria, you're automatically . . . We have seniors in our office on a daily basis who are receiving the GIS. They're receiving the GIS - which is a form of social assistance - yet they're not eligible for the Seniors Care Grant. They received a small, meager, tiny raise through their federal program, and that puts them slightly over the \$37,500, because in my opinion, we didn't take into account the federal raises that are coming through to seniors.

A senior getting a couple extra hundred dollars from the feds puts them over the \$37,500 limit, and all of a sudden, they lose on \$700, so the net effect is a net loss to that senior. One program is taxable, the other program is not. Top that with the fact that - and seniors are also eligible for the Heating Assistance Rebate Program - we've reduced the Heating Assistance Rebate Program by \$400. Now a senior is short \$1,150 this year over what they received last year. I know if someone came into my account and took \$1,150 out that I was expecting, that would cause me great hardship. Imagine what it does for our most vulnerable population. That is seniors - seniors who have built this province, seniors who have built this country for 30, 40, 50 years.

I see seniors in my office all the time who aren't eligible for these grants because they're over 70 years old, and they're still working because they can't afford not to. The fact that they should be able to enjoy their retirement, they're not able to quit. It's really sad. They're trying to maintain a home. They're trying to maintain their medication.

We all know that as we get older, our health deteriorates. That's a given fact. As the member indicated, the fact that we can't use this \$750 for health-related items just blows my mind. It should be an amount that's given to seniors to do with whatever they need to survive. There should be zero restrictions.

[3:15 p.m.]

To go back to the bill at hand, which is to provide help for seniors, I certainly believe that by passing this bill or coming up with your own or making changes - I'm sure that what all the members from the NDP are trying to do is raise awareness of the situation that seniors are facing on a daily basis. I know because I hear it from my colleagues. I hear it from these colleagues. I hear it from some members of the opposite side. I know in your offices that seniors are struggling. I know that you would want to do whatever you can. You have an opportunity to make life easier, more affordable, less stressful, and at the end of the day, more humane for the people who have come before us in this Chamber and other Chambers, we wouldn't have the supports that are currently available to those who need it. However, times are changing.

In just a few short years, we've seen major changes to the cost of food, major changes to heating, major changes to electricity. All of these cost pressures on seniors, and on top of all that, we have a housing crisis. In my constituency, we have many seniors who are still in their homes, and the fact that we were able to raise the housing income limit to allow those seniors to repair their homes is another example of things that we're able to do as members of this Legislature to help the most vulnerable people in our community.

Providing seniors with the help that they deserve in the time that they need it without the red tape of filling out an application - I had to chuckle when I heard the member for the NDP talk about navigating the mouse for the application process. A big reason that we process all of those applications in our office is so that we can put an email address on the application so we can track where that person's money is, whether they've been approved. It's a lot of work, and I commend my constituency assistant and my student in the office who are there to navigate the systems.

Can you imagine? You have to fill out the application online. You navigate - the information required on the application is very minimal, but it's very daunting for a senior to do it online. You have to navigate that system, and then you send it off into cyberspace. Do you know if it arrived? Four, six, eight weeks pass and you still don't have your money in your account and you're wondering, How do I find out? What do I do? Who do I call? Where do I go? You come into our office, we have your confirmation number, we can look it up. As a matter of fact, the department sent us a way to look them up in our office because we do so many of the applications.

That's a source that I take great pride in. I take a lot of pride in helping the seniors in my community because I have respect for them and I think they deserve more. I think they

deserve a lot more. We as a group, we have an opportunity to do that. We have an opportunity to provide an amount that's reasonable. We have an opportunity to make it less cumbersome to receive, and this is what the bill that the NDP has put forward will do. It will determine an appropriate amount. It will help seniors navigate. It will be seamless; they will automatically receive it, because - and I love the question from Question Period today - how many seniors are not receiving this and could really use it?

We all should be doing this, whether we're in Tim Hortons or whether we're in the mall. When we see a senior, the first things out of our mouths should be, Have you applied for the Seniors Care Grant, and have you applied for the Heating Assistance Rebate Program? Those are two things that will help you get through this Winter. We all owe that to our seniors. Not every senior has Facebook, not every senior has the ability to know about these programs; a lot of it is word of mouth.

As a member of this Legislature, please talk to your seniors' clubs, talk to your legions, and get the word out about this program, because it is a helpful program, but we need to do more, we need to do better, and we need to do it now.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Colchester North.

TOM TAGGART: You know, it throws me for a loop here. Often I get my speaking notes prepared and then I listen to the comments made by the others and it is so confusing because of - kind of all over there, but I will - and I will come back to that because I think there is a very valid point I want to make to that, and I am sure I will miss some of the things that went through my mind in response to the comments made.

The one thing I absolutely do agree with is that we owe it, as the member from Northside-Westmount said, we owe it to the people who came before us, who made the quality of life that we enjoy today and gave us the things that we enjoy. Most certainly there are a lot of them who don't have the opportunity to - they certainly don't have those opportunities in their senior years.

For me, I look back - I have a history, and I will mention it here in a minute, of passion towards them. Those seniors who are often struggling trying to stay in their homes, for example, in rural communities, are the same people who, when I was growing up - when I was five or six or eight or ten or whatever - it was like home. It was like going into my own home. That's what it was. Those seniors raised our communities and they raised us, and they deserve everything we can possibly do for them. I absolutely agree with that.

To start, Speaker, it is my absolute pleasure to speak on this proposed bill today for the very reasons I just mentioned. I want to say that seniors and the challenges that they face and have faced for many years are important to me. I look back to my time on Municipality of Colchester Council, and this will take us to something that I think is very important.

At two different times over that 12 years, I led the debate or discussion to improve what we referred to as a low-income property tax exemption - a policy clearly developed to enable residents, predominantly seniors, to remain in their homes. During these discussions on both occasions, the Municipality of Colchester both raised the allowable income threshold, as well as the amount that could be deducted from their income tax. I am very proud of that, and as I researched this information in advance of these comments, I see that - I note that again - in 2023 the Municipality of Colchester, again, readjusted those numbers and I want to say, well done, Colchester.

Additionally, I would comment that in my 12-year career in municipal government, I became aware of unintended consequences. That was a hard lesson to learn. I won't get into that. As I looked at this bill - Bill No. 391, the Income Tax Act, Respecting a Seniors Income Benefit - now certainly that's an appealing title and that, undoubtedly, will attract some attention and give some seniors the impression that they will receive additional funding.

There will be a few calls in my office inquiring, and my very capable assistant will provide them with a full understanding of this bill, along with ensuring that they have received all the other targeted benefits that our government provided over a short time in government.

Just to kind of jump back - I'm skipping a few comments here - but just to jump back to this very attractively entitled bill, traditionally it has been recognized that seniors' pensions basically become, because of the sheer cost and magnitude, as well as the federal taxation and - as a result, their ability to pay has been a federal responsibility.

When I read through the bill, I really can't find much real substance in it, but what it does is it enables a future government, at any time - a government, because of this bill, a government or a party or whatever that was in government in 2023 could just simply begin this program and just start sending out cheques.

It would be a different story to bring this bill forward if the member's party actually were in government and responsible for the overall budget and had responsibility for the actual input on the budget and the operation of this province. Is it right that a bill passed in 2023 would potentially be so simply enacted in 2033, 10 years later? It doesn't make much sense to me. The bill should be presented when you have the ability to implement it.

As a government, we have chosen to support our seniors in targeted ways that would ensure that they do not impact other benefits already in place. I'll mention these programs in a minute. This is the minute, so I'm going to mention it. Changes to the senior income supports require a thorough examination of the interaction with other benefits, and something that I would say often creates unintended consequences. Providing additional income to GIS recipients will put some of them over the income threshold and disqualify them for the federal GIS supplement for future years.

I'm going to digress here for a minute. One of the speakers - one of the two speakers earlier, and I believe it was brought up in Question Period, talked about a lack of take-up or lack of how many people actually benefit from this, and then they rightly talked about all the great work our constituency assistants did in explaining and filling out the forms - yes, filling out the forms - for the Seniors Care Grant.

[3:30 p.m.]

In my office in Colchester North, we had real difficulty getting low-income seniors to take advantage of this great program. We really had to get out beating the bushes and trying to encourage people to do that, which we did. We hope to have caught most of them now. But the single most common reason why they would not apply for the Seniors Care Grant was their fear that it would impact their income tax - that it would affect their guaranteed income supplement, the GIS. We had to explain to them that that's the simple reason why you had to apply for this, that if we had given them just a direct payment with no rationale or reason for it, if we'd just put it on their whatever, just sent them a cheque - it would have had to be claimed against their income tax.

Somewhere along the line, and I think mostly because of some of the federal government efforts during COVID-19, they were direct payments, which is what was being asked for here, but they became part of their income, and as a result, somehow impacted their GIS. I don't understand it fully, but I can tell you I had a few calls from seniors who didn't understand it either, but they had lost money because of it. I don't know the intricacies of that, but I know that happened.

The Seniors Care Grant, as we designed it - one of the many things we've designed to support those very important seniors - was designed so that it could be used specifically for certain things. Now the member for Northside-Westmount - and I need to correct this, because I don't want any confusion out there. There's enough confusion amongst seniors as it is now with different programs, and certainly some of them find it confusing. My assistant - it's unimaginable how many they actually fill out for people while they are standing or sitting in front of them.

The member suggested that this somehow didn't benefit, couldn't be used for the most important thing, which was health care. That's really not correct, because this allows it to be used for prescriptions, and it allows it to be used for delivery of prescriptions, drives to the doctor, drives to eye care, and that sort of thing. There's a whole range of things that this is eligible for, so please don't make it any more confusing. It's too difficult to get the uptake on this as it is now.

There would also be consequences, and I may have gone over this before, but there would also be consequences for provincial programs under the Department of Health and Wellness and the Department of Community Services - for example, low- to no-cost for

GIS recipients for programs such as continuing care and the Nova Scotia Seniors' Pharmacare program.

I have to reiterate: That bottom line, that magic number that means so much to our seniors to be able to take advantage of a lot of different programs that are offered throughout the province and the feds, that's the holy number, the Holy Grail or whatever. That's critical that you don't go over that. Again, our Seniors Care Grant does not impact that in any way.

There are approximately 11,000 Nova Scotian GIS recipients - this was in 2022 - and our government returned approximately \$16 million in provincial income tax to these recipients. Again, they're always conscious of whether they go over that number. That's a magic number, and they don't want anything to impact that.

THE SPEAKER: Order, order. There's quite a bit of chatter going on from all sides here. I just ask that, respectfully, the member for Colchester North has the floor.

The honourable member for Colchester North.

TOM TAGGART: Another targeted provincial tax measure in place that supports seniors is a \$1,000 non-refundable aid tax credit for seniors whose taxable income is less than \$24,000. Then, starting in 2018, the maximum age amount for seniors was increased by 34 per cent, from \$4,141 to \$5,606, to align with the increase in the basic personal amount - I'm not sure what it is, but anyway, a job well done, folks.

Let's talk about some miscellaneous things that our government has done to support seniors, because I wouldn't want people to think that we don't support them. We founded the Seniors Community Wheelchair Loan Program and the Canadian Red Cross Health Equipment Loan Program to offset costs for seniors and help them remain in their homes longer. The Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing - changes were made to the province's Canada-Nova Scotia Targeted Housing Benefit rent supplement program - which we have heard a lot about here recently, critically, but anyway - changes to the province's rent supplement program to expand the eligibility for low-income seniors aged 58 and older, aligning their eligible rent supplement with others of the same income bracket. The investment in the rent supplement program has more than doubled in the last two years, for a total of \$50 million, and a tremendous amount of that rent supplement goes to seniors: 8,000 households will receive rent supplements this year, up from \$5,000 in 2021.

The Department of Finance and Treasury Board in this province returned \$17 million in provincial income tax to Nova Scotia seniors through its Guaranteed Income Supplement rebate program. More than 11,000 seniors who received the federal GIS will get their provincial income tax break. Seniors do not have to apply for this refund; they must file a tax return first.

Again, and in closing, I have to say that the discussion about the forms and going out into the internet and never knowing if it's out there, well there's confirmation that goes back on that, so that's kind of hocus pocus there. We put a program together that ensured that we could support seniors without impacting that magic number, whatever it is, the threshold that allows them to collect all these other benefits from both us and the federal government.

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

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'm pleased to rise and speak to Bill No. 391. Was that a good job? I don't know. The point of our bill is to say that it is complicated and difficult and insufficient to try to access the Seniors Care Grant for seniors. We're not saying it's bad; we're not saying it shouldn't exist. We're saying it's insufficient and it is complicated to access, and that's what we just heard about.

We heard about constituency assistants needing to go out into the community and find the seniors and fill out the forms and convince them that it's okay to fill out the forms. That is a waste of effort. We heard the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board today acknowledge that it is simpler for someone to receive an automatic benefit. He followed that up hurriedly, maybe on advice from some invisible person, to say, Oh, but sometimes there's fraud. I mean, we're talking about helping seniors afford the basics. I don't think that that is at the core of our concern here. This is income-tested.

I would say that the comments of the government on this bill only strengthen our position that we need to have a seniors income supplement like almost every other province in the country has. We have had huge growth in our province in the last few years, but we remain an older province, one of the oldest provinces in the country.

Census data shows that the proportion of the population age 65 and older in Nova Scotia was 22 per cent in 2021. For obvious demographic reasons - notwithstanding, I know, a slight decrease in the average age in our province - that number is going to continue to grow. We know that seniors in Nova Scotia are the most squeezed by the rising cost of living. They have, for the most part, a fixed income, and they can't, by definition with a fixed income absorb the rising costs of food and rent and gas and everything else.

Increasingly in my constituency, I hear from these seniors. We started to hear from them - actually, they were sort of the canary in the coal mine for us about the housing crisis and the need for renter protections in Dartmouth South for us. We've heard about it across the province and in other constituencies, but in my constituency, a few years ago I started hearing from seniors who, on the advice of their kids or their financial planner, had sold their family home and rented an apartment and done all the math and figured out how they were going to afford it all on their fixed income. Then all the prices started going up every year, and they didn't have anywhere to go.

That continues to be more and more of a problem. One in 10 seniors in Nova Scotia lives in poverty. This is the highest ratio among that age group in the country. The poverty rate, in fact, of people 65 and older is almost two-thirds higher in Nova Scotia than the national average. The most important point that I think we are trying to make - the member of Halifax Chebucto, myself, our caucus - is that every other province or territory, except for PEI, has a program to supplement seniors' incomes. It's not designed for specific expenses.

We are not trying to scare seniors away from applying, but to be honest, when there is a program that requires receipts, that's complicated to apply for, that people are worried, for whatever reason, as we heard from the government member just now, this is a downloading of useless work from the Public Service into our constituency offices.

Our constituency assistants should not be spending all their time chasing down people in the community to show them how to fill out forms and get their receipts. We should create a simpler process so that they don't need to do that. This is the perfect example. Seniors tend to have a harder time with technology. They tend, as was said, to be more financially conservative, so they might be concerned for all the reasons. There is a very simple solution to that: We have an automatic program. Then we have education about it, and we say, Here's how this program works; it would be good for you.

Most other provinces and territories have income eligibility requirements, and most would require that people already have to be recipients of OAC and GIS. Four provinces have standard amounts and the rest are on a sliding scale based on income. Many amount to a very significant supplement, particularly for the people who need it the most. In B.C., that's up to \$99 a month. In Alberta, that's up to \$3,600 a year. In Saskatchewan, it's up to \$360 a month.

This isn't just like money falling from the sky. This is money that seniors who have worked their whole lives and retired need - importantly - for whatever they need it for, not for the minutiae of receipts that this time the government has decided it's eligible for. It might be for housing. It might be to feed their pet, who is their last loved one, whom they adore. It might be for food. It's not really our business. It's so they can live in dignity.

If it's a sliding income scale, then we understand, based on Statistics Canada and census information, Department of Finance and Treasury Board, whether or not they need that money. We know what a living wage is. We know what it costs to live. If someone is living below that threshold, particularly a senior, particularly someone who has worked their whole life, then we believe that it is the very least we could do to have an income supplement.

To the Seniors Care Grant, as I said at the beginning, we're not being negative about the Seniors Care Grant. It's good that we brought it in, but it's not enough, and it's too complicated. It can't be used for food or medication or rent. It can't be used for

cellphones, eyeglasses, dentures, personal alerts, vitamin supplements. You have to spend the money up front and then wait for reimbursement. MLAs know what that's like. This is a situation that many seniors may or may not be able to do, or may just not do, to the point of the previous speaker.

They may be extremely conservative with their credit cards. The seniors in my life are. They're not going to put something on their credit card that they can't pay off when that bill comes in. Will they have the grant? I don't know. That may prohibit them from spending the money that they need to live because it can take up to eight weeks to get reimbursed.

We know that it has a history of low uptake, this program. The early numbers from the first few months - again, this was reflected in the government's own remarks, that it was difficult to get uptake on this program - show that only 18,600 of the roughly 64,000 people eligible actually had applied at that time and only \$9 million of the program's \$30-million budget had been spent.

What we propose is an automatic benefit. It would catch the seniors who need it and would make it simple for them.

I do want to, again, come back to housing for a moment. Part of the reason that this kind of supplement is so critically important is because the housing plan that was recently unexpectedly released - after it wasn't going to be released and then it was released - had almost nothing in it that is rent geared to income. This is the kind of housing that the seniors who would be eligible for this benefit would need. In order to have secure housing that they could count on - which so many seniors come to us and talk to us about not having - they would need to have housing that was affordable based on the amount of money that they have.

A single person receiving the maximum amount of the Guaranteed Income Supplement and OAS right now gets between \$1,700 and \$1,800 a month. According to Rentals.ca, the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Halifax is over \$1,800 a month right now. They don't get enough every month just to pay rent. This is why, increasingly, seniors are becoming homeless.

This is an urgent situation, and it's a situation that needs to be dealt with in a multi-faceted way. This isn't a silver bullet, but this is one way - one simple, I think, elegant way - that the government could follow the lead of their counterparts across the country and help seniors to weather this storm. In two months, the rent cap will go from 2 per cent to 5 per cent.

[3:45 p.m.]

When we had a housing drop-in session a few months ago in my constituency - because we have become, in some ways, the hub of the homeless population in Dartmouth - we have The Bridge, modular housing, a tent site - we assumed that those would be the folks who would come. A few did, but over half were seniors. They were seniors who would not have identified themselves as living in poverty, although some of them may have been. They were seniors who, as I described at the beginning, had moved into an apartment, done their tidy income analysis, figured they could afford it, and suddenly they can't. They came and asked, What can we do?

The Minister of Service Nova Scotia likes to talk a lot about education, so we were trying to educate people about what they could do. Sadly, in many instances, the answer was nothing - that they couldn't do anything because their rent was going to go up, and it was going to go up legally. What we would like to say is, You can move into that affordable seniors' complex down the road. But not only can we not say that because it doesn't exist, it's not even contemplated to exist. It's not even in the housing plan. We're not even talking about it.

Having more units - number one, you can't use the Seniors Care Grant to pay for rent anyway. Having more units isn't going to magically bring down the cost of housing. We don't believe in trickle-down housing, unlike others in this Chamber.

What would help in the interim, as a band-aid, would be a steady flow of just the amount that we know seniors need to be able to approach living in dignity. This is what every other province except for ours has recognized, and this is what we're asking the government to do. It's not rocket science. It's not a pie in the sky. It's not a radical idea. We are telling this government that we are laggards in this regard, that we are failing our seniors. I'm not saying that's on purpose. I'm not being negative. I'm simply stating the fact that if we look across the country at the way that other provinces support their seniors, we come in last.

We know that everyone in this Chamber respects our seniors, supports our seniors, talks at length in here about all the ways in which we do, but as the government often likes to say - as the Premier likes to say - talk is cheap. We are a government of action.

Here's an action - and a few others that we think the government could take. They could waive seniors' Pharmacare fees. Then seniors would be able to afford their medication. They wouldn't have to choose between medication and food. They wouldn't end up in the emergency room - maybe in a waiting room, like we saw on the front page of the *Chronicle Herald* today. We could ban charging long-term care fees for people who are waiting in hospital for a long-term care bed, the alternative level of care patients. It's not their fault they can't get into long-term care. It's our fault because we haven't fixed the health care situation.

We could assist with the cost of hearing aids. We could make it illegal to evict low-income seniors into homelessness. We could create a seniors' advocate that can investigate and advocate for seniors' issues. These are some of the things specific to seniors, but there are lots of others. We could waive the grocery tax. We could raise income assistance rates. We could increase the Affordable Living Tax Credit. These are all things that our parents, our elders, the people who built our communities, who built this province, would benefit from. These are people who have so much to teach us about life, and who deserve to be taken care of after they have taken care of us.

Like Nova Scotians, New Democrats believe that as a society, we have the responsibility and every ability to take care of each other. We believe in dignity in old age. We know that the government can help deliver it, and we will keep fighting for it.

I move to adjourn debate on second reading.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is to adjourn debate on Bill No. 391.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable House Leader for the New Democratic Party.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 363.

Bill No. 363 - Early Learning and Child Care Act (amended).

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

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I move second reading of Bill No. 363.

We've been talking a lot about early learning and child care in this Chamber. As the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development has said - and as most of my caucus colleagues and I also can attest - daycare wait-lists and even wait-list fees are not a new issue in Nova Scotia. Rising demand, in part due to the fee reductions, is causing those wait-lists to balloon, and is putting families at risk of predatory fees.

The rising demand in itself, of course, is not a bad thing. Those of us who have been around more than a few years have talked about this at length in this Chamber, particularly with the introduction of pre-Primary. It means child care fees are more affordable for families than they were in the past. This means that mothers are able to work, which has positive economic benefits. It has benefits for children - particularly children who are living in poverty or living in challenging situations. We know that early childhood education can have an incredibly positive long-term impact on the lives of those children.

The problem is that there aren't enough spaces. While the fee reduction is good, in Nova Scotia right now, nearly 50 per cent of children live in a child care desert. That means an area where there are three children for every one child care space. We need a massive investment in these spaces. While we have seen some, the math is tricky, and the way we do it shows that the net increase is minimal.

The government boasts about new spaces, but these numbers show a different story. We know that the way in which these changes have been rolled out - this child care agreement - has caused the closure of many existing centres. There's no two ways about it. The growth in this sector has been limited to school-age programs, which are needed but are not addressing the dire shortage of infant and toddler spaces.

I should just digress for a second and say that, when pre-Primary was rolled out, we knew this would happen because of the rollout. What we said at the time was - because this is what we were hearing from centres that were already feeling the strain - run that pre-Primary program in existing centres where you can, because this is what helps keep them open. The government didn't do that. So a sector that was already under strain then got a one-two punch with the rollout of this Early Learning and Child Care Agreement.

Data obtained just this June shows that, since the government was elected, only 28 net new licensed child care spaces have opened across the province. I should say - because someone else will - that these are all full-time, all-day spaces. I acknowledge the value, particularly as a working mother, of before- and after-school spaces. When we talk about early learning and child care, about that agreement and the benefits it will bring, and about \$10 per day daycare, we are talking about full-day daycare for our youngest children. The rest of it is important, but that is crucial. In that regard, this government is failing.

In HRM, there were 144 fewer child care spaces in June than when this government was elected - in a province that is growing exponentially, in a city that is growing exponentially, where that growth is being encouraged, where people are coming, where people are settling in all of our constituencies and, in some cases, are leaving because they can't find child care or a doctor, and they can't afford a house. They're like, all right, never mind, I'm going home. That's not what we want.

Families are unable to even find an open wait-list. We hear from daycares about parents calling in tears, desperate for a wait-list opening. I'm always fascinated when I meet people with young children and they say, So-and-so just started in daycare. So I always stop and say, Okay, tell me your story. How? What daycare? When did you get on the list? How did that work? In almost every single case it was like, Well, I did get on the list when I was pregnant but also, my nephew's uncle's wife works there and she did me a solid. That's how it works, because those wait-lists are so long and so unmanageable - and it's not to cast aspersions on the daycare operators because they are under an enormous pressure of having hundreds of families waiting to get in, but it's almost impossible.

This has led to a situation where families put their kids on multiple wait-lists because if you are pregnant and you put your name on a wait-list for a daycare, not only are you not guaranteed a spot, you are unlikely to get a spot. So what do you do? You put your name on 10 wait-lists and you hope that you hit the jackpot and one of them comes out.

In 2019, a report found that 92 per cent of Halifax daycares maintained a wait-list and that 16 per cent charged a wait-list fee. Anecdotally, we are hearing more and more about those fees. In August, one daycare chain with seven Halifax locations said it would not get rid of its \$200 non-refundable wait-list fee because it is seeing growing demand, which is very confusing.

With non-refundable fees, some parents are paying hundreds of dollars, and they still have no guarantee of a spot when they need it. They are paying for the privilege of not necessarily having child care for their children. There is a very real impact.

In a CBC article from this August, Kayleigh Fleet, the mother of twins in Halifax - that one hits kind of close to home - paid nearly \$2,400 to place her children on a wait-list with Kids & Company, only to find out at the last minute that her spots were no longer available. She had to make the decision to delay returning to work and discovered that only a portion of her payment was even refundable. This is not unusual.

We hear the narrative in this Chamber that this is a thing that happens occasionally, and it isn't. It happens a lot. We have been hearing concerns about this for a long time. We raised this issue in the House seven months ago - and at that time, we raised the issue with a solution. We asked the minister to ban these fees. Ontario did it in 2016. I mean, there are other things. You can ban the fees, you can create a centralized wait-list, which takes the pressure off of these individual daycare operators.

The minister said today that there isn't a system. Well, that's not actually true. We have a Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. We have an entire section of the civil service that runs our regulated child care system. The idea that we don't have a system, I think, is an insult to the work that those people do. Sure, it's a patchwork. There are individual operators. The same with doctors. Are we going to say we don't have a medical system?

Yes, we have a system, but there are a number of operators in that system. So the idea that we can't regulate that system - which, by the way, we do, that's why we call it regulated child care - is an excuse that isn't even really worth addressing. We need to ban these fees, but instead of spending months working on a solution, we have debated whether or not this issue exists.

In the seven months since we raised this issue, we have gone back and forth with the minister, who has often said, We really don't think it's an issue anymore, we don't really know if it's an issue anymore, we're not really sure if it's an issue anymore.

Last week, the minister said it's not still happening. I'll table that Hansard.

This is really, really troubling because, again, this is a problem with an extraordinarily simple solution. If we think it's bad, if we don't really think it's happening, then make it illegal. Stop it from happening.

[4:00 p.m.]

We are legislators. We are in this Chamber to make laws. So when we come to the Province with an issue that is an area of provincial responsibility - education - and a problem - predatory wait-list fees - and a solution - outlaw them. Create a policy or a law that says those are illegal - and the minister's response is, Well, we don't really have a system. I think that's quite insulting, actually. That doesn't accurately reflect the situation.

We're glad to see that today the minister finally accepted that this is a problem, that she has directed her department to look into it, but we don't think that families need to wait any longer. We have put forward the solution a number of times. It exists in another province. It works. What are they looking at? This is like the interminable jurisdictional scan that the Department of Justice used as an excuse not to outlaw non-disclosure agreements, which we still can't get an answer for the final decision.

Is the minister going to look at it for another three years while parents are forced to pay more and more money in fees while they wait longer and longer to have child care, are excluded from the workforce, are unable to give their children the advantages of early childhood education, only to be told, Oh, well, we decided not to do it? We hear this more and more, and it's deeply troubling.

This is a problem. There is a solution. We're asking the minister to take action. Every day that the government waits, more families are vulnerable to these fees. There are other solutions. As we said, we need to continue to increase the child care sector. We need more spaces. We need to continue to work through that agreement.

We most recently have heard that the minister's staff was able to finally submit the paperwork needed for Ottawa to release the next branch of funding for the Canada-Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement. We were glad to hear that. Why it took several months, if not a year, to do that from when we could have had that money, from when we could have building capacity in our system, is troubling.

At the end of the day, I think this is about parents, and mostly mothers, who I speak to on a daily basis who are struggling to find child care. This, again, is in the context of a rising cost of living.

My kids the other day - we were watching a movie, and in the movie, the dad went off to work and the mom stayed home, and they said, "But what does the mom do?" And I

said, “Well, she’s a stay-at-home mom,” and they were like, “What?” I said, “Yes, she stays at home. She takes care of the kids. Isn’t that nice? I’d sometimes like to do that,” and they were like, “No, Mom, that’s totally weird. That doesn’t happen.” Because they don’t know anybody - they literally don’t know anybody who doesn’t have two working parents, because that is the economic environment that we are in.

In that economic environment, parents need child care. They need affordable child care. They need available child care. They certainly don’t need predatory child care fees. I would ask the government, in closing, to move forward quickly to ban wait-list fees, at minimum, so that parents do not have to pay for the privilege of trying to navigate our deeply challenging child care ecosystem.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

HON. KELLY REGAN: I’m not going to pretend to have a vast, current knowledge of the daycare system that the previous speaker had, because my children are 35, 33, and 27. It’s been some time, and to be quite honest, I wasn’t able to access the daycare system when I was working, because I worked shift work. I was one of those people who never had the option of using traditional daycare because I worked weird hours. I never knew what shift I was going to be on. I could be working overnight. I might go in at 4:30 in the morning.

There are lots of people in this province who don’t have the opportunity to access daycare, but for those who do, it’s something they count on.

Not long ago, I had an email from a woman who, coincidentally, is a provincial employee. She works in the health care system and her husband also works for the provincial government. She told me a really sad story about how they had been on the wait-list and they’d had a miscarriage. They decided not to take their names off the wait-list because they thought, We don’t know how long this is going to take for us to get pregnant again. We’re just going to leave our names on the wait-list.

They got pregnant again and they have a beautiful baby - she sent me a picture of the baby. She was registered with a company that said, We absolutely have a space for you - she found out no space. Then she began the frantic calling around, trying to find somebody who had an infant space, and it’s like winning the lottery right now to get an infant space. It’s no surprise why, when we find out there are 28 net new child care spaces.

We keep seeing all these announcements, but all these new spaces created and then you find out they’re not necessarily full-time and they’re not necessarily child care spaces. They might be after-school spaces. I would never want to suggest, as someone tried to say I had, that those after-school spaces aren’t important. They absolutely are. Having been a parent - and for a while a single parent - who had to negotiate my way through

before-school, after-school, middle-of-the-day, middle-of-the night daycare - any child care is important to parents.

It is very difficult to do your job when you're worried about how your children are in child care. This practice of forcing parents who want to ensure the best for their children but need to return to work, and quite - you know, women deserve to be able to focus on their careers because, let's face it, it's usually the woman who's trying to round up the child care, and the fact that we're still grappling with this issue in 2023 boggles my mind. I assumed that by the time my eldest daughter was going to be having children, this would be solved, and it is not.

To suggest that - while we can't say that it is a predatory practice and then having people pay to reserve a space, it's like looking away from a problem that's really easily solved. It's not that difficult. You just say that you can't do that anymore. The government could do it if it wanted to. So much of what we've seen in this House this session, the government could decide to deal with issues, but they decide not to and that is not a government of action.

Is it really fair to families who are trying to ensure that they can return to work when they have told their employers that they are coming back to work - is it really fair to say to them, Hey, every list you get on, you have to give us \$200 bucks? You know what that means? It means the people who can afford it are going to be forking out the money and everybody else - well, you lose. The government could decide they want to solve this problem, but they're not.

It would be really nice if the government would, in addition to indicating how many new spaces have been created, give a breakdown every time: How many are actually in after-school programs? How many are full-time? How many are infant? How many are toddler? Otherwise it's smoke and mirrors.

If you're saying we have created X amount, but you don't say all these ones over here disappeared - that's what must have happened for there to be only 28 net new spaces. You cannot support a growing population with the kind of immigration that we're having - the in-migration from other parts of the country - you cannot support that with 28 net new spaces in daycare. You just can't. There aren't that many grandmothers out there babysitting. I'm sorry - and grandfathers too.

As we just heard from my colleague, there were 144 fewer daycare spaces available in June in HRM, our fastest-growing city. I spoke a bit last night about what it's like to represent an area that has had enormous growth. This is another issue. I talked about schools. I talked about roads. I talked about facilities. I didn't even touch on daycare, but it has absolutely been an issue.

That's why we were so glad to bring in the free pre-Primary program, because that was at least one year when parents didn't have to do that scrounge for daycare. As we noted at the time, it's also an anti-poverty program, because children who have a good start in life and who get that early education are more likely to do better in school. They're more likely to graduate. They're more likely to go on to post-secondary education. They have better health outcomes. They're less likely to be involved in the criminal justice system.

Ensuring there is robust pre-Primary education is important to children, it's important to families, and it's important to our society in general. If we're putting that money there, it's a much better spend than having to clean up people who have had difficult lives and who have had a difficult time. It's much better if we can spend money up front and equip people for success. The bill that is proposed by my friends in the third party makes sense to me.

Perhaps the government doesn't want to do it because they feel they have asked a lot of daycare operators already. If that's the case, I would say you have asked a lot of daycare operators already. We have. We have asked them to step up in ways they haven't had to do before. In some cases, we have private daycares that are becoming not-for-profits.

The reason we're in this Chamber is to make sure we're making life better for Nova Scotians. I'm not sure that having to pay out a couple hundred - or more - dollars in various places for parents is improving life for Nova Scotians. The government has a choice here. They can act, or they can look away. Right now, what it looks like is they're looking away. They have decided they're not going to do anything on that.

I thought it was interesting that my colleague mentioned that when she's asking families with young children in daycare how they got daycare, it's "Who do you know?" That's how people are getting daycare. This is not the way it's supposed to work. The problem with "Who do you know?" is - in here, we would probably all get daycare because we know lots of people, if we were on the search for it. What about newcomers? What about people who don't have big networks? Who do they know? It doesn't seem fair to me that we're asking them to fork out money so they can pay some more.

The fact that we're moving to \$10-a-day daycare is commendable, obviously. We signed the original agreement on it. This is the way we should be going, but I doubt the federal government is particularly pleased to know, if they were to find out, that Nova Scotians - in addition to their \$10-a-day daycare, or their 50 per cent-off daycare - are actually having to fork over \$200, \$1,200, to reserve a spot.

It's not necessary. There is great demand right now for daycare. It's not like they need to know who's coming there - companies need to know that they're going to have that spot filled. They're going to have that spot filled. And there are swaths of this province where there's next to no daycare. That affects women who want to return to work, that

affects families who need their income, and it affects children. There's a simple solution here. The government should act - but it's not. It's looking away.

[4:15 p.m.]

That's not a government of action. That's inaction, and that's a deliberate looking away. It's a pattern with this government that we see over and over and over and over again. Yes, there are tents in Halifax. Yes, Winter is coming - oh, it's snowing out. Look away. Yes, the doctor wait-list keeps increasing. Here's a bright shiny object over here, look at this instead.

For the first two years of this government's mandate, people in this province gave them a lot of leeway. They saw them announcing things. I'm getting letters - this week was unbelievable, the number of letters I got - about not having doctors. And it could be not having doctors, or not having daycare, whatever. What I'm starting to get is people saying, I thought they were doing things, but it's no better, or, I thought they were doing things, but it's worse. I had a flood of letters this week about, I've lost my doctor, what am I going to do?

If you keep looking away on the key indicators - on the things that matter to Nova Scotians - you're going to get a rude awakening. It doesn't matter if you do things if you're not doing the right things, if you're not doing the things that matter, if you're not doing the things that make a difference. Over here, smoke and mirrors, smoke and mirrors - but at the end of the day people are going to ask themselves, Am I better off today than I was in September 2021? Increasingly, the answer is no.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hants West.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: It gives me great pleasure to stand up today and talk a little bit about the child care system and where it's been, where it's headed, and speak directly to Bill No. 363, the Early Learning and Child Care Act. We hear these stories as if this is a new thing, that child care wait-lists are something since our government came into place.

But 24 years ago - I know everybody's surprised to think that I could be this young and have a 24-year-old, but I do - I, too, found myself with this brand new baby in my arms at three months old and a great job offer - back in the time when there was a six-month maternity leave, so I had to take that job. A three-month-old baby, what do I do?

I looked around at these small, private home daycares and friends and family, and I did get by. I was on that wait-list and, quite frankly, could honestly still be on that list, who knows? I didn't take my name off that list, I found alternatives, but maybe that person was holding my spot.

Then I took that job, and I had another baby. Again, no child care. The search began, because when I went to work, that child care provider couldn't just keep that space open for me when and if I might come back. We didn't have a system in place.

This is transformational, what we're trying to do as a government here, and I'm really proud of this work. We are building a system, trying to standardize a system that - before this child care agreement, there were hundreds and hundreds of these smaller people who, maybe for one reason or another, would want to take in one child, maybe three children. We have one daycare centre - that was it - one offering any type of subsidies and those were very small.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is committing to creating provincial child care policies that are child- and family-centred, which is exactly what - not just today, not just for these new families, but for decades - we've needed more and more as women left the homes to work outside the home, and it is going to be transformational. The steps that we've taken so far are great. Signing on with the Canada-wide agreement, it's giving us that opportunity to truly transform this delivery of this service that is so needed. It's so needed for the new people that are here, it's so needed for anybody that's here. It's going to transform this province.

It is a time to be bold in these actions, it's a time to look to the places and reach out to people. That's what I'm doing. I'm like, Did you know that there's licensing and you can offer these subsidies and you can help offset the costs for parents? I reached out to my non-profits and I said, Do you know this opportunity exists? Some of them didn't.

I would encourage members opposite who are hearing numerous calls or these emails they are receiving to try to approach people in the community and express the opportunities that are there for anybody - non-profit or any home-based business that might want to license under an umbrella now - to fall into this. That would be my suggestion.

The minister has made it very clear many times - I sit behind her but I hear it all the time - that she does not support these extra fees, for registration or for cancellation or vacations or Summer breaks. These policies are not being supported by the minister. I would say, Speaker, the minister is going to take that back, we're in here 12 hours or more a day, and she has already made direction to the department to look into these fees.

I have so many things to say. I feel like my colleague from Colchester North here at the moment in his hocus-pocus. Yes, this hocus-pocus, this picture that's being painted.

The Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is currently looking at options of how we could address this situation effectively. Acts and new bills are not necessarily needed just to implement something that she agrees with - she already has that ability to do that. She's already looking into these situations to look at how they can affect them.

As she standardizes this new, transformational way that we can offer child care in our province - I mean, it wasn't that long ago that we didn't have pre-Primary, and look at that transformational change that made to families. That means that those kids are in care, those hours that those moms, dads, grandmoms, and foster moms or dads, or anybody in that family dynamic could go to work. That was a big deal.

Other options that have happened over the decades are 18-month maternity leave. Those windows are opportunity for needing these child care services. To diminish the fact that after-school and before-school care is not important? Come to rural Nova Scotia. It's very important. It's very important for the pre-Primary programs. It's very important.

To diminish that and act like those new spaces are not to be counted or not important - they're very, very, very important, because some parents want to stay home with their child for those three years, that new pre-Primary with those after-school and before-school spots is when, for the first time since their baby's been born, be able to leave home and go into the workforce.

When parents and primary caregivers bring forward a problem, the minister - our government - is very quick to look into solutions to how to address these. The sooner we do here - I thank the members opposite for bringing those to our attention. We also knew that - but it highlights the importance of looking for solutions for these problems.

In October the department toured the province and did public consultation sessions. We heard from over 1,400 families, to learn about and understand better their hopes and their ideas and their visions for what this can look like and what can work. All family dynamics are different. A transformational change such as what our government is undertaking isn't easy. We should be showing our appreciation to this sector for the amount of collaboration that they've been doing.

Who here likes change? Nobody, Speaker. Sometimes you hit those walls, whether it be housing development - don't want it here, but we need housing. It's the same thing. We need to give the confidence these centres need, to give them the tools that they need to transform with us. That's why we set up the round table, so that we could get input from the sector. Anytime I heard from somebody in my sector that panicked - I have to watch the clock here because I have so much to say. I want to tell my other story here.

We introduced the ECE wages - 14 to 43 per cent. How is that not going to help us get more seats? How is that not going to be able to have these centres open, because they'll have more staff there to run them, to do renovations, hire more people. I want to talk specifically about the fees and maybe paint a picture of why they exist in the first place. I too, after the third baby, I stayed home. I couldn't afford child care anymore. I couldn't afford to take my three kids to child care with no after-school spot, so I quit my job, we sold our house, I opened a home-based business.

Did I want to be licensed under an umbrella? No. Did I do it as a favour for the friends in the community? Sure. Of course, maybe it was who I knew, if that's the picture the member opposite wanted to paint. It was referral-based. That's how I ran my business. Speaker, what job would you want to do for 200 hours a month and not be paid? What job is it that you would want to do to say, Your baby isn't out of the womb yet, but I will hold that space for you for a year and turn away kids. And when the year was up and I reached out to the person, Oh, sorry, Nanny's going to do it.

[4:30 p.m.]

You enter into a contract to hold the spot, and my policy in particular was that I refunded it off their first invoice. That's how I did it. Then if those folks did leave and not come to me, then that was a little tiny bit of the loss that I suffered while I tried to recoup and refill that spot. That's maybe where these fees came in.

Again, as we transform child care, we will look at these. We will standardize regulations for that. I had contracts signed, and like our government, we've already signed contracts. Maybe moving forward when we sign new contracts, we can add that in those contracts. That's a tool for another reason why this bill is not necessary.

Newcomers - we talk about newcomers, word of mouth. I can't tell you how many newcomer families I took kids from because we're a province that welcomes people to our province and somebody knows somebody all the time. We created Facebook groups in my community to connect people. Our fellow colleagues, my other colleagues who did home-based daycares, we were constantly sharing kids. I can't do three days a week. I can do two. Can you take the other two? There are all kinds of things happening.

As for vacations, my policy was that if I'm off, you don't pay me. Speaker, imagine if people went off on vacation, and every time they took a day off or were home sick you didn't get paid. So you have to. These non-profits and these businesses set up business models that worked for them because at the end of the day, nobody can do it for free, as much as I would love to. I love children. The ones whom I had in my home were sometimes much more well-behaved than some of the ones that I can see in here.

There are other reasons. It's not just because of the way we rolled it out that some of these centres might have closed. It could be the fact that during COVID-19, people found other things to do. Look at me. I campaigned for a year during COVID-19 and won a seat in the Legislature. Who would have thought that?

Yes, I guess I jumped ahead because when I left my job of 16 and a half years, I offered the spots. When I saw the need in my community change - originally I took babies. That's all I had, six babies at a time. That's why my back hurts, probably. That's why sitting here all day kills me, I'll tell you. But as those kids grew, I grew with them. I turned my daycare into an after-school and before-school care centre because that's what I needed

in the community. We diminish what these privately run day homes, licensing requirements - it's not necessary. You can offer child care in your home following the regulations. It's very much what a lot of people in rural Nova Scotia do.

It's always that balance. I feel like I'm going to quote the Minister of Service Nova Scotia here to say it's that tenants balance. It's that balance between what the need is of the family and how you can run your business and be fair. I like to think that considering the fact that I myself had a very long wait-list, and I very ever frequently went without it.

These changes we're doing - I'm getting it in there really fast because painting that negative picture that there are net 28 spaces. I just have to correct the record. In my constituency, Windsor Day Care has 24 newly renovated spaces at their first location and at Windsor Day Care in the mall down by the Playful Pumpkin Play Café, we have 24 new spaces. Those are infant spaces, those are before- and after-school spaces. I don't think that those are minimal. There were 74 in my community. Windsor Nursery School was a non-profit that pretty near had to close until I connected them with the department. The next day, they had a meeting. They now have 20 new renovated daycare spaces that are all day-long, after-school or before-, whatever the need may be. It was a nursery school before and now is staying open. I am very proud of that. Speaker, 74 spaces in my little tiny community is nothing to call minimal.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm grateful to stand up here to talk today about Bill No. 363, the Early Learning and Child Care Act. I want to be very clear what we're trying to portray here. It's an Act to to end child care wait-list fees or deposits.

Getting back to the topic at hand, I rise today for all the mothers, all the parents, all the families, all Nova Scotians who have fallen victim to the predatory practice of child care wait-list fees.

I want to give you a little meaning of what wait-list fees are. Wait-lists work like this: Your name goes on a list. When a spot becomes available, you receive a call from the daycare, and if they need that spot, they take the spot. Some parents who are on a wait-list will contact other daycares that they're on and say, Take me off the list, I've received a spot, or they'll get a call from another daycare that says, Hey, a spot's open, and they say, No, thank you, I'm okay. I have a daycare.

I just want to be clear on what a wait-list is, and why people wait to be on a list for daycare.

In already trying economic times, where hard-working Nova Scotians are being stretched to the limit, families with a newborn, in addition to all the costs a child brings - and trust me, I know about all those things - are forced to put hundreds, if not thousands, of

non-refundable dollars down for the privilege of getting on a wait-list for child care. In this climate, folks are not even able to buy groceries or medicine. This practice of asking for fees is unfair.

At the beginning of this sitting, I raised the case of Kids & Company. Kids & Company is an Ontario-based company that owns seven locations in HRM. Earlier this year, deposits for these centres were as high as \$1,400, \$200 of which was non-refundable. This amount does not guarantee families a spot, either. So you're on a wait-list, you're paying for the spot, but you're not guaranteed a spot and you lose money.

I was shocked that, when presented with this practice, the minister's first response was that she would not commit to banning these fees. Public pressure was able to accomplish what the government refused to do. When Kids & Company announced that they would no longer collect \$1,000-plus deposits - they still collect them. They still collect the \$200 non-refundable fee with no guarantee of a spot, but it's not the thousands that they were charging before.

I came back to the minister on this predatory practice, and she reiterated her opposition to banning, and further claimed that she knew of no providers engaging in this process. So you know me - I'm not coming forward with any information unless I have the receipts to prove that I've done that work. The next day, I tabled an email to the minister that I was cc'd on from another parent who was being charged a non-refundable \$200 fee by another child care provider in Dartmouth. Only then did the minister finally acknowledge the burden on parents and state that she does not support this practice. But even when she continued to refuse to outlaw this practice, it was really disheartening to know that, as a minister, there's not much more that they can do.

Affordable child care isn't just an issue for parents or families. It's an issue for the economy. If we want parents or families to fully participate in our economy, with all the benefits that brings, we need a child care program that all families can afford. A recent report attributed rising child care demand to federal-provincial efforts to reduce those fees, stating that without proper expansion of the system, wait-lists will continue to balloon. While the federal-provincial child care agreement is seeking to overhaul the system with a large expansion and transition to non-profit models, the short-term pressure of this transition is hurting families and creating conditions for for-profit centres to collect these fees.

The most recent numbers from 2019 found that 92 per cent of Halifax daycares maintained a wait-list, and 16 per cent charged a wait-list fee. The national average for wait-list fees back then was \$50 to \$100. The situation has only worsened when we heard the ballooning price of a wait-list fee. Inaction by Liberal government after Conservative government has created a crisis point. Families are forced to spend hundreds if not thousands of dollars while already stretched on something that may or may not end with a child care space. Families are desperate.

Perhaps when the Premier is out actioning things with his friend Doug Ford next week, he can ask him how this works in Ontario, because Ontario banned this practice in 2016. If Ontario can do it, why can't we?

The minister admits that she agrees the practice of charging non-refundable wait-list fees shouldn't be happening, and after weeks of constant communication and questioning, the minister finally acknowledged this is happening. Why won't the minister ban the practice of charging these exorbitant fees?

In Question Period last week - we were all here - the minister told us she had directed the department to look into this practice and provide options for what we can do to prevent it - options. What are the options? Maybe ask them nicely. I don't really know. What other information does the minister possibly need to act on this? Every single day that the minister lets this go on is another day that families are charged unfair fees and parents are not able to get back to work.

When I asked the minister this afternoon about the wait-list fees and banning them and what they could do, I was given a response that you just can't sign a paper. There are funding agreements. There are contracts - paper. You just can't sign it. We can't do that in the House. It can't happen. In other bills - the Acts we have here - there are places that say things like, We can make amendments, and things like, Actions can be taken under the Act, or regulations can be written in and amended in an Act.

This is what we're asking today. We're asking for exactly what the minister says she doesn't want to happen. She doesn't like wait-list fees happening. She doesn't think that it's appropriate. It shouldn't be happening. We all agree. If we're all in agreement of the fact that wait-list fees should be banned, then we should do that. We should do that in legislation, which is our role as legislators - to create legislation, which we see constantly, that come back and forth and have discussion. This is a discussion we all agree upon. We've talked about it extensively while we've been in here this sitting and in previous times.

The centres charging these fees are licensed for over 1,000 child care spaces in HRM. That's a lot of parents putting forward fees and really hurting their budgets in order to be on a wait-list so they can get their child a space - hoping they can have a child care space in some of these daycares. I said it then, I said it earlier, and I'll say it again: This is not a small problem, but it has a simple solution. We don't have to do anything wild. We just have to change the wording and the legislation. Ban the fees for wait-lists.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: I move to adjourn debate on Bill No. 363.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is to adjourn debate on Bill No. 363.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable House Leader of the New Democratic Party.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 342?

[4:45 p.m.]

Bill No. 342 - Universal School Food Program Act.

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

CLAUDIA CHENDER: When I was first elected, in that first year a young woman came to see me. She had won The Duke of Edinburgh Award, I think, for being a community activist. I don't remember exactly what it was, but it was something to do with food security. She was in university at the time, but she talked to me about going to what was then the Southdale-North Woodside Elementary School, which doesn't exist anymore. She remembered chewing on pieces of paper at lunchtime because she was hungry, and she didn't have food. That was just how it was. She didn't have food, so she would chew on pieces of paper.

We all have conversations with constituents that stick with us, and that was one that stuck with me, because it was so far outside of my own experience. I didn't grow up in an environment of food insecurity, and sometimes it's those conversations that can bring that back.

A couple of weeks ago, I was doing some tour work as party leader. There was a young woman who was with us, and she was a photographer. There was a film crew, and she was part of the film crew. We stopped for lunch, and we were chatting. We started to talk about school food because it had been in the news. She said that a couple of people said kids should have food in school. Yes, of course, kids shouldn't go hungry. She said, Well you know, I grew up with a single mom, we didn't have enough money - my mom didn't have time to do things like pack lunches for me. She said it in this way that was so matter of fact. She was young - this is recent - and she said, my mom couldn't do things like pack lunches. If my friends had a little bit extra to eat, I would have it, and if they didn't, I wouldn't.

I've had lots of conversations in between those two. I think that, to have this conversation about the need for a universal school food program, we need to unequivocally accept that we have an extraordinary degree of food insecurity in this province, and that we have many, many children across this province who don't have enough to eat. They might have a granola bar in their classroom. They might have a teacher or a librarian who goes

out of their way to find a way to give them food. But they don't have enough to eat. This is the issue that we are trying to address with this bill.

Last year, the Auditor General reported that some students wouldn't eat for the entire day if the school didn't provide them with food. That same report found that while 43,000 children are accessing breakfast programs daily, only about 3,000 receive a subsidized or free lunch. Part of the reason - which I have spoken about in this Chamber - is that lots of our schools don't actually have cafeterias. It's not an option. If they do, it might be leased out to a private company.

They warn that if these healthy food recommendations weren't addressed, the health care cost could be in the billions. We hear over and over in this conversation from the minister and members on the government side that every student who needs food in schools gets food. We continue to talk to young people, students, parents, teachers, and administrators who tell us that is not the case - and I believe them. Again, I think we have to come at this conversation from a basic starting point that there are hundreds, probably thousands of students in this province who don't have enough to eat. The question is: What can we do about it?

A Nova Scotia Health Authority report from last Fall found that in some schools, students have to approach a teacher or administrator for free meals. This approach risks singling students out. The Premier is trying to make something about me saying that kids have to raise their hands. Kids have to identify themselves. How do we identify them? If we don't have a universal program, a child needs to identify to someone that they are hungry. That robs them of their dignity, it stigmatizes them, and it is wrong.

The reason that we are putting this forward is to say that people should not have to do that. Having to self-identify is a barrier. Further, we know that having to self-identify, and the stigma that brings means - again, to be clear on the round of this conversation - that not all children who need food are getting food. It shouldn't be the responsibility of teachers. We know that teachers are doing everything they can and that government funding is in no way sufficient.

We hear government talk about the money that they are advocating for food in schools, particularly education. Well, in fact, my understanding is that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has very little, if any, money that is dedicated to food in schools. There is a pot of money from the Department of Health and Wellness that is dedicated to healthy eating. But the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Progressive Conservative government think that every discretionary dollar that goes into education and is under the control of schools should be used for food. It shouldn't.

There are all kinds of other things that we need in schools. We need playground equipment. We need musical instruments. We need to fix infrastructure. We need all kinds

of stuff. We shouldn't have to spend all that money on food. Not only are we spending all that money on food, but many schools tell us that budget is already spent, and we're not even at Christmas. That is how big the need is.

We know that food bank usage across the province is rising - up 27 per cent in this year alone. One-third of all Nova Scotians accessing those supports are children - one-third of people accessing food supports in this province. Nova Scotia has some of the worst rates of child poverty and food insecurity in the country. Hundreds of children who rely on the school breakfast program weren't even able to access them when the pandemic hit.

All the costs have risen over the last year. Those school breakfast programs are becoming narrower and narrower. When I talk to my own children and their friends, they say that maybe there's a granola bar in the back of the classroom. For so many schools, that's what school food means. School food means that you can have a granola bar when you get to school. For any parent or anyone who has interacted with children, a granola bar does not a meal make. It's not healthy.

This has been true for years. I met with Nourish Nova Scotia five years ago and they said that it directly impacts educational outcomes. It's not just that we need to make sure that children aren't hungry, although we shouldn't have to get beyond that, because that feels like a basic. If we want to go further, hungry children can't learn. Not only can they not learn and have educational excellence and progress, but they can be disruptive.

I think we hear teachers say - particularly teachers in schools in disadvantaged areas where they know that food insecurity is high - that they can't plan on getting anything done in the afternoon because by that point, the kids will be hungry, and they're going to be squirrely. The teachers won't be able to teach them anymore. That should not be a situation in our schools.

We have advocated for this program for years. One free meal a day for all students. Across the world, developed countries that have the financial capacity - of which Canada is one - have these programs. Yes, we are also looking to the federal government because this is an election promise that they made. In the meantime, the fact that we are not acting on our own is a huge disservice to children and families who are struggling and who don't have the time to wait.

The government announced a salad bar pilot in the Spring - eight schools in the Strait Region, none in HRM. I think that the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development spoke at NSTU about seeing bowls of grapes on tables in classrooms. That's great for the classrooms that have bowls of grapes on the table. I've never been to any of them. My children have never been in any of those schools.

Again, I think what we're doing here is that we are advocating for publicly funded school meals, something that is the norm in many parts of the world. We are the only G7

country that doesn't do this. Again, this is not some kind of aspirational, radical idea. This is something that every other G7 country does and that we should absolutely be doing.

I will say that the United Nations estimates that school food has a return of \$3 to \$10 for every dollar invested, so it's also good economics. We are saving health care costs. We are saving all kinds of costs, but in the end, the main thing that we are doing is feeding children.

I want to close by saying that this isn't a hugely planned-out and well-crafted speech. To me, the need for this program should be completely self-evident. We all live and represent communities that have challenges around child poverty. This is an issue across our province. We all represent constituents who have extreme food insecurity because this is the norm across our province in every constituency.

This is a simple thing that the government could do, which we have been hearing dribs and drabs about from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for some time, which would directly impact that. I urge the government to move forward with the school food program and pass our bill.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Thank you, Speaker. I'm really honoured to get up in support of this bill. It's something that, as members of the Legislature, we've been talking about for years.

I do want to recognize some of my colleagues. The member for Timberlea-Prospect tabled a similar bill, the Youth Food Security Act, on March 24, 2022. Then my colleague, the member for Fairview-Clayton Park, tabled Bill No. 284, the School Lunch Program Act, on March 29, 2023. Then again, myself, on October 17, 2023. So it's something that all members of the House have talked about.

As the Leader of the NDP said, it's one of these conversations that you don't need to do a lot of research on, because it's obvious that a school lunch program would mean so much in supporting students in schools across the province.

I had the privilege of being the minister of that department, and I've said this before in my comments when the member for Timberlea-Prospect was the Premier. He gave me the honour of being the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, and he gave me two tasks. One of them was daycare, and the other one was trying to establish a universal lunch program.

I wish I had more time, but democracy is what it is, so we have a new government. But there were some great conversations. I know that staff was really engaged in the

conversation. I was very engaged with the federal minister in the conversation at the time. It was something that we were fairly close on.

Now, mind you, there have been some changes, as the minister indicated in Question Period today. There have been some changes in the leadership at the ministerial level, but I do have some concern about the timeline and how long that conversation is taking. I know it's kind of a two-way street when you're looking at bills like this, and you're trying to develop a program. So I hope they do have that conversation.

I can appreciate that, of course, as a federal partner - similar to the child care deal - you need that partnership. There are resources on both sides. I hope that when they're looking at that program, they're looking at - and they've done it in the pilot projects - local produce, and they look at the ability of using local suppliers for it.

As my colleagues from the NDP said - and I've kind of given this speech before - you talk about the tangible things that government can be doing now to support families in the greatest cost of living crisis we've seen in our generation, for sure. Feeding our kids in school, and taking that pressure off of families, is one that the government can really start to implement now.

I also made the argument around school supplies, in a previous speech - that these are things the government can be looking at that would take a lot of pressure off families who are really struggling to pay the everyday costs of life.

Again, we support this bill. It's very similar to bills that we've tabled in the House. I have those conversations and I go on tour. It's consistent all over the province. Even the committee work that we've seen, where we've had advocates come in and meet with various committees over the years. They all say the same thing: that implementing a lunch program would just be such a massive support and benefit to the kids going to school in their educational journey and how they learn, but also the support that it will provide the families.

We know that our kids are there, so it's one of those places - and nobody would disagree with that on any side. Anything we can do in our school system to support our kids - because we know our kids are there. We know that they're going to be there every day. Well, Monday to Friday, for the most part. So we can provide them a breakfast program. I'm very proud of our government for implementing that. It was something that we were proud of.

With these programs, you adjust them over the years. I'm sure the government will look at it and make their adjustments to the program, too. That was a big step because we did know that kids were going to school hungry. We knew that. We saw the statistics around how many kids were going to school without a lunch, and the financial barriers that

families had in trying to support their kids with all the costs of life, but also it was making sure that they had lunch.

Breakfast was the first step. We always said that lunch was obviously going to be the next step. We could give kids two meals a day before the end of the day. That would be a huge help.

[5:00 p.m.]

I don't think anybody on the government side disagrees with that. I look at this as more of a conversation than a debate on a bill. Many of us see it. We deal with it with our constituents. We hear the stories in our communities. I think that everybody in here would happily rise and celebrate a universal lunch program for our kids. That's one of those non-political issues for me: anything you can do for a kid, any support you can provide for a kid in a community, whether it's in the school system or not. We have our questions back and forth - the minister hears lots of them from us - but ultimately, everybody here wants that program. Everybody wants to see that happen. If the government is successful in it - which I hope they are, for the sake of our kids - we will all celebrate that. It's something we've been advocating for. It's important.

There are some other things I believe you can do in the schools as well. I think school supplies would be awesome - take that cost away from families at the beginning of the year. It's hundreds of dollars. Breakfast is there. Adjust the breakfast if you need to, and bring in a lunch program so that we know that every kid who's going to school has that ability to go home at the end of the day with the best experience possible in their education, but also knowing that, if they're going home to a situation where they're in a more vulnerable environment, the best we can do is make sure that we can give them two good meals and give them a positive experience at school.

As the member said, put in a system that they don't have to ask. That is important. I wrestled with that as minister, too, and I can appreciate where the minister's coming from on that. I see first-hand - my wife's a teacher too, so she got those requests. Teachers do it in a way that is very confidential. They do it in a way that is very professional, and really, so much thanks to them. They're teaching their courses, they're doing what's necessary, but they're also taking on what I would say are some situations outside the scope of their practice. I've talked to hundreds of teachers in my time, as an MLA and as Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, and you know what, they come at that situation with love. They come at that situation with compassion, with professionalism, and in my time in that department, we never had a scenario where a kid has had to raise their hand in the classroom. They never have.

I hope it never happened, but I know myself and from my own experience that that never happened, because the teachers are amazing. They've been dealing with - and I was Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development during the height of COVID-19.

When we had the worst wave of it, we had kids who we were trying to send packages home with; we were trying to make sure kids were fed. We were trying to make sure all that stuff was done, and teachers were coordinating all of that stuff while they were trying to teach classes online. Support staff were doing that. They did an outstanding job, and I want to say that on my feet. In my time there, I asked our teachers and staff to do a lot, a lot outside of their scope, and you know what? They stepped up probably better than any jurisdiction in the country. They kept our kids in school as long as they could. They supported them the best they could. And to this bill, whenever a kid needed something, or a student - I said "kid." They're all kids to me until they graduate from school.

The point being, whenever we needed something, the teachers stepped up every time. I've never had a situation where a kid had to raise their hand in front of anybody else, so I get where the minister's coming from on that.

To the bill, again, this is one of the most tangible things that we can do. There are lots of bills that come through here. We're talking about food today, and the minister indicated in the media - I don't have it to table; I'm happy to do it. I'm sure she'd give us her comments around naloxone; you're looking at that. I brought forward the AEDs in schools.

The point being that schools are community hubs. A lot of supports can go there to help kids - and the overall community, for that matter, but we're talking specifically about this bill around food. I don't want to stray too far.

This is one of those things where this would be so good for kids. It would be so good for their families. I just hope that negotiation happens sooner rather than later. I'm happy to do whatever I can to help, as the minister said today. If I must call my colleagues, I'd happily do it, because I don't care about politics with this. We just see it. We're all seeing and feeling it. Interest rates are up. Mortgages are going to come due. It's not going to get easier. Everything is expensive. If we can all come together on this and do this for our kids, we are going to save families hundreds of dollars. Let's all celebrate that, because it would be massive.

Breakfast and lunch, and throw some school supplies in there while you're at it. It's a pretty good package to support our kids. I honestly wish the department well with it, because it's something I've been talking about for 2.5 years. We're in politics, and we'll debate bills and stuff; we'll put a little pressure on the minister of the department to do it because that's what we do. I just hope the feds come up with that. I'm surprised it hasn't happened yet, to be honest. It was heavily discussed when I was there.

As we were doing the child care negotiation, we were talking about this at the same time. It was a different minister at the time, but it seemed like it was ready to go. It seemed like - the funniest thing. I used to walk in - there were certain staff - and I'd just walk by the hall every day and say, Where's the school lunch program? That was just the next thing.

The member for Timberlea-Prospect - who was the Premier - that was a big piece of his mandate when he was Premier. He really wanted to fight for that. I'm glad to hear the fight to get it done continues.

We'll have lots of debates - back in the education role. This is not what I want to debate. I just want it done. We all want it done. I think we'll get there. Politics has a funny way of making people make announcements on stuff too. I was there; I was on that side. I hope it happens. This bill is important. This bill has been tabled four times in the last two years. I gave my first speech in that Summer emergency debate that we had over - I forget - it was the first year. We were talking about it then. We were talking about the school system and what we could do to help families.

Here we are 2.5 years later. I can get the negotiation side of it. The minister and I have had this conversation before. We need the feds to kick in here, but my question is - we definitely need them to kick in like we did on the child care deal. These are massive programs that the feds play a big part in, and it's in their mandate letter - in multiple mandate letters. I read the correspondence, and I appreciate the minister tabling it. I hope she gets a response sooner or later. I'm happy to help if I can.

I've got a minute and a half left. What can I say for a minute and a half? Let's do this for our kids. The House Leader is over there smiling. She agrees. Let's do this for our kids. The Minister of Health and Wellness is smiling because of health outcomes; it's important. I forgot I'm not allowed to do that. I'm sorry. I'm being nice. I could talk MOU all night, so I just figured it'd be nice now. The point being is that I appreciate this bill coming forward again. This is not a political issue for me. We'll keep asking the question, of course. I can appreciate that there is some work to do on this. I hope the minister gets a response on this. This is just another step to help our kids, another step to help their families, and another cost we can take away. It will pay off big time, especially for those kids who need the help the most.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sackville-Cobequid.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: It is a pleasure indeed for me to rise and talk on this bill. I thank the member for Dartmouth South for bringing it and opening up the conversation. I thank the member for Sydney-Membertou for adding words as well.

This is about as political as I'm going to get. As the member for Sydney-Membertou was talking about the number of bills that have been brought up since this government took over the administration, I wish that this bill would be amended to the legislation that would have been brought in the previous eight years.

Unlike the member for Dartmouth South, I do know food insecurity is all around us. My father went to sea at a very young age, served in the Second World War and in Korea. He became a cook. I asked him why he became a cook. He said, Steve, future

member for Sackville-Cobequid, if you want to eat, be the cook. My mother started Beacon House food bank, the largest food bank in Nova Scotia. My experience in this area goes back over five, six decades now.

As the Premier said earlier, it's not acceptable for Nova Scotians and Nova Scotia students to go hungry. We all have a duty to ensure that doesn't happen. Teachers, administrators, other support staff - they need assistance. They are getting it - I'll mention it in a few different ways - not only from a department but from a community where people chip in and help out as best they can.

I want to talk a little bit about the situation. I'm going to reference a document from Nourish Nova Scotia. I'll also be tabling the two letters that the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development tabled earlier, but I'll have more than 90 seconds to comment on them. I will table them.

We have a case where people, in particular children, are living in an area where - perhaps one in four live in food-insecure households. As was mentioned earlier, we are 37th out of 41 high-income countries in providing access to food - nutritious food - to children. School breakfast programs help reduce food insufficiency and improve nutritional status. Canada is the one G7 country that does not have a national food program. Research tells us that school food programs increase consumption of healthy foods; reduce risk of chronic disease; improve mental health; and positively influence children's nutritional knowledge, dietary behaviours, and food intake. It improves educational outcomes and increases graduation rates by reducing hunger in classrooms. This is known to be a barrier to concentration and learning. It also helps students feel connected and that they belong. It has a positive impact on families, especially many single mothers out there, who invest significant time preparing food.

Why is this so important? Our students need to perform better academically. They need to behave better and have fewer office referrals. We need them to attend class on time so that they can improve their educational learning experiences and participate in class and show improved concentration.

Why do students come to school hungry? There are many reasons. As soon as I put on my glasses, I'll be able to read them. How many of you had rushed mornings? Some are taking care of their brothers and sisters and their other siblings. They have other responsibilities.

Some participate in extra-curricular activities. One which is key and becoming even more prevalent is no access to food at home. I won't repeat the comments made by the previous two members. Sleeping in, especially if you're a teenager.

In the rural communities, too, those extra long bus rides. You have to get up early, get on the bus, and get to school. Wouldn't it be nice to get to school and have a nutritious meal right there to start your day off?

[5:15 p.m.]

Of course, early drop-offs. Mom or dad or guardians, they have to get up and go to work. They have no child care, perhaps, early hours, and will do that. Perhaps they're working shift work.

One out of three elementary school children go to school without breakfast. Two out of three high school students go to school without breakfast. Our children are facing a health care crisis, they truly are. Approximately one in three children and youth are overweight and/or obese. The quality and quantity of the foods they eat is not good.

Type 2 diabetes is becoming more and more prevalent. It used to be called adult-onset diabetes, but it's increasingly a higher and higher number of children who are facing type 2 diabetes.

In those numbers, somebody took a look at it and said: What are we going to do about it? In February of 2019, there was a Senate motion. It was No. 358. Our own Senator, Stan Kutcher, was part of that. I'll quote:

“That the Senate urge the government to initiate consultations with the provinces, territories, Indigenous people, and other interested groups to develop an adequately funded national cost-shared universal nutrition program with the goal of ensuring healthy children and youth who, to that end, are educated in issues relating to nutrition and provided with a nutritious meal daily in a program with appropriate safeguards to ensure the independent oversight of food procurement, nutrition standards, and governance.”

In 2019 in Parliament, in their budget commitment, they made: To work towards creating a national school food program through engagement with provinces, territories, and key stakeholder groups.

After that, in December of 2021, federal mandate letters went out to both the Minister of Agriculture and Agrifood and the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development with developing a national school food policy and working towards a national school nutritious meal program. Here we are two years later. We still don't have it.

Having been in government, we all know it takes time to get things done. It even takes more time when you change the chairs on the deck - the ministers. How do you bring them up to date? How do they go forward?

Where we are now is, on this particular issue, the minister indicated earlier two letters that had been sent off not that long ago. If I could, I'm just going to read it, and I'll submit this.

“March 29th, 2023, the Honourable Minister Karina Gould, MP, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development. RE: School Food Programs.”

This was from our Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. A copy was tabled earlier. I think it would be useful to listen to these words.

“Dear Minister Gould:

“I am writing to follow-up on my previous letters and conversations we have had on the important topic of healthy and accessible school food programs.

“Nova Scotia continues to be ready to partner with you and your team to deliver on your mandate commitment to develop a National School Food Policy and to work toward a national school nutritious meal program. We have been working hard to provide as many options as possible for Nova Scotian students to accessible healthy food, but more needs to be done. I was following the Federal Budget release closely and looking for the much-needed investments in school food, however I was unable to locate any new funding.

“Inflation rates continue to increase which is putting pressure on Nova Scotia students and families. If we act now, we can make a significant difference. As I have mentioned, and our teams have discussed, Nova Scotia is very well positioned to quickly deliver on a new universally accessible, non-stigmatizing approach. We have a well-established network of partners, includes government departments, municipal units, education entities, Public Health, and various NGOs, private sector partners, as well as volunteer groups.”

I'll conclude it at that point. The second letter, a short while ago, to the new minister, just re-emphasizes the point that we need to get acting on this. We are ready here in Nova Scotia to do that. Some of the things that have been done - I'll go to that now. Yes, we are doing things. We have taken action to make sure we are no longer the one out of the G7 and that we do move up in the rankings.

What do we have? We've maintained and built on Nova Scotia's existing food programs, including the School Healthy Eating Program, SHEP, in partnership with Nourish Nova Scotia There is \$1.7 million and an additional \$2.7 million, so that's \$3.5

million. We're running health promotions in schools for \$750,000 annually. Nourish Nova Scotia gets \$275,000. It goes on and on.

In my community and the Sackville High School family of schools, I've been involved in many meal programs, as have other organizations. The Rotary Club of Sackville and Area goes in and helps with school breakfast programs. We've got community food gardens. When I was a municipal councillor - the member for Halifax Needham would know the significance of a lot of the programs, including mobile food markets and such, that have been put into the municipality. There's a lot of emphasis on providing good, nutritious food. Food bundles have been provided through Square Roots. I've got a whole list.

We've got a lot of work to do. One thing we all have in common is that we all eat. We all need to eat to survive. Our children are our future. They are our most precious resources. This government is going to do everything - our minister is going to do everything she can - to ensure our children are well looked after with nutritious food.

THE SPEAKER: I just remind the member to table any documents that they were quoting from, please.

The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm not going to take up too much time, because time is slowly ticking by. I do want to say that, if we believe in feeding our children in a universal school food program - if we truly believe in it - we wouldn't be waiting on the feds for money. We would be putting our money where our mouths are, and we would be taking action.

Cape Breton has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the province, at 25 per cent. In Eskasoni, the number is even higher: One in two children live in poverty. I could speak to my constituency, and my constituency, according to the last statistics, varied between one in three and one in two children living in poverty.

Nova Scotia has some of the lowest income support packages in the country, with the second-lowest amount for a single parent with one child. This has created a strain on community organizations. Speaking to food banks over the Summer, and other food providers in the CBRM such as Loaves and Fishes, they reported back to me that the need and the demand has been increasing substantially. And it is with young families, young people, making up a significant number of their clients.

This reflects the greater trend among the food banks in our province. Feed Nova Scotia has reported that their food bank usage across the province is up to - I believe, 27 per cent is what they said for this year alone. The problem with that is that Feed Nova Scotia can't even keep up with the demand that is needed from those whom they serve and

provide food for. One-third of all Nova Scotians accessing food supports are children. One-third are children. Volunteer and donation-run school food programs are reporting an increase in demand.

As someone whose partner is a schoolteacher, I am telling you that what I am getting reported back is that it's not proper food that they're really getting; it's not always nutritious. It's a granola bar. It may be a thing of fruit, but most of the time it's a granola bar. That is not substantial. That is not going to sustain them through the rest of the day.

This year the average food costs were found to have increased by 11 per cent across the province, and it is one of the top of the massive cost increases in other areas, like an average of 18 per cent increase in shelter costs. All of this, and what it does to people in my community is that it increases the need for more supports. It puts strains on families. We have children going to school hungry. We have teachers bringing food in to ensure that their kids have at least something in their bellies so that they can learn.

These parent, donation-funded, teacher funds are not always reaching the children. They're not reaching all the kids, because kids are too embarrassed of the stigma of not having food, so they try to hide it, those who can - the oldest, the ones in the middle school and in junior high and high schools. In the elementary students, the fear becomes when the Department of Community Services might get involved, because they're coming to school without food in their bellies. That is a fact, to the member across. That is a fact.

The members can laugh all they want, Speaker, but these are children who are starving, and the members over there on the other side are laughing. How dare they? They should be ashamed.

THE SPEAKER: Order. Please refrain from acknowledging what members in the House are doing.

Order. The time for Opposition Business has elapsed. We are now at the moment of interruption. The topic for late debate, as submitted by the member for Dartmouth South, is:

“Whereas the number of people who are homeless and without access to shelter in Nova Scotia is exploding - in Halifax the By Name List that tracks people in need of housing has reached over a thousand people - this level has never been seen since the list was kept;

Whereas this is an issue felt in every community across our province and below-freezing temperatures are now upon us;

Whereas shelters are full, modular housing units are full, the public housing wait-list is in the thousands, for the first time, there is simply

nowhere for people to go, and this government has not provided any plan or assurance that people will not be wintering outside.

Therefore, be it resolved that this government's inaction to provide housing will have dangerous and life-threatening impacts this winter."

[5:30 p.m.]

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION UNDER RULE 5(5)

The honourable Leader of the New Democratic Party.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Speaker, I understand that I can't refer to whether a member is present or absent, but I will note that this is one of the few times in the House where quorum is not required. Members don't have to be in the Chamber for this conversation, but I would hope that members would decide to stay, because what we heard today in the scrum from the Premier, when he was asked whether people would be sleeping in tents this Winter, was an unqualified yes. The Premier said, yes, people will sleep in tents this Winter.

He went on to make remarks about how there are always people sleeping rough all year around, et cetera. But the fact that the leader of this province would, without flinching, confirm - in a snowstorm, in a climate like this - that people would be sleeping outside, without an immediate follow-up that their government would do everything within their power to stop that from happening, is a matter not just for late debate but for urgent debate in this Chamber.

Across this province, we have people living in tents, under bridges, in stairways, on couches, in basements, in substandard living conditions, in shelters. That number is growing and growing, and despite some efforts from the government - yes, there are things being announced - it is not making the difference that we need to see.

Since the government was elected two years ago, the number of chronically homeless people here in HRM has doubled. There are now over a thousand actively homeless people in Halifax. A survey conducted in July found that 22.5 per cent of people sleeping on the streets in Halifax reported having lost their housing to a fixed-term lease or renovation. What we hear is: There's new construction - that's why rental costs are going up. As we've said many times in this Chamber, the cost of rent has gone up more quickly here in Halifax than anywhere in the country, notwithstanding a rent cap, and yet we have a government that refuses to act to protect renters. We hear about balance. We hear about education. But we also need to hear about the 22.5 per cent of people sleeping in tents who lost their housing.

This is not like an academic discussion. This is a discussion about life or death for people who are living outside right now. Unfortunately, although we do have a Winter plan announced, by its own admission, that plan will not come close to meeting the need for the people sleeping outdoors. What is the plan? It is snowing. It is freezing, and we don't have a plan.

We know, here in HRM - I mentioned the thousand people. We don't have as clear counts for the rest of the province because there isn't the capacity to count in the same way, but the South Shore Open Doors Association in October said 124 households, 65 children, just on the South Shore. This government represents the South Shore. I hope that they are advocating internally to find a place for these people to stay indoors this Winter.

In eastern Nova Scotia, 419 people experiencing homelessness when the numbers were last counted, and that would be higher now. There's been an encampment at Grand Parade - we all see it every time we're in downtown Halifax - for months. Twenty tents counted at Grand Parade. In my district, at the tent encampment on Geary Street, the last time I heard, 40 people living in tents in an area probably the size of this Chamber.

The plan isn't going to cut it. The tiny home community on Cobequid Road will have 52 units to provide housing for about 62 people. They will be ready by next Summer, but what will these folks do during the Winter? The province is spending \$7.5 million for temporary housing produced by Pallet, 200 units in Nova Scotia - 100 units in HRM in the face of a thousand people that we know of sleeping outdoors. We know that there is, apparently - we heard today and maybe we will hear from the government in their response - today the government finally said, Yes, we're going to have an emergency shelter in HRM, we figured out where it is. But they won't tell us where.

In Dartmouth, we have The Bridge - which I hope the government is not counting in their supported housing numbers because The Bridge is not supported housing. It is a shelter. It is a hotel where people have a room and a toilet. They don't have a kitchen. They don't have anything that resembles an actual home. It's a shelter. It's supposed to be temporary - just come in and out as you need a shelter. We have the modular housing units, we have the tent encampment on Geary Street, and we have so many more people. This number of people who will be accommodated, it won't scratch the surface. This undetermined-location shelter in HRM - I think the word was Halifax. What's that going to do for folks on the Dartmouth side? Between Dartmouth North and Dartmouth South, we have hundreds of people sleeping rough. Where are they going to go? We have no idea.

These announcements are all a step in the right direction. We need more shelter beds, but we need more housing. We've had a long time to figure out what that housing is going to look like, and the only conclusion that we can come to is that the government doesn't understand the magnitude of this problem. So we are taking this opportunity to impress upon them the magnitude of this problem. People living in tents are working full-time. They are attached to the labour force - not all of them, but some of them. Some of

them were driven to homelessness by the shockingly insufficient income assistance rates, which have been frozen in the face of record inflation.

The provincial government is responsible for housing. They are not responsible for paving the way for developers to do things that enrich them. Developers build. We need that. It's great. We need to expedite planning rules, and that's great, but to solve the housing crisis - to solve the number of people living in tents, to solve the fact that our shelters are full - we need affordable housing. That is non-market housing. That housing is built by non-profits and co-ops. Public housing: 222 units is great. Again, that's in the context of a wait-list of thousands and thousands of people who are waiting years and years.

I hope that there is an affordable housing plan that's like Part 2 of the housing plan that we just haven't seen yet. We will welcome it, but as it stands, we know that we need at least 70,000 units of housing by 2030. We know that more than 30,000 of those need to be affordable, and we don't see anything that takes us even close. We have been fighting for more and better housing for years. We would say this in the Chamber five years ago, and the government of the day would roll their eyes: Oh, there's the NDP talking about housing again - and here we are. We are in a full-blown housing crisis, and we will continue to say the same thing: everyone deserves a roof over their head.

We have responsibility for housing. It is our job to ensure that every person in this province is sheltered this Winter, and that everyone has access to a home that they can afford.

We look forward to the government letting us know how that's going to happen.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: Speaker, I thank the NDP caucus today for bringing forward this really important late debate topic.

As the member for Dartmouth South mentioned, and as has been said many times here, we are currently in the midst of a housing crisis, first and foremost, but a homelessness crisis here in Nova Scotia as well - and in Halifax in particular. Not one of us, I imagine, can get near Province House without walking past the tents that are in Grand Parade, or Victoria Park not far from here, or just outside the Cobequid Community Health Centre in Lower Sackville, or any other number of locations in HRM where there are a thousand people who are experiencing homelessness right now, today, as snow falls, and temperatures dip below zero overnight. Of course, it will get colder in the months to come, and there are very serious concerns around safety - physical well-being for people who have to suffer outside.

I think it's very easy for us to look at these things in the abstract and think about them in terms of numbers, but those thousand people are human beings. They all have stories. They're mothers, fathers, grandparents, sons, and daughters. They've obviously fallen on very difficult times for a wide variety of reasons. It's incumbent on us as legislators, and it's incumbent on the government - more than almost anything else, I would argue - to take care of those who need help the most. That's a pretty basic principle that I unfortunately see not being lived up to from this government on this particular issue.

When we look at homelessness, it is an extremely complex issue. No one disputes that. The reasons why people fall into homelessness are almost limitless. Often, we hear that perhaps there are mental health issues. It could be addictions issues. There could be issues of someone potentially fleeing domestic violence. But when we look at the core of the issue - we look at other jurisdictions that have tackled homelessness to an effective degree or academic research on homelessness - the two core drivers are housing and income. Those are the two core drivers for homelessness. If you have enough housing and adequate incomes for the vast majority of your population, the number of people who are homeless will drop. If you don't, it will rise. It's a fairly direct correlation between those two things.

I think on those two issues, housing and income, we see insufficient action or inaction from this government. If you look at housing, for example - and the member for Dartmouth South cited many of these things - we look in vain through the housing strategy, through bills that are before this Legislature, for an overall addressing of the issue of affordable housing, which is of course a key component in the homelessness epidemic.

We talk about rent supplements, for example - which I know we've talked about a lot - and the housing needs assessment. The average recipient of a rent supplement in Nova Scotia is making \$15,000 a year. Of course, those people are going to have a nearly impossible time finding housing, when we're looking at rents in the HRM easily being in the range of \$1,600 to \$1,700 on average.

We hear the government is taking what I would say are some positive steps, in terms of tiny homes and shelters through Pallet. I've talked to the minister about this, and I encourage him to keep moving forward on that, and scaling that up to a higher level. As welcome as those units will be, that still leaves hundreds and hundreds of people without. The fact is that those shelters are not going to arrive overnight - and I think we really need to be looking urgently at what spaces are in HRM, large spaces - it could be church halls, could be community centres, could be facilities of that sort, perhaps municipally owned or provincially owned, that are either unused or underutilized and can we work out some kind of system where there will be temporary shelter for people?

[5:45 p.m.]

Is it ideal? No, but I would argue very strongly that it's certainly better than being outside in a tent. It's certainly better than living in a car - which we know far too many people are having to do.

The other driving factor when it comes to homelessness and predicting homelessness - housing and then the second piece, of course, is income - very basic. If you have enough money to afford a place to live, you will have a place to live. Unfortunately, we have seen over the past couple of years this government decide - wrongly, in my view - to freeze income assistance rates for those who are most vulnerable, who are most at risk of slipping into homelessness.

The dollar figures might seem very small to many people. But when you're trying to survive on \$10,000, \$15,000, \$20,000 a year at most, an extra \$100 a month is a huge, huge difference. When we look at the amount of money that this government is spending - that's one thing I will say. They are willing to spend money, but in odd places, and not always in the most logical places. The investment that's required - the member for Kings South was talking about this earlier today - to raise income assistance levels to match inflation over the last year or so, which, of course, we know has been running very high - 7.5 per cent on average - is \$20 million to match that income assistance rate to inflation.

In the grand scheme of things, given how much money this government is spending on programs across the board, I really struggle to see how that could not have happened. If we're talking about an extra \$100 or \$125 a month - if that is the difference between someone living outside or living in a tent or living in their car or being able to pool enough money together to rent an apartment or move in with a couple of roommates or whatever the case might be - to actually have a roof over their heads and warmth and comfort and security and all of the benefits that flow from housing, because having a place to live is the keystone and the foundation of solving so many other problems that can emerge when someone doesn't have the luxury of somewhere to live.

I don't think we can just wish away this problem, assume that as time passes and as inflation hopefully goes down, this problem will solve itself because it certainly won't. It's also a problem that is deeply rooted outside of Halifax too. We know that there are a thousand people, let's say - there are probably more. These things are never as accurate as we would like - let's say there are a thousand people who are homeless in HRM. How many hundreds are there outside of HRM, where we know in many rural communities there might not be shelter or support services or wraparound services to help these people? That is another issue that I think has been underappreciated and not looked at as closely as it needs to be because the needs are just as great outside of HRM, in my view. In fact, the supports that are available are not as great outside of HRM as they are here in the city. That's a pretty scary combination.

As we get into the Winter months here, I would urge the government to have a sense of urgency and not get caught up in trying to figure out the perfect solution. We're never going to have the perfect solution, but the first thing we can do is find immediate shelter and immediate housing solutions for the thousand people who are living outside.

The second piece, which would be longer-term and structural, is to really look at how these people can be supported, raise their income levels so that they actually have a chance to succeed and thrive in life - which should be the goal for all of us who are here in the Chamber.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Truro-Bible Hill-Millbrook-Salmon River.

DAVE RITCEY: Thank you, Speaker, for allowing me to say a few words during this late debate.

There's no question that having a place to live brings with it stability, security, and a sense of belonging. Having a place to call home is something most of us take for granted. For others, the struggle to find a safe, dignified place to live and sleep is a daily challenge.

Reasons for homelessness are varied and complicated. They include uncertain physical and mental health, challenges relating to addiction, lack of affordable housing, and community and family breakdown.

We know that homelessness ultimately may result in increased use of the health care system, increased substance misuse, increased danger for abuse and violence, and increased chances of entering or re-entering the criminal justice system. All of these outcomes come at a serious cost to both the individual and to society.

It's important to note, as well, that homelessness and lack of affordable housing is a problem too significant and too complex for one level of government, one private sector organization, or one not-for-profit group to fix on its own. It takes all of us to meet this challenge. We are building community.

Our goal is to provide more supportive permanent housing for people across Nova Scotia, and we are beginning to see the progress. This year alone, the Department of Community Services budget to provide support for those experiencing homelessness was increased by \$8.2 million, bringing the total investment in homelessness to \$18 million, which represents a 261 per cent increase over the last two years.

We recently announced two innovative initiatives as we worked to provide supportive housing to those experiencing homelessness. In the first, the government and private sector are coming together to build a tiny home community - the first of its kind in

Nova Scotia - to help people experiencing homelessness in the Halifax Regional Municipality.

This pilot community will have 52 units providing housing for about 62 people. The project is a collaboration between the provincial and municipal governments, and Nova Scotia companies The Shaw Group and Dexter Construction. Part of the municipal group, the community, will be built on surplus land belonging to HRM. HRM is providing the land at no cost and will also provide support such as snow clearing and general property maintenance.

In this case, the Province will invest \$9.4 million in construction, and \$935,000 per year in annual operating costs. Dexter Construction will undertake site services and land preparation work, using its local workforce and equipment.

It's anticipated that 30 units will be completed by next Spring, and that people will be in them by next Summer. The community will be completed by next Fall, and if successful, similar communities may be created in other areas of HRM.

The second initiative has to do with added support and shelter options for this winter. The Province is providing more funding to create new Winter shelters, enhance shelter diversion supports, and establish a formalized emergency weather response for vulnerable people. It is also investing in operational supports and providing land in HRM to establish an innovative shelter solution.

In partnership with service providers and municipalities across Nova Scotia, the Province will invest \$7.5 million into shelters produced by Pallet, a shelter provider. It will purchase 200 units to provide temporary housing across Nova Scotia, including a hundred to be located in HRM. The funding will also purchase bed frames, mattresses, and desks, as well as support operations.

With the approach of the Winter season, the Province is providing \$1.8 million for an additional three overnight shelters in Amherst, Bridgewater, and HRM. The Amherst shelter opened October 1st with 20 beds. The Bridgewater shelter will open November 15th with 15 beds. We have secured a 50-bed location for the HRM Winter shelter, and working with HRM we are finalizing the set-up of those details. I anticipate we'll have an announcement very soon about the location and opening date. This location will be able to increase their bed count up to 100 as needed and will have areas for men, women, and youth.

The Province is also expanding diversion and eviction prevention support funding by \$570,000 to 11 organizations - 8 in rural Nova Scotia, and 3 right here in HRM - to ensure service providers have more options for Nova Scotians in need. With more extreme weather events, the Province is dedicating \$250,000 to support the coordination of emergency weather responses across the province, again for those experiencing

homelessness. The Province will also provide HRM with up to \$180,000 in funding this Winter to support a designated campground for RV and trailer park hook-up.

Speaking of the Winter months, we have also invested in ensuring that when bad weather hits, our shelters can keep the lights and heat on and stay focused on supporting the people they serve. To that end, we made a \$1 million investment through the Community Generator Program by Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage to purchase generators for all provincially funded shelters. For many years, the sector has been acting for this support, and we are pleased to have provided each of them with this peace of mind.

Last year we announced new temporary Winter shelters in Amherst, Dartmouth, and Lower Sackville for those experiencing homelessness. This added 60 new emergency shelter beds right across the province. As I mentioned, the Department of Community Services has secured a location for our Winter shelter in HRM this Winter. We'll share those details once set-up details are finalized. Our service provider is ready to go once everything is in place.

In addition, over the past year we provided eight communities outside HRM with \$95,000 each to fund housing support services, diversion support, and emergency hotel rooms when shelters are at capacity or for people better served within a hotel environment. We also committed the first annual funding for Open Arms, Viola's Place, Pictou County Roots for Youth, and the Truro Housing Outreach Society to stabilize and professionalize staff operations.

Shelters are important, but they're not the long-term solution. We believe supportive housing is the path to help more Nova Scotians. Many Nova Scotians experiencing homelessness have challenges that make it difficult to live in housing without additional supports.

I'll leave you with this, Speaker. We know finding a home is life-changing. We know there is much to do and there are many Nova Scotians looking to us, collectively, for solutions.

As I mentioned earlier, this is a complex problem, but I am confident that over time we can . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order. I want to thank everyone, all the members, for participating in late debate. We will now move on to the order of business, Government Business.

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Deputy Government House Leader.

JOHN WHITE: Speaker, I move that you do now rise and that the House resolve itself into a Committee of the Whole House on Bills.

THE SPEAKER: We will take a short recess in order to prepare for Committee of the Whole House on Bills.

[6:01 p.m. The House resolved into a CWH on Bills with Deputy Speaker Nolan Young in the Chair.]

[11:59 p.m. CWH on Bills rose and the House reconvened. Deputy Speaker Nolan Young resumed the Chair.]

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

THE CLERK: That the committee has met and considered the following bill:

Bill No. 340 - Municipal Reform (2023) Act.

and the Chair has been instructed that the committee has made some progress on this bill.

THE SPEAKER: As we've reached the time of adjournment, we will now rise. The House will resume tomorrow between the hours of 1:00 p.m. and 11:59 p.m. We will now rise. The House is adjourned.

[The House rose at 12:00 a.m.]

NOTICES OF MOTION UNDER RULE 32(3)**RESOLUTION NO. 772**

By: Hon. Patricia Arab (Fairview-Clayton Park)

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

Whereas Annapolis Valley Produce has demonstrated unwavering dedication and resilience in providing the residents of Fairview-Clayton Park with fresh, locally-sourced produce throughout the market season, spanning 20 weeks; and

Whereas despite facing challenges such as an unprecedented number of rainy days, the team at Annapolis Valley Produce has maintained a steadfast commitment to their service, as evidenced by the consistently busy farm stand on Dutch Village Road, frequented by loyal customers eagerly waiting to purchase a wide array of fruits and vegetables, from apples to zucchini; and

Whereas the enthusiastic support from the community, undeterred by adverse weather conditions, reflects the deep appreciation for local businesses that play a vital role in the health and vibrancy of our neighborhoods;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly acknowledge and commend Annapolis Valley Produce for their significant contributions to the community of Fairview-Clayton Park and express our anticipation and excitement for their return in June, marking the beginning of the strawberry season and another fruitful market period.

RESOLUTION NO. 773

By: Hon. Patricia Arab (Fairview-Clayton Park)

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

Whereas Emily Fougere has been a dedicated and long-standing member of the Centennial Arena Board of Directors, contributing significantly to its success and vitality; and

Whereas Emily, in her role as President, demonstrated exceptional leadership and resilience, especially during the challenging times of the pandemic, providing guidance

and support to both staff and patrons of the arena; and

Whereas Emily's ongoing commitment and experience continue to be invaluable to the Centennial Arena, ensuring its role as a vital community hub for sports, recreation, and fostering unity in the Fairview-Clayton Park community;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly recognize and celebrate Emily Fougere for her outstanding contributions and leadership at the Centennial Arena, and acknowledge her pivotal role in strengthening community ties and enhancing the quality of life in Fairview-Clayton Park.

RESOLUTION NO. 774

By: Hon. Patricia Arab (Fairview-Clayton Park)

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

Whereas the volunteers and vendors at the Fairview-Clayton Park Farmers Market have successfully reached a notable third-year milestone, establishing the market as a significant community tradition; and

Whereas this market has become a dynamic space that promotes local commerce and fosters community togetherness, enriching the lives of residents and visitors alike through the exchange of locally sourced and crafted products; and

Whereas the dedication and collective efforts of those involved have not only created a marketplace but also a nurturing environment for local growers and artisans, exemplifying the values of sustainability and community spirit;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly congratulate the volunteers and vendors of the Fairview-Clayton Park Farmers Market on their third-year milestone, acknowledging their hard work and commitment to creating a vibrant, sustainable community space.

RESOLUTION NO. 775

By: Hon. Patricia Arab (Fairview-Clayton Park)

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

Whereas Team Nova Scotia Girls U14 Baseball has achieved the prestigious title of Atlantic Champions, securing the gold medal in an outstanding championship game against Newfoundland and Labrador; and

Whereas Graci Downing of Fairview, wearing the No. 27 jersey, has been a vital member of this back-to-back championship-winning team, contributing significantly with her dedication and exceptional skills; and

Whereas Graci exemplifies the spirit of a true multi-sport athlete, excelling not only in baseball but also in hockey and javelin, demonstrating extraordinary talent, determination, and commitment;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly congratulate Team Nova Scotia Girls U14 Baseball on their remarkable achievement as Atlantic Champions and recognize Graci Downing for her significant contributions to the team's success and her exemplary achievements in multiple sports.

RESOLUTION NO. 776

By: Hon. Patricia Arab (Fairview-Clayton Park)

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

Whereas the volunteers of the Halifax West Ecumenical Food Bank have been recognized as the 2023 HRM Volunteer Award winners in the group category, for their selfless and dedicated service to the community; and

Whereas these volunteers contribute an astounding 500 hours each month, ensuring the efficient operation of the food bank, based out of the Salvation Army's Fairview Citadel in Fairview-Clayton Park, thereby playing a crucial role in sustaining this essential service for over three decades; and

Whereas this food bank has become a vital support system for over 300 families each month, many of whom are newcomers to Canada, with District 10 Municipal Councilor Kathryn Morse and Mayor Savage honouring two of the food bank's dedicated volunteers, Harold and Marian Smith, for their exemplary service;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly recognize and applaud the Halifax West Ecumenical Food Bank and its volunteers for their remarkable contributions to the community, and commend their enduring commitment and significant impact in providing essential services to families in Fairview-Clayton Park and beyond.

RESOLUTION NO. 777

By: Hon. Patricia Arab (Fairview-Clayton Park)

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

Whereas Hello Pets, owned by passionate animal enthusiasts Mohammad Ashiq and Hasibur Rahman Abir, celebrated their first anniversary on August 26th with a day-long event, marking a significant milestone in their journey; and

Whereas over the past year, Hello Pets has deeply integrated into the Fairview Clayton Park community through participation in events, donating prizes for giveaways, and collaborating with various community groups; and

Whereas Mohammad Ashiq and Hasibur Rahman Abir have created a nurturing environment at Hello Pets, fostering the bond between pets and their human companions and offering a space filled with love, care, and expert advice for pet owners;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly recognize and celebrate Hello Pets on their 1st anniversary, commending the dedication of Mohammad Ashiq and Hasibur Rahman Abir in fostering a compassionate community space for pets and their owners, and thanking them for their contribution to enhancing the lives of both pets and people in our community.

RESOLUTION NO. 778

By: Hon. Patricia Arab (Fairview-Clayton Park)

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

Whereas Jane Garnier has been recognized with the prestigious 2023 Youth Volunteer Award by HRM for her exceptional commitment and contributions to the community; and

Whereas her energetic and enthusiastic efforts have greatly enhanced the experiences of camp participants at Chocolate Lake Recreation Centre, creating fun, exciting, and memorable experiences; and

Whereas Jane's volunteerism extends beyond the recreation centre, including significant contributions to community clean-up initiatives and selfless service at a local soup kitchen, positively impacting numerous lives within the community;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly commend Jane Garnier for her outstanding dedication and service as a youth volunteer, recognizing her as a shining example of the profound difference one individual can make in their community through selfless acts of kindness and commitment.

RESOLUTION NO. 779

By: Hon. Patricia Arab (Fairview-Clayton Park)

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

Whereas Lauren Farrow, an exceptionally skilled pharmacist at the Clayton Park Shoppers Drug Mart, has been honorably recognized as the 2023 Pharmacist of the Year, reflecting her outstanding dedication to the field of pharmacy and her remarkable ability to inspire her peers; and

Whereas Lauren exemplifies unwavering professionalism and calmness under pressure, coupled with extensive clinical knowledge, admirable leadership qualities, and exemplary patient communication skills, making her not only an excellent manager but also a role model for others in the profession; and

Whereas Lauren, known affectionately as the "breath of fresh air" in the pharmacy, remains a source of reassurance and strength even on the busiest of days, embodying the virtues of poise and resolve that are essential in the challenging environment of health care;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly recognize and celebrate Lauren Farrow for her exceptional contributions to the community and her field, and express our deepest appreciation for her exemplary service and the positive impact she has made as a pharmacist in Clayton Park.

RESOLUTION NO. 780

By: Hon. Patricia Arab (Fairview-Clayton Park)

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

Whereas Erik and Misty Famillaran have successfully inaugurated Macao Imperial Tea in the heart of Fairview, marking an exciting new chapter in their entrepreneurial journey; and

Whereas Macao Imperial Tea, since its opening in August, has captivated the community with its versatile milk tea offerings, including the popular Cheesecake tea line and traditional beverages; and

Whereas the establishment not only serves as a tea shop but also a vibrant space for customers to relish good books and engage in board games, enhancing the social and cultural fabric of Fairview;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly congratulate Erik and Misty Famillaran on the grand opening of Macao Imperial Tea, and extend best wishes for their continued success, recognizing their contribution to the community as a hub of enjoyment and social interaction.

RESOLUTION NO. 781

By: Hon. Patricia Arab (Fairview-Clayton Park)

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

Whereas more than 550 graduates from 19 different countries received their degrees during Mount Saint Vincent University's fall 2023 convocation, joining the global network of over 39,000 Mount alumni; and

Whereas these graduates have achieved their degrees despite the significant challenges posed by pandemic restrictions and changes, demonstrating remarkable perseverance and resilience; and

Whereas Mount Saint Vincent University continues its commitment to excellence in education and empowering future generations, as echoed in Mount President Dr. Dickinson's inspiring words to the graduates;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly congratulate the graduates of Mount Saint Vincent University's fall 2023 convocation for their achievements and commend the University for its enduring dedication to nurturing and inspiring future leaders.

RESOLUTION NO. 782

By: Hon. Patricia Arab (Fairview-Clayton Park)

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

resolution:

Whereas Sheree Fitch has been recently honored with the prestigious Order of Canada for her outstanding contributions to children's literature and the Canadian literary community; and

Whereas Sheree Fitch, as a writer, poet, and literacy advocate, has had a profound impact on the nation's literary landscape through her over thirty-two years of dedication to the realm of literature; and

Whereas her literary works have significantly influenced readers of all ages across diverse genres, fostering a deep appreciation for reading and language in both young and old;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly celebrate Sheree Fitch for her exceptional contributions to Canadian literature and recognize her well-deserved honor of receiving the Order of Canada, acknowledging her role in enriching the lives of current and future generations through her creativity and commitment to the literary world.

RESOLUTION NO. 783

By: Hon. Patricia Arab (Fairview-Clayton Park)

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

Whereas Jamie Flynn, the Pharmacist/Owner of The Medicine Shoppe Pharmacy in Fairview-Clayton Park, has marked a significant milestone with the 15th anniversary of the pharmacy on June 21st; and

Whereas for 15 years, Jamie Flynn has been a steadfast figure in the community, offering health care services characterized by a deep sense of trust, reliability, and empathy; and

Whereas the long-standing operation and success of The Medicine Shoppe Pharmacy under Jamie's stewardship are indicative of his enduring dedication and the strong bonds forged within the community;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly recognize and congratulate Jamie Flynn and The Medicine Shoppe Pharmacy on their 15th anniversary, commending their vital role in the health MeMiM care system of Fairview-Clayton Park and acknowledging their commitment to providing exceptional service and care to the community.

RESOLUTION NO. 784

By: Hon. Patricia Arab (Fairview-Clayton Park)

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

Whereas Yvonne Noel has dedicated the last four years as a volunteer and community manager of Square Roots Fairview Clayton Park, significantly contributing to the well-being of the Fairview-Clayton Park community; and

Whereas Yvonne has played a vital role in ensuring that families have access to healthy and affordable food, coordinating hundreds of volunteers and managing the logistics of supporting numerous families; and

Whereas Yvonne's commitment has extended to organizing key community events, such as a community Halloween party, partnering with Freemans Fairview and the Salvation Army to distribute pizza kits and Christmas dinners during COVID, and collaborating with various groups to supply Valentine's Day vegetables to 412 seniors;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly recognize and thank Yvonne Noel for her outstanding service to Fairview-Clayton Park, and acknowledge her dedication and tireless efforts that have been a lifeline for many families in the community.