



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

DEBATES AND PROCEEDINGS

Speaker: Honourable Karla MacFarlane

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First Session

FRIDAY, MARCH 1, 2024

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House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, FRIDAY, MARCH 1, 2024

Sixty-fourth General Assembly

First Session

9:00 A.M.

SPEAKER

Hon. Karla MacFarlane

DEPUTY SPEAKERS

Lisa Lachance, Danielle Barkhouse, Nolan Young

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. I would like, if we have unanimous consent, that we go right to the order of business, Statements by Ministers. Do we have unanimous consent?

Is everyone in agreement?

It is agreed.

STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Premier.

HON. TIM HOUSTON (The Premier): Speaker, it is with profound sadness that I rise today to pay tribute to our 18th Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Brian Mulroney. In his February 1993 resignation address, Prime Minister Mulroney said, “I’ve done the very best for my country and my party,” and there is no doubt that those words are true. You only have to listen to the tributes that poured in last night from people of all political stripes.

Prime Minister Mulroney was a bold leader and a courageous statesman who tackled the difficult issues of the day with dogged determination. With Brian Mulroney as leader, the Progressive Conservative Party swept to victory with 211 seats, the biggest majority in Canadian history. Then he rolled up his sleeves and he got to work. He once said, "You have to spend your political capital on great causes for your country." That is exactly what he did.

In 1988, Prime Minister Mulroney signed the Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement, ending 100 years of tariff protection. President George H. W. Bush and Prime Minister Mulroney co-authored a clean air plan to fight acid rain and saved many forests and lakes from the leading environmental threat of the day. He was recognized as the greenest prime minister in Canadian history.

In 1985, Prime Minister Mulroney led Commonwealth countries in the fight against apartheid in South Africa. Driven by his personal convictions of justice and an unwavering respect for human rights, Prime Minister Mulroney launched a relentless anti-apartheid campaign, telling his allies - Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan - that they would be on the wrong side of history if they did not join him. The Prime Minister was so influential in dismantling apartheid that just 127 days after leaving prison, Nelson Mandela travelled to Canada to thank Prime Minister Mulroney in the House of Commons.

Speaker, Brian Mulroney had deep roots right here in Nova Scotia. He loved Canada, but he loved Nova Scotia. On September 12, 1983, Mr. Mulroney entered the House of Commons after winning a by-election in Central Nova the month before. Of course, he always looked fondly on his years as a student at St. Francis Xavier University. He was proud of the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government. I am thankful that generations of students will know the impact he had on our country and on the world because of this school.

He was a true gentleman who came from a different era of politicians - one we could all learn from when it comes to decorum.

On a personal note, I will be forever grateful for the generous counsel and advice that Prime Minister Mulroney had offered me, especially in the last two years. He was never too busy to take a call or to listen to a problem and provide guidance. I feel very fortunate to have had time with him. I am extremely sad that he is gone, and I will miss his mentorship.

Today we send our most sincere condolences to Mrs. Mulroney, Ben, Caroline, Mark, and Nicolas, and to the many thousands of lives Brian Mulroney touched in his almost 85 years.

May he rest in peace. (Standing ovation)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: I'd like to thank the Premier for his comments.

The Right Honourable Brian Mulroney was Prime Minister when I was born, Speaker. He certainly was a bold visionary for this province and a transformative leader, bringing free trade to North America, which still lives on today. He strived to make Canada a better place and always stood up for what he believed was the right thing to do, even when those decisions were tough. He certainly did love his country, and he loved Antigonish. His legacy will live on through the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government there.

I've had the great pleasure of listening to former Prime Minister Mulroney over the course of my career in politics. His oratory is probably unmatched in Canada, but so too is his commitment to good outcomes. Whether it was in a partisan government, supporting the current Prime Minister, or even supporting the previous government under Stephen McNeil, he was always there to negotiate with the United States and to support the leaders of our provinces and our country whenever he was asked to serve.

He had profound impacts on the global landscape, as well, particularly in challenging the apartheid regime in South Africa. The last time I heard former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney speak was actually at StFX, at the Atlantic Economic Forum that was happening there. He had some really important words, particularly about debate in our parliamentary system and about how, when was Prime Minister, he had opponents and they always debated the issues that were most critical to people in their lives each and every day. I certainly will remember that advice he gave that room and to the Prime Minister at the time as well.

I want to express my condolences to Mila, Caroline, Ben, Mark, Nicolas, and their families. This is a great loss to them, and it's a loss that the country shares with that family as well. (Applause)

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

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Speaker, I rise today to join the tributes to the Right Honourable Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

All Canadians in particular were proud of the role that we played to end apartheid in South Africa. There can be no doubt that Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was a key player in that fight, and in the release of Nelson Mandela, who confirmed as much himself.

He was the first Prime Minister to recognize and act on the negative effects that humans were having on our planet. The Air Quality Agreement with the United States was

a landmark. This agreement fought acid rain, protected lakes and forests, and was a blueprint for future agreements.

The Prime Minister held a special place in his heart for Nova Scotia, as we've heard, from his days at StFX to his time as the member for Central Nova, and as Prime Minister, where he created ACOA as well as the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government. I've had the privilege, as many of us have, of participating in their vital programming.

With that, we in the New Democratic Party want to thank him for his service and send our condolences to Mrs. Mulroney, to his children Ben, Caroline, Mark, and Nicolas, and to all his friends and loved ones. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: I would kindly ask that we stand for a moment of silence, please.

[A moment of silence was observed.]

THE SPEAKER: Please be seated. We will now begin with the Orders of the Day and the daily routine.

PRESENTING AND READING PETITIONS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: Speaker, before I present my petition, may I introduce a guest?

THE SPEAKER: Yes, you may.

GARY BURRILL: Thank you. We're glad to have Nate Mahoney with us today. Nate is the president of the Young New Democrats Society at Dalhousie University and is taking part in an internship program through the Dalhousie Political Sciences Society with the Halifax Chebucto constituency office. He's also been involved in the work of the petition that I'm about to present.

I want to welcome Nate to the House today. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Welcome. Thank you for joining us today.

The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: Speaker, I beg leave to present a petition. The operative clause reads as follows:

Whereas over a quarter of those who are homeless for the first time are over the age of 60; and

Whereas nearly 6,000 people are on the wait-list for public housing, with an average wait time of two years;

Therefore be it resolved that the provincial government ban evictions of seniors whose incomes would qualify them for public housing until there is a place in public housing for them to go.

This petition has been signed by a considerable number of the residents of Cork Street in the Halifax Chebucto constituency, and I have signed it also.

THE SPEAKER: The petition is tabled.

PRESENTING REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

TABLING REPORTS, REGULATIONS, AND OTHER PAPERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: I would like to table a document, Speaker, in consideration of a member statement that I'm going to make later. The document is *United in Poverty Action: A Community Update* of the United Way Halifax, dated January 2024.

THE SPEAKER: The document is tabled.

STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS

GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Health and Wellness.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

MICHELLE THOMPSON: I rise today in memory of Nicole MacHattie, who lost her battle with colon cancer but spent her last few months advocating for treatments and screening. In the gallery today, we have Nicole's family and friends, including her children, Ewan and Emma, who continue her legacy and advocate on her behalf. I would ask those folks to stand and be recognized by the House. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Thank you for being here. The honourable Minister of Health and Wellness.

[9:15 a.m.]

RESOLUTION NO. 929

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

Whereas colorectal cancer is a serious and life-threatening disease that is the second most common cause of cancer deaths in Nova Scotia; and

Whereas this disease is preventable, treatable, and beatable if caught in the early stages, and at-home screening kits are offered for free to Nova Scotians aged 50 to 74 years of age every two years as an early detection method; and

Whereas trends of the disease continue without any known cause, awareness and testing is necessary;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this Chamber join me in recognizing the importance of this ongoing issue, and if members or someone they know should be screened, we encourage them to reach out to the Colon Cancer Prevention Program.

I ask for waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health.

RESOLUTION NO. 930

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

Whereas for more than 20 years, the Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia's A Different Stage of Mind annual fundraiser has raised more than \$5 million; and

Whereas these funds have been reinvested into communities across the province for mental health programs and support services; and

Whereas this is the final year of the entertaining fundraising tradition where performance teams pledge to fundraise \$50,000 and participants get a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take the stage as the celebrity performer of their choice;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of the House congratulate the Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia on their 20th anniversary of A Different Stage of Mind fundraiser and recognize the critical funds they have raised for community mental health initiatives.

THE SPEAKER: Are you looking for a request for waiver? (Laughter)

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. 417 - An Act to Amend Chapter 7 of the Acts of 2011, the Fair Drug Pricing Act, Respecting Shingrix Vaccine. (Rafah DiCostanzo)

Bill No. 418 - An Act to Amend Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2010, the Finance Act. (Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin)

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

NOTICES OF MOTION

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Antigonish.

BONVIE, DENNIS: AHL HALL OF FAME IND. - CONGRATS.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Speaker, I'm excited to rise today to congratulate Antigonish's Dennis Bonvie on being inducted into the American Hockey League Hall of Fame.

Dennis played 871 games for eight different teams in the AHL, scoring 275 points. He was well-known for his competitiveness and toughness, accumulating a record-breaking 4,493 penalty minutes.

Over his Hall of Fame career, Dennis played for the Cape Breton Oilers, Hamilton Bulldogs, Portland Pirates, Philadelphia Phantoms, Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins, Providence Bruins, Binghamton Senators, and the Hershey Bears.

Since his retirement, Dennis has served as a scout for the Toronto Maple Leafs, Chicago Blackhawks, and Boston Bruins, for whom he has been a director of professional scouting since 2022.

I ask all members of this House to congratulate Dennis on his well-deserved honour.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Yarmouth.

PHARMACY APPREC. MO.: IMPORTANT WORK - RECOG.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, March is Pharmacy Appreciation Month, and I rise today to recognize the thousands of pharmacists, pharmacy assistants, and other pharmacy staff who work in our pharmacies and provide excellent care to patients across Nova Scotia every day.

Pharmacists play an important role in our health care system, and expanding their scope allows them to better treat their patients while taking pressure off our over-burdened emergency departments and walk-in clinics. The former government made it possible for pharmacists to prescribe birth control and medications for uncomplicated UTIs and shingles, and since then their scope has been expanded even further under this government.

I want to thank these hard-working Nova Scotians for their tireless efforts to keep our province healthy. Their contributions are important not just this month, but all year round.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, may I make a few introductions before my statement?

THE SPEAKER: Yes, you may.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I want to introduce a few people from the Endometriosis and Chronic Pelvic Pain Clinic at the IWK Health Centre who have joined us today. They're over in the gallery opposite, and as I say their names, I'll ask them to rise. Dr. Allanna Munro is an anaesthesiologist who specializes in chronic pelvic pain. Leah Pink is a nurse practitioner who works in the clinic. Linda MacEachern is a social worker who provides pain education and counselling at the clinic. Kathryn Hawkins is a pelvic floor physiotherapist who provides pain education and treatment in the clinic. Also working in the clinic but not present today are two gynecologists who specialize in endometriosis and chronic pelvic pain: Dr. Elizabeth Randle and Dr. Brigid Nee. Also, we would like to welcome today Maggie Archibald and Faith Lamoureux, who have shared their stories of accessing care for endometriosis in Nova Scotia.

Of course, all of this is in light of the fact that today, March 1st, marks the beginning of the very first Endometriosis Awareness Month in Nova Scotia. I would like everyone to welcome our guests.

THE SPEAKER: Welcome, and thank you for being here and for all that you do.

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

IWK CHRONIC PAIN CLINIC: IMPORTANT WORK - THANKS

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, I rise today to recognize the work of the IWK Health Centre's Endometriosis and Chronic Pelvic Pain Clinic. In 2021 the clinic opened, the first of its kind in Atlantic Canada, thanks to the hard work and advocacy of clinicians and the public. When it opened, nurse Leah Pink said: "Drawing on the expertise of multiple health care professionals and by using innovative strategies to provide care we will better meet the needs of this underserved patient population."

This interdisciplinary care model is the gold standard. Endometriosis costs our medical system in ER visits and many often-unnecessary tests, due to a lack of understanding and the long delays people face in getting diagnosis and treatment. It also costs those who suffer from endometriosis in wages lost while unable to work, and time away from family and friends, and pain and money for physiotherapy, and other out-of-pocket expenses to manage chronic pain. Thanks to this clinic, more Nova Scotians have access to the treatment and support they need as well as qualified support.

I ask the House to join me in thanking Dr. Allana Munro, Leah Pink, Linda MacEachern, Kathryn Hawkins, and their colleagues for their work in expanding badly needed endometriosis care in our province.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sackville-Cobequid.

BAUR, DAN: COM. SERV. - RECOG.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: I rise today to applaud Dan Baur from Lower Sackville. Dan Baur has been volunteering for the last 34 years and continues to dedicate his time and talents to our community.

Dan has served as troop leader with Scouts Canada; has coached and mentored youth with the Sackville United Soccer Association, leading them to win a gold medal; has taught youth paddling at Sackawa Canoe Club; has assisted trail development and maintenance with the Sackville Lakes Parks and Trails Association; received an award from Canadian Blood Services for over 200 donations; and has volunteered with the organization Different Folks supporting underrepresented and underemployed entrepreneurs in their communities.

Speaker, I would like to ask that all members of the House of Assembly join me today in applauding Mr. Dan Baur for his selfless contributions and his continued volunteerism, making our community a better place.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Armdale.

SEW AMAZING: TAILOR & DRY CLEANING SVC. - RECOG.

ALI DUALE: I would like to recognize the Sew Amazing tailoring and dry cleaning small business in my constituency. They provide fast service and a great result to all customers. The owner, Mobina, is incredibly hard-working and has done a great job since she opened in 2017.

Speaker, I would like to thank Mobina for the service she offers the community and hope to see everyone support local businesses like this.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

LAMOUREUX, FAITH: SHARING STORY - THANKS

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I rise today on the first day of Endometriosis Awareness Month to share the story of Faith Lamoureux of Dartmouth. For years Faith lived in excruciating pain, ignored by doctors and believing that she must be dying. A large lump appeared on her back in her early 20s and a walk-in clinic doctor, her only option with no

family doctor, dismissed her, suggesting that she gain weight. Faith says that: Every doctor I saw asked if I was on my period and it was infuriating.

Years later she passed out in pain on the street and after hours in the ER was diagnosed with endometriosis. The lump was gone. Two massive endometrial cysts had ruptured. The doctor in the ER couldn't offer much support, saying they didn't know anything about endometriosis. In 2023 Faith had the surgery she needed but because of the disease's progression, she needed major abdominal surgery and a hysterectomy.

Faith is able to live without pain today and doesn't want anyone to have to face what she did - almost a decade of debilitating pain. I ask all members to join me in thanking Faith for being here today and for sharing her story.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Queens.

ASTOR THEATRE: *FOLLIES* MUSICAL PROD. - CONGRATS.

HON. KIM MASLAND: I rise today to congratulate the Astor Theatre's Winds of Change Dramatic Society on their recent production of the Stephen Sondheim musical *Follies*. This was the first adult musical to be staged in Liverpool since 2018, and it recently opened to rave reviews. Its elaborate costumes, live orchestra, powerful songs, and fun dance numbers have made it a huge hit with audiences as it continues over its eight-show run.

With cast members ranging in ages from 14 to 77, members of the production team invested hundreds of hours in the project. Special recognition for director Ashley-Rose Goodwin, who spent in excess of 50 hours per week working with individuals and the full cast preparing the show and bringing her vision to life.

Bravo to all, and a sincere thank you to everyone involved for bringing the community together to celebrate the arts in such a wonderful and fun way. I am super excited to return home tonight to take in a show.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

CLEMENTS, ERIN: PHYSIOTHERAPY WORK - RECOG.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Speaker, I rise today to recognize registered physiotherapist Erin Clements. I had the pleasure of meeting with Erin in January, when she shared with me her commitment to helping breast cancer survivors with targeted physiotherapy. Erin, a breast cancer survivor herself, shared with me the importance of proper physiotherapy after surgery. I was surprised to know that this would make a huge difference for women, as it was not offered to me after my surgery. Erin confirmed that many surgeons don't mention physiotherapy, but usually nurses recommend it.

[9:30 a.m.]

Erin has made a huge difference in the recovery of many Nova Scotian women. I ask the House to join me in recognizing the incredible physiotherapist who dedicates her profession to make post-surgery recovery easier for all women.

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

ARCHIBALD, MAGGIE: SHARING STORY - THANKS

LISA LACHANCE: Speaker, I rise today to mark the beginning of Endometriosis Awareness Month, and to share the story of Maggie Archibald of Halifax. From the day her first period started, Maggie lived in a serious pain cycle every month. For 16 years, she had to miss out on life for days each month. Because women's pain is so often ignored and dismissed, it took a random conversation with a family member to hear about endometriosis.

In 2022, Maggie was happy to connect with the IWK's endometriosis and chronic pelvic pain clinic. Since then, she's had surgery for her endometriosis, and is now closely followed to manage the ongoing pain and monitor any progression of the disease. She said that connecting with the clinic has been life-changing.

Maggie wants her story to spread awareness about endometriosis among the public and medical professions. The condition is serious and often unknown or ignored. She says she was aware of its existence and, had she been better informed, might have sought care earlier.

I encourage all members of the House to work together to increase early intervention and expand support for those with endometriosis.

THE SPEAKER: The honorable member for Kings West.

OAKLAWN FARM ZOO: CLOSURE - RECOG.

CHRIS PALMER: As the MLA for Kings West, it is with a heavy heart that today I address the closure of Oaklawn Farm Zoo in Aylesford after 40 years of service to our community, and also recognize the amazing community contributions of Ron and Gail Rogerson. The Rogersons purchased their property in 1974 and over the next 10 years did school class trips while building the zoo.

In 1984, the Oaklawn Farm Zoo officially opened to the public. The zoo has been an integral part of our region's identity, providing generations of families with memorable experiences and educational opportunities. I suspect that most members of this House have visited the zoo with their families at some point or another.

Ron and Gail's hands-on approach, compassion, and steadfast determination have been instrumental in shaping our community and leaving a lasting impact on generations of visitors. Their tireless dedication to the well-being of the animals, the preservation of endangered species, and the education of the public have been truly remarkable.

Speaker, as the Oaklawn Farm Zoo closes its doors after four decades of service, I would ask members of this House to join me in taking a moment to express our deepest gratitude to Ron and Gail Rogerson for their extraordinary contributions to our region and province. Thank you, Ron and Gail. Your impact will be felt for years to come, and the zoo will be dearly missed.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

GERROW, COLTON: SNOW RELIEF - THANKS

FRED TILLEY: Today I rise to thank and congratulate a young person in our community. We all know that in early February, Cape Breton was hit - some other parts of the province as well - with a very serious snowstorm. So much snow arrived in our towns that the fire hydrants were completely buried, but Colton Gerrow came to the rescue and was shovelling out fire hydrants. He was honoured by the Sydney Mines fire department and received all kinds of accolades on Facebook for his great action.

I want to thank Colton for showing us adults what it takes to be part of a community and for everyone to pitch in and do their part in time of disaster. Thank you, Colton. I'd like all members of the House to congratulate Colton for setting a fine example.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable for Halifax Needham.

NORMAN, RAINA: SHARING STORY - THANKS

SUZY HANSEN: I rise today to share the story of Raina Norman, whose endometriosis was so advanced by the time she had surgery that the scarring was the worst case her surgeon had ever seen. Raina spent many years from puberty until her late 30s dealing with the pain of endometriosis, often ignored. She said, "It was like someone had wrapped barbed wire around me and was continually cinching it."

She suffered from pelvic floor dysfunction, bladder problems, and issues with nerves and ligaments, causing back and leg pain. She also had two miscarriages, which caused a great deal of emotional pain. When she became pregnant with her son and gave birth via C-section, she heard the doctors describing black marks on her uterus that they didn't understand. She knew it was endometriosis.

In January of this year, Raina finally had the surgery she has needed for years. Her organs were fused, and endometriosis was threatening her kidney. Doctors couldn't believe

that her damaged uterus had been able to carry a baby to term. Nova Scotia needs more qualified specialists so the long, painful wait times for help for the endometriosis that Raina experienced could be reduced.

May all the members of this House work together to raise awareness to ensure that no other Nova Scotians have to wait the way Raina has.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hants East.

MCKAY, CARMELLE: HOCKEY TEAM SIGNING - CONGRATS.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Speaker, I have the pleasure to rise in my place to talk about another amazing East Hants resident: Carmelle (Callie) McKay, a 17-year-old student and goaltender. I nearly forgot to mention that she is the only female playing for Cole Harbour Bel Ayr Wings U18-A Central Minor Hockey League team.

She was scouted by Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, so in the first part of February she and her mother went to visit the college. On February 8th, Callie signed her commitment to the Aquinas women's ice hockey team. Callie is finishing up her last year at Hants East Rural High and is looking forward to this new challenge.

Please join me in congratulating Callie and wishing her all the best. I am sure this is not the last time we will see great things from her.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clare.

DEVEAU, CARL: RETIREMENT - BEST WISHES

RONNIE LEBLANC: I rise today to offer my sincere congratulations to Carl Deveau on his well-deserved retirement following an impressive 23-year career as a paramedic.

While Carl transitioned from his role as paramedic, his dedication to serving our community remains unwavering. Currently representing District 4 on Clare's municipal council, Carl actively contributes to various committees and community events. This demonstrates his ongoing commitment to making a positive difference in the lives of others.

Beyond this civic engagement, Carl finds solace and joy in the great outdoors, enjoying activities such as canoeing and wilderness camping. I invite all members to join me in expressing our heartfelt gratitude to Carl Deveau and his dedicated service as a paramedic, and wishing him a fulfilling retirement.

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

LEGENDS OF WHITNEY PIER: TRIBUTE CONCERT - RECOG.

KENDRA COOMBES: Tonight, African Nova Scotian musicians will be honoured at a special tribute concert called Legends of Whitney Pier at Menelik Hall.

Menelik Hall is an historic venue in Whitney Pier. It is where early civil rights leader Marcus Garvey made a speech in 1937 that told generations of African Nova Scotians to “emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because while some might free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind.” Legendary singer-songwriter Bob Marley used parts of that speech as the inspiration for his *Redemption Song*.

The free event will also celebrate icons who are no longer with us, and who inspired and encouraged others within their community and beyond through music and storytelling. I wish I could be there with them tonight, but unfortunately, I’ll be driving home.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Lunenburg West.

SOUTH SHORE DUELLISTS: FENCING INSTRUCTION - RECOG.

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: Speaker, I rise today to congratulate the South Shore Duellists Fencing Club and its coaches Ed Matchett, his son Aidan, siblings John and Emma Kinley, and Alice Smith for bringing more than 35 years of fencing instruction and education to the South Shore.

The club was founded in 1988 as the Bridgewater Fencing Club. Students ranging in age from 7 to 76 train at their own level, using foil, épée, or sabre weapons. While many play recreationally, several students have gone on to represent the province at the Canada Games and beyond.

Ed began coaching in 1991 after he and Aiden developed a mutual passion for the sport. He says that it’s a psychological game. The amount of education, dedication and skill needed to play and teach this sport is not for the faint of heart. It requires speed, endurance, strategy and tactics, like a game of chess. What he enjoys most is watching young athletes progress and achieve their goals.

I ask the House to join me in thanking the South Shore Duellists Fencing Club and all its members and volunteers who have supported the development of the sport of fencing in our community.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

74TH CRUSADERS: COM. SERV. - RECOG.

CARMAN KERR: The 74th Crusaders is an Annapolis Royal based motorcycle enthusiast club that is dedicated to the safe operation of motorcycles and giving back to our community. They support and sponsor myriad groups and organizations, including Big Brothers Big Sisters, IWK Health, the Annapolis Area Food Bank Society, Royal Canadian Legion Branch 21, the Salvation Army, the Mid-Valley Palliative Care Service, Annapolis County Special Olympics, Annapolis Community Health Centre, and the Annapolis Royal Volunteer Fire Department.

The club comprises nearly 100 working and retired members, spouses, families, and friends from all walks of life. This year, the Crusaders are celebrating their 50th anniversary, and they are marking this impressive milestone with special events taking place all year.

I invite all members of the House of Assembly to join me in congratulating the 74th Crusaders on their 50th anniversary and in thanking them for their many contributions to our community.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

UNITED WAY: POVERTY REPORT - RECOG.

GARY BURRILL: I'd like to commend to the attention of the House the United Way Halifax report "United in Poverty Action: A Community Update," which was released in January and which I've tabled. The report is a five-year follow-up on the United Way and HRM's joint 2018 report on the same subject of poverty, dealing with changes in the landscape of income inadequacy from 2018 until now.

One of the key changes contributing to poverty currently in the HRM, the report points out, is in the area of rental housing, where we see, the authors write: "a growing trend in renovictions and fixed-term leases, whereby some landlords are removing existing tenants and replacing them with new tenants, enabling them to get around the . . . rent cap."

The report is to be commended to all members but particularly to those who continue to deny these realities around them.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth East.

KIN CLUB OF DART.: COM. SERV. - RECOG.

HON. TIM HALMAN: I rise to recognize the Kin Club of Dartmouth and the positive contributions they continue to make in the community of Dartmouth East.

One of the Kin Club's recent activities was the Christmas Miracle initiative, which provided gifts to more than 150 children, undoubtedly bringing joy and cheer to many households in Dartmouth. The Kin Club's dedication to spreading happiness is truly commendable, and it is heartening to see such a positive impact on the local community.

I ask the House to please join me in recognizing the Kin Club of Dartmouth for their ongoing efforts and positive impacts on Dartmouth. Their commitment to making a difference in the community is truly inspiring, and I wish them continued success in their future endeavors. I look forward to the next community breakfast by the Kin Club hosted at the East Dartmouth Community Centre.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

THOMAS, SCOTT: PH.D. COMPLETION - RECOG.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I rise in my place to recognize a long-time friend, Scott Thomas from Cape Breton, who has successfully defended his studies and obtained his Ph.D. in Justice Studies, with a focus on restorative justice, from Arizona State University.

Scott is the Human Rights Officer at Cape Breton University but has held many senior roles across the community in human rights and diversity. He's travelled and represented not only the island but Nova Scotia many times with his experience.

Scott has been a long-time friend of mine. We were elected to student government together way back when at Cape Breton University, but Scott has been on this journey to complete his Ph.D. He's a dear friend of mine, and I rise in my place to recognize Dr. Scott Thomas, Ph.D.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

AFGHAN. WAR MONUMENT: HONOURING VETS. - THANKS

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Today I rise to acknowledge the sacrifices of all veterans, particularly those who served and died in the war in Afghanistan.

On September 23, 2023, a new monument dedicated to the memory of the 158 Canadian Armed Forces members who died in Afghanistan was unveiled in downtown Amherst. Believed to be one of only a few such memorials in the country, the Afghanistan War Memorial stands in a newly created park in the shadow of a beautiful mural that honours the Nova Scotia Highlanders. The site is intended to provide a place of comfort for visitors to honour all those who lost their lives and to reflect upon how such sacrifices affect the freedoms we enjoy as everyday Canadians.

[9:45 a.m.]

It is believed there are over 100 Afghanistan veterans living in Cumberland County alone, with a great many more in the surrounding area and across the Maritimes. I would ask other members of the House to join me in thanking Justin McKay and members of the Amherst Royal Canadian Legion Branch 10, along with other members of the team that undertook this project.

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

SAFE HOUSING: NEED - RECOG.

LISA LACHANCE: Speaker, I rise to reflect on our collective failure to provide for all Nova Scotians. This morning is one of the coldest mornings this Winter in Halifax. This morning, the electricity supply in Grand Parade was shut off, removing heat and cooking options for the unhoused people living there. There remain about a dozen people in Grand Parade who have not been offered appropriate indoor shelter or housing options.

We can't say we didn't know. The unhoused people and families themselves have been vocal and persistent self-advocates. Service providers have told us - elected officials, the public - about the deep challenges they face in finding any service or any shelter that is suitable for unhoused Nova Scotians.

I ask all members to recommit to safe, adequate housing for all Nova Scotians.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Argyle.

SURETTE, CHERYL: BOOK PUBLIC. - CONGRATS.

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: Speaker, I rise today to recognize Cheryl Surette of Belleville on her first book, *Avery's Worst Day Ever*.

While publishing a book in itself is an accomplishment, Cheryl has not let living with a rare genetic disease, Alström syndrome, get in her way. Alström syndrome affects one's vision, hearing, kidneys, heart, and other major organs. As Cheryl puts it, "It's no walk in the park," but she uses her challenges to inspire others. *Avery's Worst Day Ever* is the first of a series Cheryl hopes to get under way as she shares her love of learning and reading with others.

I ask all members of this House to join me in congratulating Cheryl Surette on this remarkable accomplishment and wish her much success in the future.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour.

ATUANYA, CHIEF-INNOCENT (TONY): DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

HON. TONY INCE: Speaker, I rise today to remember a friend for almost 20 years, Tony Atuanya, born Chief-Innocent Atuanya in Nigeria. Tony immigrated to Canada in the 1970s. Tony attended Humber College, Carleton University, Saint Mary's University, Dalhousie University, and TUNS. He had an entrepreneurial spirit and was the owner and operator of Atcom Paving & Construction.

He went on to be Executive Director of the Watershed Association Development Enterprise Ltd. and was Property Manager for the Preston Area Housing Association. Tony was dedicated to his community, sitting on and chairing many boards. He was a member of the Saint Thomas United Baptist Church in North Preston. He came from a very large family of siblings all over the globe, and the family was his core.

I ask my colleagues to join me sending condolences to Tony's wife of 49 years, Roselene, and his children, grandchildren, and all those mourning his loss. He will be greatly missed.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

ADEQUATE HOUSING: ACTION NEEDED - RECOG.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, everyone has a right to a warm, safe, and affordable place to live. In Nova Scotia, current market rents are not affordable for very many people. Tents are not warm, especially on days like today and when the power is cut off to them, and shelters are not homes.

Since news that the tenting encampments were closing in HRM - or some of them - many people who have been living in tents in Halifax have migrated to Dartmouth North. On this morning, I'm thinking of the 25-plus dwellings on Green Road and the folks who are living in them.

I want to take this moment to urge the new Minister of Community Services to take immediate action to make sure that everyone in our province has appropriate and adequate housing immediately.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hants West.

CROFT, JENNA: CONSTITUENCY ASST. WORK - THANKS

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Speaker, I rise today to thank the wonderful Jenna Croft, who celebrated her first anniversary in the constituency office this past December. There is a lot to be said about what our constituency assistants are responsible for in the run of a day, and part-time help in our office has become a necessity.

Although I don't get to work as closely with Jenna as Ashley does, I can tell you that the flow of the office has improved drastically since her arrival. She keeps us organized, the office clean, and smiles on the constituents' faces with her warm demeanour, big heart, and incredible sense of humour.

That's not all. She is also crafty, often laminating our contact lists, decorating the office, and scrapbooking my journey as an MLA by saving news articles and the like. If there were a lottery for part-time help, I feel like I have won it.

Jenna, Ashley and I thank you for all that you do, because the constituency office just wouldn't be the same without you.

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

GABR, GHADA: BUS. AWD. NOMINATION - RECOG.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: Speaker, I rise today to start off Women's History Month and applaud the remarkable achievement of Ghada Gabr, who was recently nominated for Business Leader of the Year at the prestigious Halifax Business Awards. Ghada's nomination is a testament to her exceptional leadership and dedication to excellence.

As the associate owner of three Shoppers Drug Mart stores in HRM, including one in Fairview-Clayton Park, Ghada has demonstrated outstanding vision and innovation in her role. Beyond this, she serves as a coach and mentor to new owners, providing guidance and resources for their successful growth. Ghada Gabr's nomination for leader of the year is a well-deserved recognition of her exceptional contributions to the business community in Halifax. Her leadership, mentorship, and advocacy serve as an exemplary model for all of us. I urge my colleagues to join me in recognizing her on this prestigious nomination.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

HOUSING: NEED FOR ACTION - RECOG.

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, today the power has been disconnected to our friends and neighbours at Grand Parade. On a day like today, where the temperature is between -14C to -11C, it is unimaginable for folks to not have power or heat during these cold temperatures. Housing is a human right for all, and our neighbours who are unhoused deserve a safe, affordable, and permanent home. Our social services are supposed to work with organizations across the province to administer social programs, some of which are social assistance and affordable housing. Everyone sleeping outside needs permanent housing. We need to take action on creating this badly needed infrastructure because without it the housing crisis will continue.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings North.

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

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

JOHN LOHR: In the East Gallery are Dana and Peter Harrison. Peter is my hard-working assistant, who is known to most of you. He works very hard for me. Dana, his wife, like our families in politics for ourselves, makes many sacrifices for the amount of time and effort that Peter puts in - many late-night phone calls and emails. She makes many sacrifices for us - as a province, really - in letting Peter work as hard as he does. It's very appreciated, and her political acumen is also very appreciated. She has a good understanding of what's going on. Like all of us, we always appreciate the advice of our spouses. I know that Peter does, and I do. I want to thank them both. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings North.

ASHLEY, KATE: CDN. PARENTS FOR FRENCH VP - CONGRATS.

HON. JOHN LOHR: Speaker, I rise today to congratulate Kentville resident Kate Ashley on her position as the 2023-24 Canadian Parents for French National Vice President.

The Canadian Parents for French network is a national volunteer organization of parents, volunteers, and advocates dedicated to the promotion and creation of French as a second language learning for young Canadians.

Kate Ashley is currently Assistant Dean of Arts and an assistant professor at Acadia University. She is the former president of the Canadian Parents for French Nova Scotia branch board of directors, bringing more than 18 years of experience in community and Canadian Parents for French branch services to her new role.

Please join me today in congratulating Kate Ashley as the 2023-24 of Canadian Parents for French National Vice President.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

GOUGH, PETER: PARL. ARTIST LAUREATE ADVOC. - RECOG.

HON. KELLY REGAN: I want to salute a Nova Scotian artist whose dream recently came to fruition. Nearly a decade ago, Peter Gough had an idea to create a Parliamentary Visual Artist Laureate for Canada. He spoke to his MP about it, but the MP became Speaker of the House, so he couldn't sponsor the bill. Then Nova Scotia Senator Wilfred Moore championed the concept.

Once Senator Moore retired, the bill was then advanced by Senator Patricia Bovey. Meanwhile, Peter kept up the push for this position, even as he battled an aggressive form of cancer.

I will note that Nova Scotian Dr. George Elliott Clarke, himself a former Parliamentary Poet Laureate, wrote a poem in support of the concept. Sadly, Peter passed away in December 2020. In addition to his devoted wife Brenda and their family, Peter leaves behind an amazing body of frankly stunning work, as well as his idea.

I'm pleased to inform the House that the legislation creating a Parliamentary Visual Artist Laureate passed third reading in the House of Commons last month. Our friend Peter would be pleased.

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

BEC: FAREWELL ALUMNI CONCERT - RECOG.

KENDRA COOMBES: It is music night in Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier. Tonight, the Breton Education Centre will play host to a farewell alumni concert, part of the series of goodbyes to the 54-year-old Breton Education Centre building. BEC's school band teacher and Men of the Deeps conductor Stephen Muise is calling it "a celebration of our town, our school, and its wonderful musical tradition."

Tonight, 50 of BEC's school band alumni will take the stage to perform with BEC's current band members. Tickets were sold out ages ago, which is a testament to the people's excitement to hear generations of BEC band members perform. I know it's going to be an incredible evening, and I am disappointed to miss it.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

CUMB. CO. TEAM: PLAYOFFS - RECOG.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Speaker, I hope my colleagues from Inverness and Truro-Bible Hill-Millbrook-Salmon River are listening to this, because it's playoff time. The U-18 AA team from Cumberland County, after visiting Port Hood last Sunday, winning a 3-2 victory in less than one second left in the game, were off to the semifinals on Saturday against Truro.

I just want to give a shout-out to a team that I've been privileged to be involved with all season. They climbed their way up from near the bottom of the league to third place right now. I hear the person from Pictou County chirping, but we beat them out of the playoffs too.

I can't wait until Saturday afternoon to meet Truro in the semifinals. Fire up, boys, because we're going to the finals.

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

HAMMONDS PLAINS: HOUSE FIRE - RECOG.

HON. BEN JESSOME: On a more sombre note, I'd like to extend my thoughts and prayers to a family from Hammonds Plains that lost their house in a fire this week. I want to say thank you to the many community members who have already started to wrap their arms around this family.

After the year that we had, it was certainly a familiar experience that we are certainly uncomfortable with and hate to see, but I have to reiterate my gratitude to the many community members who have already started to reach out to the family to find ways to support them through what is yet another terrible tragedy. As I said, my sympathies and my thoughts go out to the family from Hammonds Plains that lost their house in the fire this week.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Colchester North.

ROBERTS, MARILYN: COM. SERV. - RECOG.

TOM TAGGART: I rise to recognize the outstanding volunteerism of Marilyn Roberts from Tatamagouche. Marilyn has been a dedicated volunteer along the North Shore for many years, serving as the first and only statistician for every hockey game played in the North Shore Recreation Centre for four years. This includes games with the North Shore Minor Hockey Junior C and rural hockey.

Much of her free time has been devoted to the rink. Marilyn was a founding member of the North Shore Skating Club, where she taught figure skating and power skating.

She has actively participated in fundraising projects and contributed to the improvement of our community. I commend her for her unwavering support and commitment to the North Shore Recreation Centre and to the people of Tatamagouche and that area.

THE SPEAKER: Order. It is now 10:00 a.m. We will start Oral Questions Put by Members to Ministers, and we will be done in 50 minutes.

[10:00 a.m.]

ORDERS OF THE DAY

ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM.: GIVING UP ON FAMILY DOCTORS - EXPLAIN

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: When the Premier was in Opposition, he said there was a health care crisis when 60,000 Nova Scotians didn't have a family doctor. That number has now skyrocketed in two years to over 153,000 Nova Scotians without a family doctor.

It seems that the government is giving up on the family doctor practice model. We see that in the numbers; we also see that in the words of the minister and the Premier, where they have said that the old days of having one patient for a family doctor are over. Another reference to that model as being part of the old days. We see it in comments from department officials, when they said that in the old days, we had one physician that we went to on a regular basis. Those days are now over; Nova Scotians need to get over it.

I would like to ask the Premier: Why is he giving up on getting Nova Scotians a family doctor?

THE PREMIER: This is not a government that gives up on anything. We keep going. Nova Scotians are worth the effort. They're worth the urgency.

Nova Scotians will remember a former government that made a promise to them: a doctor for every Nova Scotian. There was never a plan to deliver on that. It was a political catchphrase. It was a misguided political statement. We want people to know that this government is committed to making sure that when they need care, it will be there where they need it, when they need it.

The world is changing. The access-to-care model is changing. There are health homes, there is virtual care, but Nova Scotians should note that this government is committed to fixing the mess that we inherited, that Nova Scotians inherited. We will fix the health care system.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Talk about a PR stunt: fixing health care when more than twice as many people don't have a family doctor, and beating your chest and patting yourself on the back as a result of that. There are consequences to people not having a family doctor in the health care system. Also in getting things like kidneys from live donors donated to save lives for people who need dialysis and who have kidney failure. We see

that here in Nova Scotia, where people hoping to donate a kidney actually need a family doctor and a primary care provider.

My question to the Premier: Does he see the impacts that people not having a family doctor have on peoples' lives and on the health care system overall?

THE PREMIER: This is the real crux of the issue, and it demonstrates a complete lack of understanding in how the health care system works. The former Minister of Health and Wellness has no clue how the health system works, and really no understanding and no care. We know that from the system we inherited.

What I will say is that we are making sure that Nova Scotians have access to care. That's why we passed the Patient Access to Care Act. The members opposite - I hear them. They'll remember they filibustered that bill. They tried to hold that bill up, and then in the end, what did they do? They voted for it, because they didn't know what they were doing, but they did know that we know what we're doing, Speaker. Additional scope of practice, primary care clinics, there are ways for Nova Scotians to access care. We are communicating those messages to Nova Scotians. They're trying to instill fear in people; we're here to support Nova Scotians.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, here's what I know about the health care system: The more people who have a family doctor, the better. The more pressures taken off specialists, the more pressure taken off our ERs - more people who want to donate kidneys to save their loved ones' lives can actually do that when they have a family doctor.

This Premier brags about how much money they're spending. It's like hiring a contractor to fix your house and the pipes get worse, the roof is leaking more, and the contractor says to you: Don't worry; look at all the money I'm spending. That's the answer that the Premier gives us. Yes, he passed that bill, and what's gotten better? We have exponentially more people without a family doctor. The wait times now in Nova Scotia are twice the national average, and more people are dying in our ERs.

My question to the Premier: Does the Premier not understand that giving up on a family doctor model is having a negative impact on our health care system and patients' lives?

THE PREMIER: We will not give up on Nova Scotians like the former government did. We will not give up on Nova Scotians.

Just in the month of January, I think it was in the range of 50,000 additional appointments through pharmacies, pharmacy primary care clinics, virtual care, and urgent treatment centres. We are opening up access to care, and we are informing Nova Scotians through an app that they can put in their hands and find it.

I will tell you this: We are focused on supporting Nova Scotians. We focus on moving this province forward, while that government focused on concealing misappropriation of taxpayer money. We're focused on doing what's right. They're focused on hiding their wrongdoings.

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

PREM.: INCOME ASSISTANCE - INDEX

CLAUDIA CHENDER: In a budget where the tax relief has disproportionately benefited high-earning individuals and developers, a one-time \$150 cheque and a failure to index income assistance just seems cruel.

Yesterday, the Minister of Community Services justified this decision by saying that year over year, indexing is usually about \$10, \$15, or \$20. What they decided is that it's better to put a lump sum in people's pockets.

I have to ask about that math. Based on last year's inflation, a single adult would have seen \$300 this year from indexing. Is the Premier leaving thousands of Nova Scotians behind based on some bad math?

THE PREMIER: We know - and we feel as a compassionate government - the need to do everything we can to support Nova Scotians. That's why we've increased income assistance rates by \$300 per month for those who are not able to attach to the workforce. That's why we have allowed those who are expected, with our help, to reattach to the workforce and who are on income assistance to be able to keep more of the money they earn to support them as they reattach to the workforce.

We are doing what we can. There's always more to be done. I find it interesting and appreciate what my colleague, the minister, said when he pointed out that we've done more in that one thing and he did more as minister in one week than the NDP did in five years. That math is not being challenged because it's absolutely true.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: While this government celebrates a top-up for some recipients, which is in fact an adherence to a court decision - thank you for complying with the law - and a small one-time top-up, the fact of the matter is that income assistance rates in this province are too low to live on. They land people in food banks, in hospitals, and ultimately in tents and shelters. We have the second-lowest income assistance rates in Canada. They are thousands of dollars lower than in other provinces.

This is the third budget where the government has not indexed those rates. When will the government allow Department of Community Services workers to start giving clients adequate support and stop having to hand them tents?

THE PREMIER: Yes, this government does comply with the law. Strangely, that's an oddity in this Chamber, but we do comply with the law.

This budget has \$16.5 billion of investments going into the hands of Nova Scotians - investments in Nova Scotians. We're proud of the work that we are able to do to support Nova Scotians. We know that there's more work to be done. We will continue to invest in Nova Scotians in every possible way we can.

That increase to income assistance for those who are not able to return to the workforce is a significant investment. It dwarfs anything that any government did before ours.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: With \$16.5 billion, they couldn't index income assistance. People sleeping rough in our province receive the lowest available income assistance rate: \$380 per month. Food, necessities, and medication costs alone are more than this, let alone housing.

Advocates are perplexed by the lack of action being taken right now, given the current rate of inflation. Can the Premier explain why all income assistance recipients can't get the same amount, to at least give people a fighting chance to get back on their feet?

THE PREMIER: Of course we know, and I know that the Opposition likes to ignore this simple fact, but as a government we have chosen to do a number of targeted supports that are in addition to income assistance - targeted supports to help people and meet them where we can meet them.

I will acknowledge that there is lots of work to do and, as government, we do what we can. We always wish we could do more, but we do what we can. This is a budget that is about building up Nova Scotia. It's about supporting Nova Scotians. It's about investing in Nova Scotians.

I hope that the member opposite can get behind Nova Scotians, like we are, like Nova Scotians are, and push this province forward.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

FTB: HEALTH CARE STATS - IMPROVE

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, again the Premier talks about how much money is being spent. They cannot point to outcomes improving. He says they inherited a mess in health care. Here's what they inherited: a Need a Family Practice Registry that wasn't even at 70,000 people. Here's what else they inherited, lower wait times, better off-load wait times. They inherited more emergency departments that have been cut down, that have been shut down under this government.

The system is getting worse, and they are bragging about spending more.

My question to the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board is: When he looks at the amount of money that has been spent in health care, he looks at the outcomes that they are achieving with patients who need a family doctor, with wait times, with people dying in ERs, what statistics is he looking at to say Nova Scotians are getting a good return on investment?

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Speaker, as Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, I certainly concern myself with the numbers, but do you know what else I concern myself with? People.

The last government was very good at holding the line. What they ended up doing was holding the line on people's care. It resulted in great inefficiencies in the system. I'll give you just one example in the 20 seconds I have left: nursing home beds empty because there weren't enough staff, hospital beds full of people who should be in nursing home beds, four times the cost to have somebody in a hospital bed as a nursing home bed, and ambulances sitting outside hospitals unable to deliver their patients because the hospital beds were filled with people who should have been in nursing home beds.

ZACH CHURCHILL: What the minister doesn't recognize is the investment in home care, which is the most cost-effective way to support people in continuing care, which is where most people want to be who can, and this government is taking from home care for this as well.

THE SPEAKER: Order, order. There's a lot of chirping. The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Thank you, Speaker. Money is about people and where people's hard-earned tax dollars go is important. We're talking about outcomes for people when it comes to health care.

We look at the \$464 million that this Finance and Treasury Board Minister spent for a nursing recruitment and retention bonus that we were told was going to bring 2,000 nurses back to the system - it brought 148. That's a cost of over \$3 million per new nurse to the system.

Does the Finance and Treasury Board Minister believe that this is a good return on investment for people?

ALLAN MACMASTER: Speaker, there's all kinds of achievements that I know our Health and Wellness Minister, our Seniors and Long-term Care Minister and our Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health have been making. I don't have time in 30 seconds to list them all. We listed a lot of them yesterday in the Budget Speech.

There have been a lot of improvements for people. We are a growing province. We're getting results and at the end of the day it's results that matter to Nova Scotians. My conscience is clear that we are doing everything we can. As Finance and Treasury Board Minister, 36 per cent more for health care than the last government budgeted is a massive increase and there are massive changes happening. The proof is right before our eyes.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

DHW: AMBULANCE OFF-LOAD TIMES - REDUCE

HON. KELLY REGAN: A recent FOIPOP by the Liberal caucus revealed some disturbing trends in ambulance coverage off-load times across our province. According to the information provided by Emergency Health Services, in January 2024 the average wait times spiked in many areas of our province. At the Dartmouth General Hospital, the average wait time was 209 minutes; that's three and a half hours. At the Cape Breton Regional Hospital, the average off-load time was 201 minutes, more than three hours. At the Halifax Infirmary it was 187 minutes, again more than three hours. At the South Shore Regional Hospital, it was 119 minutes, which is two hours. I'll table that. Is this what the government means by more care, faster?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: This is a really great opportunity for me to talk about some of the more recent investments that we've made in the EHS System. One of the things that I'm really pleased about and proud of is the Emergency Medical Responder Program that will start in March - this month - of this year.

This is a regulated health care professional who is used in a couple of other jurisdictions across the country. These individuals will be trained and regulated by the College of Paramedics of Nova Scotia, and they will be able to work in a couple of different places. They'll be able to work in off-load, as an example, to support patients, to get our paramedics back on the road. They'll also be able to do some low-acuity transports as well, and they'll also be able to work with a paramedic to extend our paramedics.

We're really excited about this program. We've worked very closely with the college, as well as the regulator and the provider . . .

KELLY REGAN: The emergency health system is in crisis in this province. Our paramedics are devastated by the government's failure to listen to them. It's a stressful job, so what's the government's solution? Reduce the expertise in ambulances. Spread paramedics thinner. When this minister took over the Department of Health and Wellness, she bragged: "I'm going to tell you right now: things are going to get better every day under this government." It has not.

[10:15 a.m.]

There are 153,000 people on the doctor wait-list. They doubled the wait-list. The ambulances are lined up. I can tell the minister that it's not better. Listen to the paramedics on the ground. Like she promised to do, do better.

MICHELLE THOMPSON: I can tell you that we spent a lot of time out in the field. I never saw the former Minister of Health and Wellness out talking to people on a regular basis in all my eight years. We spend a ton of time in the field, as does . . . (interruption).

THE SPEAKER: Order. The honourable Minister of Health and Wellness has the floor.

MICHELLE THOMPSON: We spent a ton of time. We had a really great process, and we were able to give our paramedics a significant raise in January. We're looking at expanding their scope of practice. For the first time, we have a physician, a nurse, and a paramedic in our comms centre. We now actually have video linkage to support our paramedics in the field.

Paramedics are improving the health care system in our province. I'm very proud of the work that we're doing with paramedics, and I cannot wait until Budget Estimates. I hope I have 20 hours.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

DHW: VOL. FIREFIGHTERS - SUPPORT

CARMAN KERR: Recently, volunteer firefighters responded to a tragic accident in my community. I quote one of the first responders: "Last night I sat in the back of an RCMP cruiser with a severely injured young boy. I felt helpless, wondering if this child was going to die on my lap while we waited for an ambulance."

These firefighters were confronted with severely injured, including three young children. I know this family - the same age as my kids. They requested multiple ambulances, and almost two hours later, one arrived.

This long wait for emergency support unfortunately has become the norm, not the exception. Firefighters from multiple departments throughout Annapolis tell me they've participated in several medical emergencies recently where the response time has been 60 minutes and more.

The Premier just said that care would be there . . .

THE SPEAKER: Question.

CARMAN KERR: My question is: How will the minister and the Premier ensure the department ensures this never happens again?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Unfortunately, I'm not able to speak about individual cases on the floor of the Legislature, which I know folks are well aware of. We are aware that our system can be strained. We know that there are a number of paramedics who have left the system, but we are training more paramedics. As an example, we are introducing EMRs to support our paramedics. We are introducing field supports. We're working with medical first responder departments to make sure that they have the access to the training and the education they need.

We are very committed. We meet with EHS on a regular basis. We have moved to a more regulatory process in the Department of Health and Wellness. I can assure the members in the Chamber that we are on this file all the time. We're working very hard. Really proud of the recent contract. It will do a lot to support paramedics throughout this province.

CARMAN KERR: The decision on this night was made to transfer this young boy in the back of an RCMP cruiser, with two firefighters providing medical assistance. They were instructed by EHS to stand down and wait in the parking lot of a church, as they were not approved to transport patients.

Government's non-action on emergency care in Annapolis has placed firefighters in a precarious legal and ethical position. Do they decide to wait and have a Nova Scotian possibly succumb to their injury, or do they attempt to transport the patient to the nearest hospital, two hours away?

Will the Premier and the Minister of Health and Wellness commit today to meeting with these volunteer firefighters, and to hearing directly from them about their experiences and what they are requesting for supports?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: What I do want to say is that as soon as folks call 911, there is a dispatcher who can actually help triage and move those calls to the appropriate provider, whether that be a physician or a nurse in the comms centre, and actually support people in doing constant re-triage and triage in the department. I do know that the company, as well as the regulator in the Department of Health and Wellness, has reached out to meet with the fire departments in a number of different areas, and certainly in the member opposite's constituency that will happen.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

FTB: AUDITOR GENERAL FUNDING - INCREASE

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board. The Auditor General's budget request for increased funding for health audits was unanimously approved at a recent committee meeting. The idea of additional health auditors actually comes from this government's election platform and the Health and Wellness Minister's own mandate letter, but despite this committee's approval, it is inexplicably missing from the budget.

Can the minister explain why this election promise and mandate is going unfulfilled?

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Speaker, it's not missing from the budget, and it's not missing as a platform commitment unfulfilled either. The commitment has been fulfilled. We created this extra resource capacity for the Auditor General because we believe in the importance of auditing what's happening in health care, because we want to see continuous improvement. We see the Auditor General's Office as playing a role in that. We actually stuck to what we committed to in our election platform, and that office is now staffed as we had committed to in our election campaign.

SUSAN LEBLANC: The Auditor General was approved by the special committee for \$1.1 million and received \$200,000 extra this year. Last year, she asked for extra money and she got not nearly what she asked for.

This is unreal, in the face of this government yesterday tabling a budget that again allocated its bulk of spending toward health care at a whopping \$7.3 billion. (Applause) Yes, yes. Great, great.

With this level of investment, and in the midst of the scandal that is the Hogan Court health hotel, it's more important than ever to have the independent eyes of the Auditor General to ensure that the government is accountable and transparent in their health care spending.

My question to the minister: If the minister believes his government's spending is all above-board, why won't he provide the funds to the Auditor General that she asks for?

ALLAN MACMASTER: No other government before has provided these resources to the Auditor General's Office. That's a fact. Nobody did it before. We're open to doing it. We did it. We did what we said we would do in the election campaign.

There are a lot of asks - believe me. We had well over another billion dollars of spending asks that we could have said yes to, but we said yes to a lot of things in the budget yesterday. One of them was further increases in the health budget, because that is our focus as a government, and there was something new: There was tax relief for Nova Scotians.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

DHW: EMERG. CARE ACCESS - IMPROVE

CARMAN KERR: Speaker, my plea to the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board would be to take that budget and put it into acute and emergency response times in Annapolis and rural Nova Scotia. The recent AG report on ground ambulance service reports that this service is in a critical state. Two of the main key factors are patient off-load delays at hospitals and emergency department closures.

This government closed my emergency department in Annapolis Royal. Ambulances are not permitted to attend at Soldiers Memorial Hospital on most cases. We've gone from 336 hours of coverage in Summer 2021 to 18 hours of coverage per week. It's a two-hour drive to Yarmouth. It's an hour and a half to Kentville.

My question is: When will paramedics and 18,000 residents of Annapolis have reasonable access to emergency care?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: We've been working very closely with Mid Valley Recruitment, as an example, in the member opposite's riding, to look at how we can better staff those hospitals in his area - Annapolis, as well as Soldiers Memorial. We work very closely with clinicians. In fact, those hours are in collaboration with clinicians who, if we had not worked with them in a very intentional manner, felt that they were no longer able to work at all.

I'm very proud of the work that has happened in NSHA to enable those providers to stay on longer. We've actually looked at the EHS system. We now have a paramedic course that's in Yarmouth to support building the workforce in Western Zone. There are a number of initiatives that are under way. I would hope that the member opposite would be working with Mid Valley Recruitment to have a positive narrative about the communities in which he lives, in order for us to improve . . .

CARMAN KERR: I'm happy to have volunteered on physician recruitment the last number of years and will continue to do so.

Paramedics are hard-working, professional, dedicated, and typically apologetic when they arrive on scene. They should never be apologizing on behalf of the government and EMCI. The AG's report on ground transportation was released a few months ago, and I quote: "EMCI submits a monthly exemption report to the Department, which lists the specific calls where on-time performance was not met . . ." - 45,604 cases of exceptions that were not met. This government admitted that exemptions submitted weren't reviewed and automatically approved because of a mutual agreement that EMCI would not be held accountable.

The firefighters are accountable. The paramedics are accountable. Why would government and EMCI agree not to be accountable?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: The issue around the contract, which was signed by the former Minister of Health and Wellness and current Leader of the Official Opposition, is that those things were not clearly identified in the previous contract. We are working very hard. We have moved to a regulatory process in the Department of Health and Wellness. We have our own data now. We are working with individuals. They are former paramedics - in fact, some people who helped negotiate that contract on the other side and were obviously better negotiators than the former government. Here we have people with deep knowledge of the system, deep knowledge of how we can improve the system. We continue to do the best we can with the tool that we have. When we have an opportunity to re-evaluate and renegotiate that contract, we will.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

DHW: PHYSIOTHERAPY AFTER MASTECTOMIES - IMPLEMENT

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Speaker, I had the pleasure of meeting Erin, a local physiotherapist in my area, who spoke to me about the great benefits of physiotherapy for women recovering from mastectomies. Unfortunately, this is not covered in Nova Scotia for this purpose. I'm actually confused, and I would like to ask the Minister of Health and Wellness - because 10 or 12 years ago, I actually was a medical interpreter for a patient who had a mastectomy, and it was offered. I'm truly not sure, and I've been trying to find out if it is offered or not.

Will the minister commit to looking at physiotherapy for women who have had mastectomies?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Certainly, I can look into the protocols following discharge. I really don't have those off the top of my head. I do know that we have publicly funded physiotherapy in all of our hospitals across this province. We're also looking at how we can incorporate physiotherapy into the collaborative care clinics across the province - health homes. I don't really understand the question, to be honest, and I can certainly speak afterwards.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I thank the minister. If I could just take this moment to explain that after a mastectomy, especially if they remove the lymph nodes, you cannot use your arm. I was lucky because I actually remembered some of the exercises that I interpreted. I used them and I had a friend who helped me, but a lot of women do not have movement of their arm after these mastectomies, and they take it as normal. It's not normal, and it can be helped with one or two sessions of physiotherapy, allowing them the right exercises to strengthen the muscles. I hope the minister will look at this and help women after surgery.

[10:30 a.m.]

MICHELLE THOMPSON: Certainly there are discharge protocols that we would, as a health care team in acute care, follow. I know now that often many of the mastectomies are done in a day-surgery environment and it could be, in fact, that because of the type of exercises that are required - I am familiar with them - that maybe the nurses are doing some of those discharge planning techniques.

We can certainly look at the discharge planning to better understand what information is given, but this is the point of having a team environment where perhaps a physiotherapist describes and creates a care pathway and it doesn't actually need to be a physiotherapist who teaches those simple but necessary and important exercises when, in fact, the discharge nurse can do that. I will look into it for the member.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

DHW: PET SCANNER FOR C.B. - UPDATE

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: The Minister of Health and Wellness knows this question is coming. This is Year 3. The community continues to rally. You see the construction of our cancer centre in Cape Breton. A lot of people are involved with that - our medical community, construction sector - and the community continues to rally, but I am going to ask the question again. We are still waiting on an answer from this government for a positron emission tomography (PET) scanner for the cancer centre. This is three years I've been asking this question. We have the community rallying, raising money, and they want an update.

My question to the Minister of Health and Wellness: Can she update the House today on the conversations about a PET scanner for our new cancer centre?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: I appreciate the question from the member. I know he has asked it several times. This was an election promise that was spoken about in August of 2021. The issue was never really about purchasing the equipment itself; it is around the operation of it. As I've said before, it has very specialized reagent that has a half-life and so we need to look at a certain piece of equipment - the name of which I cannot pull off the tip of my tongue right now - in order for us to make sure that if there is a PET scanner in Sydney, we have the appropriate infrastructure to support it. The creation of reagent that has a half-life is very complicated. It requires a specialty staff member; it requires a certain type of machinery, and these things are not easy.

Those conversations carry on and I will continue to have conversations with the Nova Scotia Health Authority about our ability to deliver.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I can appreciate the complexity of it, and these are the conversations that we had when we were in government as well. A commitment was made to the community. Not politically, but because the community was rallying to purchase the equipment. You have residents from Cape Breton and beyond who are committed to this, who are committed to the project, and there are some complexities around it.

For me, we know that there are hundreds of people who could use that PET scan who can't make that trip here, and that's not just Cape Breton. That is all over the province. The minister has provided updates, but I think it's time that at least a timeline is put on this so the folks on the ground at home who are rallying to do this can find out once and for all what the timeline is for an answer.

My question to the minister: Can she at least provide some sort of timeline on her update to the community about whether this PET scanner is going to happen?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: I will say that we have been looking at ways in which we can make it easier for people who are from faraway areas in order to access PET scanners. The purchase and the implementation of the fixed-wing transfer unit allows people from our farthest flung areas - Cape Breton, Yarmouth - to be able to come to the city in order to access treatments. A fixed-wing aircraft is one example of ways that we can accommodate that has put 5,200 hours of ground transport back into the system as a result.

We know that there are people who are waiting for a timeline. I don't have that right now. Not only is it the reagent material, we need to look at the availability of staffing. Unfortunately I don't have that with me today.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

SNS: HEAT FUND CUT - EXPLAIN

GARY BURRILL: My question is for the Minister of Service Nova Scotia. Six weeks ago, the government announced that eligibility for the Home Energy Assistance Top-up, HEAT, Fund, which people could get \$400 from towards their oil bills, was being cut to every second year, making everyone who received it last year ineligible to get it now.

The government says this is because the program originally was for every second year, and they are just going back now to how it used to be. We know all of that, but what we don't know and what I want to ask the minister is: What made the government think that January, February, March of 2024 would be a good time to cut back on heating assistance to the people of Nova Scotia?

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: We know that many Nova Scotians are struggling, and that's why we work very hard to deliver targeted supports. The government's

investment in the HEAT Fund program, that's a collaboration with Nova Scotia Power as well as the Salvation Army which administers the program being one, Speaker. As I've shared with the House before, that was a temporary change. This change that we brought forward again this year was communicated last year to those who had received it previously and allows new people to be eligible for the program.

That said, there are a number of other programs that we continue to invest in Nova Scotians. We know there is more work to do, and we'll continue to do that.

GARY BURRILL: Speaker, this cut is particularly miserable because it came just three months after another \$400 in heating assistance was cut from a different heating help program, the Heating Assistance Rebate Program, which went from \$1,000 to \$600.

Now we're getting into the real hard old going of the heating season. Most houses take three tanks or so a year. March is the third tank time. The \$400 from the HEAT Fund, the \$400 from HARP, would have bought about half of that third tank but, as it is, there is one pile of households that don't know where that is going to come from.

The government reported a \$40 million surplus yesterday and I want to ask: Did it not cross anybody's mind that this would have been an awfully good time to put both of those \$400s back?

COLTON LEBLANC: I want to reassure the member opposite that we work very hard every single day to make lives better for Nova Scotians and build up a province that's better and more welcoming for everybody. That said, I am very proud of the investments that are in the 2024-2025 budget. There's a lot of hard work that has gone into it.

The minister has listed off a number of initiatives. Budget 2024-25 demonstrates two things: We are listening, and we are committed to acting. We are committed to acting and working on building a stronger province. I hope the member opposite supports this budget.

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

SLTC: DEMENTIA PATIENT SAFETY - IMPROVE

LORELEI NICOLL: It's very difficult to stand here in this House and believe that health care is being fixed when we all continually hear of personal stories from Nova Scotians on a daily basis. I want to highlight one in particular who contacted my office to let me know that her husband, who was in long-term care, was allowed to leave his long-term care facility by a security guard, even though he had dementia.

Sadly, while he was out, her husband fell and he passed away. As you can imagine, this caused great stress and anxiety for the entire family. I asked her: What would you like me to ask to the Minister of Seniors and Long-term Care?

To the minister: What is being done to increase safety so those with dementia are not let out by security of long-term care homes?

HON. BARBARA ADAMS: I thank the member for this important question. While I can't speak to specific circumstances, what I can tell the member is that one of the challenges in the past was not having enough staffing in long-term care. That's why one of the first things we did was commit to the highest staffing level in the country of 4.1 hours of care.

We also needed a lot of staff in order to reach that staffing level. That's why we committed to 2,000 continuing care assistants getting free training. We are almost at that 2,000 mark now, Speaker.

We didn't stop there. We also need licensed practical nurses, so we have a free CCA to LPN course that is going on in Truro right now. There are a number of other initiatives to try to improve safety in all of our facilities.

LORELEI NICOLL: I thank you for the answer from the minister but when the family met with management at the long-term care home, the only action taken was to fire that staff person and security person.

The woman asked me: Would it be possible if the residents could have an ID or something like a bracelet, something that would prevent them from leaving long-term care facilities? Is a system being considered to keep more dementia patients in the province safe in long-term care?

BARBARA ADAMS: Certainly one of the things that we're challenged with in long-term care is that there's a continual increase in the number of people with dementia and challenging behaviours. We have increased the number of programs across the province to train staff in this new area. It's one of the changes we just announced for the CCA program: There is increased training for continuing care assistants for dementia, as well as for challenging behaviours.

One of the other things is that these are people's homes. In my nursing home, Ocean View Continuing Care Centre, there are two dementia wings that are locked wings. Some nursing homes have that ability and others don't. We are always open to speaking with family members who have these concerns.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth on a new question.

DHW: OVARIAN CANCER RESEARCH FUNDING - INCREASE

LORELEI NICOLL: Ovarian cancer is a huge issue that affects many people in our province. The consequences are deadly, and we need to increase research to ensure we can cure such deadly cancers that affect so many women.

In 2019, the former government for health care funded ovarian cancer research by \$1 million. After meeting with Dr. Jeannette Boudreau, who was so grateful for that, and her amazing researchers at Dalhousie University, we know they asked for another \$1 million from this government to expand their research. I don't see the funding in the budget. My question to the Minister of Health and Wellness: Does the minister intend to support ovarian cancer research with similar funding?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: I recently met with folks related to ovarian cancer as well. As we do, we look at our budget and what we're able to do. I had a great conversation with a couple of folks at that meeting, and we will continue to work with them and understand what the needs of the program are.

Currently the research that's happening here is exciting and country-leading, and I was very pleased to be able to get acquainted with the individuals as well as the research that's under way. I think there will be more to say in the future.

LORELEI NICOLL: It was. I attended Dalhousie University, and we, along with the member for Clatyon Park West, were really amazed. To actually see the active research being done at Dalhousie is incredible. I want to thank their team. I can't emphasize enough how much \$1 million - it doesn't sound like very much in a health care system where women's health is not very well focused on.

I am sure, even though it's not in the budget, the \$1 million can be found, and I would like the minister to commit to that \$1 million to continue the great research that's being done at Dalhousie.

MICHELLE THOMPSON: As we always do, we work closely with our clinicians to understand the pressures in their programs. There are a number of requests that come in to us around funding different research opportunities, different therapeutics, and different technologies. We continue to look at the demands that are in front of us, and we continue to make those decisions on an ongoing basis.

We'll continue discussions with our clinicians. We also work with the Atlantic Clinical Trials Network, through the Nova Scotia Health Innovation Hub, and with our partners in the Department of Advanced Education. There are a number of ways in which we get feedback from our research clinicians across the province.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

DHW: FAMILY PHYSICIAN RECRUITMENT - UPDATE

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: My question is for the Minister of Health and Wellness. Every day I have patients contacting my office, asking me what to do because they don't have a family doctor. Some people have a new onset of symptoms, and they may go to the pharmacy clinic, try virtual care, or go to the emergency room. They often have diagnostic tests ordered, and then they're contacting my office to say, Nobody is following up. What do I do? Where do I go?

I have other people who don't have a family doctor who say, I have chronic diseases, diabetes or cancer. I have no family doctor. I have no one to manage my care. The number of family physicians in Amherst is continuing to decrease. Just last month, we had someone else announce they're moving to another province.

Can the minister please tell the House when the people of Amherst and area can expect to see progress with recruitment of family physicians?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: There are a couple things. Anyone who is on the Need a Family Practice Registry should reach out and make sure they have access to virtual care. If the virtual care provider feels you need to be seen in person, we have 19 primary care clinics to which you can be referred in a very timely fashion, and if your care requires it, you will be followed by that primary care clinic until you're attached permanently to a health home. We know that people want family physicians, but we also want them to have access to pharmacists, to nurses, to nurse practitioners, to physios, to social workers.

There was a collaborative care clinic that was recently opened. The member for Cumberland South and I were there to be able to open that recently, so we will continue to look at how we can support all Nova Scotians in terms of accessing care.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: It is a heavy burden to bear, I have to say, especially when you know people are struggling and they need help, and they don't know where to go to get it. The fact is that most people don't know to call their MLA office to find out how to navigate the health care system. The reality is that a lot of people do try to access care through virtual health and either can't get an appointment and then can't afford Maple, which is often encouraged for them to try.

We do need family doctors in this province, Speaker. That's a fact. We need them in Pugwash and area, we need them in Amherst and area. We need to look at hiring physician recruitment companies to help - experts in the field.

My question to the Minister of Health and Wellness: Can the minister please tell us when we will expect to see more family doctors in this province, especially in the Pugwash area, which has a new hospital opening but no family doctors to man it?

[10:45 a.m.]

MICHELLE THOMPSON: There are recruitment efforts under way with the Office of Healthcare Professionals Recruitment, as well as with Nova Scotia Health Authority. There are two physician recruiters who were very successful in the Northern Zone, and in fact are doing very well in regard to their recruitment efforts.

People do not have to pay for Maple if they're on the Need a Family Practice Registry. That's not true. Anyone who is on the Need a Family Practice Registry gets virtual care through Virtual Care Nova Scotia for free. In fact, all Nova Scotians are now able to access virtual care: two appointments per year for them, free of charge. Cost is not a barrier.

The app is also very important because, to the member's point, that is what will help them navigate the health care system and find out the closest way for them to access care. We also have 10,000 patients in Nova Scotia who are now able to access their diagnostic imaging and lab tests on that app.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

DHW: MIDWIFERY IMPORTANCE - RECOGNIZE

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, midwifery-led births account for only 5 per cent of total births in Nova Scotia, far below the national average of 14 per cent, and I can table that. This is a disservice for expectant mothers in Nova Scotia, given many positive health outcomes associated. Midwifery support leads to more natural births, a decrease in C-sections and surgical interventions, easier breastfeeding initiation, and it decreases the chance of having a pre-term birth. Not only does it take the stress off new moms, but it also takes stress off our hospitals.

Does the Minister of Health and Wellness recognize the importance of midwifery care in our health care system?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: I spoke about this yesterday in the Chamber. Certainly, midwives have a role to play in prenatal, obstetrical, and gynecological care. In fact, there are things that they can do around supporting women's wellness.

We have a couple of areas outside of the city. IWK has some midwives, and we do have some areas. It certainly is not easy to maintain the staffing complement in those areas. We're also making sure that midwives are part of a team. We need to ensure that they have nurses who are around them. We need to make sure they have primary care physicians who do obstetrics. We need to make sure they have specialty services to support them. Yes, many deliveries are usual and regular, but we need to make sure that they have the infrastructure around them.

We do continue to look at women's health issues, and we'll continue to assess the situation as we move forward.

SUSAN LEBLANC: As the minister's response shows, it's hard to ignore the benefits of midwives that they add to our health care system. Investment in midwives is simply a smart policy, yet there are only 16 funded positions and 3 practices in the province. Many communities across Nova Scotia, as the minister said, lack essential midwifery care. The budget yesterday was a missed opportunity for this government to address the critical shortage. Why is this government not investing in midwives?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: Nova Scotians are not missing out on good, quality, excellent obstetrical and gynecological care in this province, and midwives are a part of that team, but they are not the only members on that team. We know that midwives play a role. We have 16 positions. To date, they have been very difficult to date to fill. We continue to work with Nova Scotia Health and IWK to better understand how to support them.

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

Before we move on, I just want to acknowledge an observation that I made during Question Period - for the Speaker to try to stay on time and to be fair to everyone.

What I notice is that the Opposition wants extra time if their question is going over. I try to accommodate if it's not going over too far. Yet we want to have an answer. What I notice is that sometimes Opposition wants that extra time to ask the question, but they don't want to give the extra time to hear the answer. It's Question Period, I realize that, but what I notice is that I'm getting some looks, so do you want me to give you the extra time to ask the question?

I'm just trying my best. I want to recognize that, and just let you know... (interruptions). Order. I am trying my very best to make sure that you are also getting to hear the answer.

As well, to let everyone know - a gentle reminder about your statements. Again, it's really hard when you're introducing people - you know, it takes time. But it's taking time from your own colleagues to have an opportunity as well to get their member statements in. It's really hard for me to cut you off. I don't want to cut you off when you have guests in the gallery. That would be really rude of me. At the same time, there are others who are not getting their member statements in. Just a gentle reminder to be cognizant of that.

The honourable Government House Leader.

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

GOVERNMENT MOTIONS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Speaker, would you please call Resolution 912, respecting referral of Estimates.

Resolution No. 912 - Respecting the Referral of Estimates on Supply

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member will have 46 minutes remaining in the Official Opposition's response to the Budget in Address.

The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

FRED TILLEY: I'm pleased to stand today and continue the brief response or address to the budget. There's one thing that I wanted to clarify a little bit from yesterday's Question Period. There is, indeed, a reduction in the spend in this budget on housing. The minister indicated to one of our members during Question Period that maybe they should get an accounting lesson, et cetera.

Well, I would throw that back, considering the budget for 2023-24 was \$554 million and the actual spend was \$712 million, which is a difference of \$158 million, or 30 per cent. When we're underbudgeting a department by 30 per cent, I think that constitutes as maybe not knowing what we're doing in that area or that spend, because we've considerably underbudgeted. Therefore, a forecast this year of \$712 million with a budget for next year of \$680 million, which is indeed a reduction of \$32 million.

I would argue that we would take this year's spend and apply a factor to it to increase the budget for the following year, not decrease it from the previous spend. So this government missed a huge opportunity in not investing in housing in Nova Scotia, given the fact that we've reduced our amount in the budget for this year over last year. When Nova Scotians are facing their toughest times, rent at less than 1 per cent vacancy in Cape Breton and less than 1 per cent vacancy here in the city. When rents are increasing by 11 per cent, people can't afford to find a home in which they can live reasonably and have somewhat of a standard of living.

Add that to the fact that the housing market has put many of our young people completely out of business when it comes to looking to buy their first home. Sure, there's a loan program available for the down payment, but who can afford a huge loan plus a huge mortgage? Young people of our province, whom we should be investing in - there's nothing

in this budget for them, to help them get that first home and to get situated in life so they can become more productive, less worried, and less stressed.

The fact that we have decided not to index assistance payments at a time when inflation is pretty much the highest in the country here in Nova Scotia - we know we pay the highest taxes in Nova Scotia. We know we've reduced the assistance when it comes to the heating rebate and when it comes to the HEAT Fund. We know that everything with this government is a reduction. What are we doing to help our most vulnerable people in Nova Scotia?

This government will point to the Seniors Care Grant - a \$750 grant - which I have to say is a real benefit to helping seniors get the things they need to move forward and pay for things in their home, whether it be medication delivery, using it for heat - whatever they feel they need. However, more and more seniors are becoming ineligible for the Seniors Care Grant because of the income limit placed on it: \$37,500.

When we look at all these things together, we've had a net loss of \$800 in heating funds for people and a net loss of \$750 for seniors who are ineligible now to receive it because their income is slightly over. For a senior who's on that fixed income, that's \$1,500 that they're now not eligible for and that's out of their pocket. That's a full tank of oil. That would go a long way to help a senior to get through this tough winter.

Top it off with the record snowfall that we have had this year - seniors are paying hundreds of dollars to have their driveway cleared, to have a path cleared to their oil tank, and to have an emergency path so they can get out. Add that to the snowfall that happened after the record snowfall. Just when they got everything cleared, they were hit with another snowfall. It has really caused a lot of issues for Cape Bretoners.

We look back to our Department of Community Services and our \$150 payment - \$0.41 per day. That really does nothing. They get a lump-sum payment of \$150 - one grocery order. One grocery order, and that's gone. Not even a grocery order. A couple bags of groceries, and that \$150 is gone.

Nova Scotians need more. Nova Scotians deserve more. This government has to step up to the plate and help.

We have all seen the graphics on social media - the greatest or the biggest income tax cut in the history of the province. I don't think so. Granted, yes, indexing bracket creep is a good thing, but it's not actually cutting taxes. It's putting money back in the pockets of Nova Scotians who shouldn't have to pay the tax on that amount.

If we want to talk about making a historic cut in taxes in this province, try cutting the HST by 2 per cent. That would be the greatest tax increase in the Province of Nova Scotia. (Interruption) Increase - decrease. Tax cut, thank you. See, I'm so passionate about

this that I'm getting my increases and decreases confused. Maybe I do need that accounting lesson.

[11:00 a.m.]

A tax cut of 2 per cent on the HST would save Nova Scotian families so much more money that they could then put back into our economy. We have seen zero plan to improve the economy in this budget. What we've seen is a government that is resting on the laurels of natural economic growth through population increase. They're not doing anything to stimulate. They scrapped the Better Pay Cheque Guarantee, which would put more money in your pocket to spend in the economy, which would grow the economy. Nova Scotia Loyal - there was supposed to be a program launched long ago, but all we see are PR stunts with wrapped trucks and parades and propaganda. We don't see any real improvement in helping Nova Scotians buy more local.

I certainly hope that in the school lunch program, there's a huge focus on purchasing those products from local vendors, local suppliers, local producers. That would help the local economy, but we don't see that in the budget. There's no tying that to the growth in our economy - helping local suppliers.

We've heard in Question Period today the colleagues on this side of the House asking those tough questions about issues in our Department of Health and Wellness. The doctor wait-list continues to grow. Thousands a month are added to the list without a doctor. Off-load times. Surgical wait times - double the national average. Early on in the campaign, we talked about 24-hour surgeries. This government talks about the extra number of surgeries they've had this year: the extra number of this, the extra number of that. Well, they're talking about extra numbers on a smaller number. It's not an improvement or a fix to health care. It's smoke and mirrors. It's government by public relations.

We're spending \$600 million extra on health care. Where is it going? It's going to bonuses and it's going to salaries. The biggest chunk is going to salaries and bonuses, not on the areas of improvement and efficiency-creating that we can see.

We heard the Minister of Health and Wellness talk about the fixed-wing aircraft, and how it's reducing the numbers of ambulance time on the road. Well, that's great if they take you home. I've got instances in my community where people are flown to Halifax because they're deemed to need a serious medical test. They're flown up, they go in the hospital, and then they're discharged. They're told to find their own way home.

I don't know about you, Speaker, but I wouldn't want to be out on the street in a johnny shirt because they don't have any clothes with them, because they were flown from the hospital in Sydney - go out and hitchhike. Or talk to a senior to talk to a family friend to drive all the way to Halifax to pick up someone who was discharged and has nowhere

to go. It's terrible that we treat our seniors in this province - who have worked their whole lives and paid into this system - as second-class citizens and tell them to find their own way home. Four and a half hours home. It's just terrible.

This is a budget of spending on administration. We see the Public Service is going to grow by 10 per cent. That's a huge figure. What is growing in the Public Service? Are we hiring more administration? We can't administer things the way they are? We need to add 10 per cent to the Public Service?

We see our debt grow significantly over the period of this Progressive Conservative government. The debt service ratio in dollars is continuing to grow. Our kids, our grandkids and our great-grandkids will be paying for this for the rest of their lives - and if we don't get a handle on this now, maybe even their great-great-grandkids.

We need to stop spending. We've seen all of the organizations talk about how this budget doesn't make its mark. They talk about spend, spend, spend; buy, buy, buy; do, do, do. But nothing is getting done, done, done. Everything is: let's throw this at the wall, let's see what sticks.

I personally spent some time in our system over the last year. In talking with a lot of the health care providers, they tell me, "Fred, there are solutions to things, but there are people in hospital waiting for simple tests, taking up beds." I personally waited for a test for days. I could have been out, recuperating at home. What happens then is you have people on stretchers in our emergency departments, waiting to get moved up to a better location in the hospital where they can receive better and more humane care.

I use those as an example of how we need to change the way we do things. This government says they're listening - but they're not acting. So instead of just paying people more money - we need to pay a fair wage, there's no doubt - what we need to do is look at those areas where we can improve investment in our system to make it better. A PET scanner for Cape Breton would be one of those investments. Three years to figure something out is a long period of time. We need action and we need action now for Cape Breton.

The school lunch program is great. We've been advocating for this for a long time. The devil, again, is in the details. We're looking forward to finding out when this will start, if it will be a full implementation. It says, "phased in over four years." What's the phase-in plan? That's what we need to know. We will try to get to some of those answers during Budget Estimates. That's important information.

The indexing of tax brackets beginning in January 2025 is a start, but not the biggest tax cut in the history of the province. Continuous glucose monitors - a good start. However, we want to see that program expanded and made eligible for all folks who are suffering

from this tough disease. This would help them to manage their treatment, but they're not eligible because they're not insulin-dependent. We need help in that area.

I would like to say that this budget has fallen short in many areas. When it comes to affordability, this budget has fallen way short. When it comes to housing, this budget has fallen way short. When it comes to looking after our most vulnerable people in Nova Scotia, this budget has fallen way short. With that, Speaker, I'll take my seat and pass it on to my colleagues.

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

LISA LACHANCE: It's my pleasure to rise today and talk about this third budget from this government while today, at the same time, so many Nova Scotians are facing affordability challenges in our province. The cost of everything is soaring. We know Nova Scotians want to get by on their own, but their wages just aren't keeping up with inflation. Housing and energy costs continue to skyrocket.

We're here today because we need a government that prioritizes building a province where Nova Scotians can provide for their families; where utilities benefit the public, not just their shareholders; where governments give families a break when they need it; when every child in this province has enough to eat; and where we know that we'll be able to keep our houses warm and the lights turned on when times get tough.

Families are experiencing economic uncertainty and insecurity at levels not seen in generations, and this impacts everything. Whether driven by the cost of big-ticket items like housing and education, or the affordability of life's basics like groceries and heating fuel, overlaid by worries inherent in uncertain access to timely and quality health care, the anxiety is palpable. There's also growing economic and social insecurity being experienced by Nova Scotians that is rooted squarely in the legacy of colonization, ongoing racism, and discrimination experienced by diverse communities.

We need to remove barriers to better social and economic outcomes for all Nova Scotians, and prioritize justice and equity for Indigenous, Mi'kmaw, and African Nova Scotian communities, as well as persons with disabilities, newcomers, and 2SLGBTQIA+ folks and communities. We have an equal need to prioritize gender justice and address gender-based violence in all our government work, as evidenced by the Mass Casualty Commission report. This budget doesn't address what Nova Scotians need now.

There are more than 150,000 people on the Need a Family Practice Registry. People are waiting too long in emergencies. We heard the example this morning from the terrible accident in Litchfield, where children who were hurt and injured waited two hours for care that quite literally was to save their lives.

In housing, this government has spent a lot of time and energy making it easier for developers to build homes, and this budget extends a \$425 million tax break for developers without even mentioning the word “affordable.” But a record number of homeless folks are outside in the middle of a Nova Scotia Winter.

The plain truth is that Nova Scotians are dealing with skyrocketing cost increases and deserve a break. This PC government purports themselves to be bold with their spending and going like hell. The spending we see sometimes certainly ends up being bold, but Nova Scotians don’t end up seeing that much of it. Take the Hogan Court hotel site sans driveway, for example. Highly unusual and significant adaptability and design concerns - I’ll table that - do not instill confidence in this government’s spending.

We need direct action from the Houston government to help people now, not \$150 one-time payments or rent supplements that are taken away once you are deemed not low income enough. When times are tough, Nova Scotians want to know their government has their backs. This Progressive Conservative government continues to show them that they don’t.

Nova Scotians are scared about what a lack of access to health care means. Parents are worried that they’re doing the right thing for their children when they are managing their development, early vaccinations, and more through one-off drop-in clinics when they lack the careful eye of an ongoing health care professional to make sure that their children’s development is on track. They worry that their parents can’t access the health care they need as they age.

Health professionals confess their concerns, not being able to spend the time they want with patients, delayed test results with devastating outcomes, and burnout, and they wonder how they continue working in a system where their best isn’t possible.

We know that Nova Scotians’ health is at stake. We continue to have some of the worst health indicators in the country. Nova Scotians have some of the highest rates of chronic disease in Canada. I’ll table that. We are near the bottom of the list for cancer mortality and below the national average for life expectancy, infant mortality, and deaths due to diabetes and respiratory conditions.

The system’s failures are borne disproportionately by people with the lowest incomes, who are less mobile, less likely to have access to private insurance, and face other barriers.

We are spending a lot of money, it is true, and we have been for a long time, but we are still not getting the results we need. Nova Scotia has one of the highest rates of per capita health care spending of all provinces but continues to rank well below average in health outcomes.

[11:15 a.m.]

One thing we've noticed in this budget is the distinct lack of funding directed to the actual provision of primary care; 153,000 people on the Need a Family Practice wait-list - a record amount - are waiting to be assigned to a primary care clinic. Urgent care, mobile clinics, expanding the ER capacity, and additional training are all good things, but we don't see any additional money to fund primary care sites.

Nova Scotians have a huge range of health needs and deserve a place where they can go to get those needs met, not just an app. If we focus on collaborative care and community clinics, all health care professionals working there could be used to their full potential.

It is disappointing to see the lack of funds incentivising primary care providers to work here and stay here. We have a beautiful province, on that we can all agree. This government has said time and time again that they want to grow our population. There are so many things we could do to bring down that number of 150,000, Speaker. Why aren't they in this year's budget?

An increasing lack of true primary care office visits leaves many folks with no other options other than an emergency room visit. Of the 150,000 Nova Scotians on the Need a Family Practice wait-list, many do not have a smartphone, home computer, or even stable internet connection, and so they go to the emergency room. Our government passes the buck by saying that Nova Scotians care about each other and that people help each other out. That is true and that is something we all want to continue, but there are people in our province who don't have that extra help and our offices hear all about it.

Emergency rooms in rural areas are facing staffing crunches like never before. I'll table that. Last December, an annual report showed that ER closures increased by 32 per cent over the previous year and all the government had to say for themselves is that it didn't reflect the current situation. ERs in rural areas have been disproportionately affected and, in many cases, it takes a long drive to get to one that is open. If they aren't able to get a ride or are in dire conditions, Nova Scotians need an ambulance. We have not seen the improvements we would like in that regard either. While \$887,000 to train more EMTs is a great start, we must keep in mind that the system is already stretched thin.

A report from the Auditor General in the Fall showed that the average wait times for an ambulance the year before nearly doubled. We can't truly use our ambulances to their full potential unless there is a bed open where they can take a patient.

We are far from having universal mental health care in this province. Mental health service wait times in most regions for adults and children climbed at the end of 2023, and 2022 saw the highest rates of suicides in Nova Scotia ever. I will table documents pertaining to both those.

We have a number of one-off, untendered contracts with private sector organizations to offer limited mental health supports in terms of the types of services and length of treatment. It is imprudent and risky to offer folks single counselling services at no cost without even a chance that they might keep working with that provider, even if they could pay for it. Instead of bolstering the services offered through the Office of Addictions and Mental Health, this government opted to sign a contract with a private organization. I will table that.

A number of us received a letter in late February from a number of public psychiatrists working across the province. I think many of us received it based on the committees we worked in or sit on and our roles. I will read out the authors of this letter.

We received a letter from Dr. Julia Gibson, Western Zone Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist; Dr. Pippa Moss, Northern Zone Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist; Dr. Cornelis DeBoer, Northern Zone Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist; Dr. Gurinder Singh, Northern Zone Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist; Dr. Don Krawczyk, Northern Zone Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist; Dr. Vhari James, Eastern Zone Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist; Dr. Madeline Ferracuti, Western Zone Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist; Dr. Gerald Gray, Western Zone Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist; Dr. James Chandler, Western Zone Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist; and Dr. Kayla Choo Chong, Eastern Zone Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist.

If you didn't receive a copy of this letter, since it pertains to the entire province, I would encourage you to find a copy from one of your colleagues who sits on various committees to have a look at what they have to say. They have spent a lot of time analyzing and understanding the situation that they face in providing psychiatric services to children across this province, and they find the current approach severely lacking. I'm going to talk a bit about what they have to say.

They warn that the more we move mental health care towards the digital, the further removed from a clinical environment it becomes. Public practitioners' offices and community outpatient clinics creep gradually into the private sector. The gradual shift to digital platforms represents a shift away from the public sector. That further limits the public sector's capacity and forces folks to rely on whichever help they can find - private practices, families, friends, and other unpaid caregivers.

They also warn us to remember the financial barriers that virtual-centric care presents to many Nova Scotians, not only buying a phone but paying for the internet you need to access the care. Patients end up bearing a more costly burden, essentially prioritizing a service meant to be the opposite. Virtual options also download the responsibility to Nova Scotians to find an appropriate physical space to access care that will protect their privacy, which can also be a significant barrier. Folks who are without stable housing, who deal with family violence, who have parenting or caregiving responsibilities - the virtual option does not take their situations into account.

They also go on to say that that is not to say that there is no use for virtual care options. They suggest improvements to the current system. They talk about how a properly thought-out hybrid model could be incredibly effective. Those who are comfortable with a virtual option or have mobility concerns would greatly benefit from this. If there were navigation supports in place, providers could work with patients from where they are most comfortable. Most importantly, it would be easy for patients to know what is available to them instead of endlessly scrolling through an app.

The idea of proper navigation in mental health services is not new. It's particularly important and particularly exemplified by Integrated Youth Services. Last June, Nova Scotia finally committed to the development of Integrated Youth Services across the province. Integrated Youth Services are recognized as a best practice precisely because they use an evidence-based approach to welcoming, assessing, and triaging youth into services and programs. With the various online services, what we are asking folks to do is self-select into a potential service without adequate criteria and without any way to navigate around the whole system.

The practitioners who wrote to a number of us also wanted to say that it's important that we take a good look at our human resources approach when developing new programs. All programs require staff. This is a quote: "Some of this government's approaches to fixing health care have led to a veritable workforce crisis in child and youth mental health care, especially in rural areas." They say the most recent iteration of the Health Services Insurance Act actively discourages practitioners from joining the public system by reimbursing private practices at an enormous rate to provide services. The clinical psychology services pilot does nothing to increase the capacity of a system that is already working through their own long wait-list of urgently needed assessments.

In the same letter, it is candidly pointed out, and I quote: "The diversion of public funds to private care providers is at the root of the issue. We believe that public funds should be used to strengthen the public health care system, not erode it." When Nova Scotians said they wanted better health care, I don't think this is what they imagined.

The government did offer some help with continuing care in this new budget, but there is still more that we could be doing. We know about the plan to build 5,600 long-term care spaces by 2032. We don't know how well this takes into account the government's population growth goal for 2030, and to get incredibly scientific, these are billed as new and replacement spaces. Do we know how many will be replacements?

I'm certainly pleased to see the government committed to keep implementing the human rights remedy for Nova Scotians with disabilities who have fought for years for their rightful independence. I do hope that we see the previous investment in the continuing care service system from warehousing practices used in a transformational way to make sure that everyone gets the support they need.

Housing remains a deep concern. A recent social media post that I will table from Adsum, a housing support service provider in Halifax, said: “So far today we’ve had anxious calls from 7 families with a total of 17 children who are facing eviction or the end of a fixed term lease on Thursday. What happens after the 29th? It’s very disheartening. Staff answering the phone: Makes you want to throw up every time you say ‘no.’”

An organization with over 30 years of housing experience shared this on February 26th. Those 17 children were due to lose their homes yesterday, on Budget Day - the day this government delivered a budget that did nothing to stem the tide of housing precarity. Now it's the day after. Where have these families ended up? Hopefully some of them are still in their rentals, but how much longer will they be able to stay? Everybody wants a decent home in a community they love, a home where they feel security of tenure and can plan forward to the next year, the next job, for their family.

What the Houston government has delivered is a completely inadequate response to the need for shelter that allows people to transform their lives. The average rent of a two-bedroom apartment in Halifax went up 11 per cent last year, and stats reviewed from 2016 to 2021 revealed a loss of 31 affordable housing units per week in HRM. I will say that that is absolutely no surprise for those of us in our offices in Halifax Regional Municipality who have received so many phone calls about the loss of tenure, the loss of housing. What will people do?

There is a \$425 million tax break for developers in this budget without any requirements for affordable housing. The rent cap allows for a 5 per cent increase, which is being circumvented by allowing fixed-term leases and not committing to a tenancy enforcement branch that could provide safeguards.

We have also suggested many other ways to keep people in their homes, such as having a low-income energy program, banning seniors’ evictions, banning Winter evictions, and more. Implementing actual rent control by ending fixed-term leases and applying rent control in the unit, not the lease, would go a long way to securing tenure for folks. We also need more supportive housing of all types, and yet still there is a lot of uncertainty in the sector.

The Bridge in Dartmouth is being recognized as an effective shelter program, yet there is actually uncertainty about its lease today - March 1st - which ends on March 31st of this year, in the same week that the government has been telling people to leave tent encampments because there are spaces available inside for everyone.

The community conversation around homelessness has become polarizing and misinformed. In addition to implying that people are comfortable outside, the Premier has also said that lots of life’s circumstances lead to homelessness, and that the government, and I quote, “can offer lots of help but people don’t always want to take it.” What fell out

of public discourse was an understanding that people have been suffering and are suffering from a structural policy failure.

I want to walk through what we learned in the Halifax Point-In-Time survey of 2022 and point to the government systems that this government could be strengthening right now, this year, to address the homelessness issue and to support people across Nova Scotia. I will table that Point-In-Time survey.

When you look at that survey of youth who are homeless, 49 per cent of folks - of current homeless youth - had been in the child welfare system. Of adults, 29 per cent were former youth in care, and of those, 38 per cent became homeless within a year of aging out of the system.

[11:30 a.m.]

I know this government has promised some better supports for children in care and aging out of care, and we will be asking at Estimates about what has been done and what's next. But it's much more than that. It's about creating systems where children don't have to enter care at all. It's about supporting families, ensuring the elimination of poverty, and ensuring parents can stay in their homes, make enough money, and feed their children.

One thing this government has promised time and time again is a Child and Youth Commission, but again, we don't see that in the budget. That independent voice could be an important way that we know and understand what's happening with children and youth in our province, and that we can all know about actions we can take.

From the 2022 Point-in-Time survey, 6 per cent of homeless folks who were contacted identified as veterans or former RCMP members. Obviously, this points to the need for better veteran and mental health supports. Of the folks in that survey, 67 per cent reported mental health concerns, 39 per cent reported cognitive delays or learning disabilities, 36 per cent reported a physical disability, and 22 per cent reported traumatic brain injury. That is a raft of examples that highlight systemic failures in the health care system that spill over and from - into education and employment.

As someone who has struggled to raise two children in this province with significant learning disabilities, I can tell you that the system is absolutely no help, and sets folks up for failure at every step.

We also need to think about diverse communities - 16 per cent of the folks contacted in the 2022 Point-in-Time survey identified as 2SLGBTQIA+, and 34 per cent of under 24 identified as part of that community as well. This highlights systemic exclusion from health care, unsafe systems in education, and inadequate supports for families.

In seniors - the majority of seniors reported that the reason they lost housing was housing and financial issues. Lots of folks were newly - for the first time in their entire lives - homeless, and 58 per cent of seniors reported physical disabilities.

Phoenix Youth Programs shared some of its recent challenges yesterday in a public email. The letter - and I'll table it - says:

Staff at Phoenix Youth Shelter are reporting a steady increase of recently unhoused families reaching out for support. With so few options available, they're often forced to make heartbreaking decisions. "We have parents dropping their kids off at the door sobbing," explains Janelle, the manager at the Phoenix Youth Shelter. "They don't want to leave their kids here, but there's nowhere else for them to go."

What we don't see in this budget is any commitment to poverty reduction or elimination. Income assistance rates are left languishing, but government is willing to allow housing to become and remain out of reach for so many. We need to see this Houston government show leadership that, in fact, all Nova Scotians have a right to safe and dignified housing.

As I said, Nova Scotians are struggling with the increasing costs of everything, from power and food to fuel and housing. Power rates have increased 13.6 per cent in two years, and families are struggling to make ends meet. The cost of groceries increased over 6 per cent last year and 13 per cent the year before. Everyone from students to families and to seniors are feeling the pinch. People need a break. They need to know they can afford to heat their homes and keep the lights on, keep themselves and their families fed, get their prescriptions without pharmacare co-pays, and avoid unnecessary government fees.

Indexing tax brackets is also one piece of this puzzle. We know that Nova Scotia was the only province not to have taken action on this, which was costing Nova Scotian families. That's why our caucus also recognized this need and tabled similar legislation before the House. After many years of Liberals and Progressive Conservatives making tax cuts to benefit large corporations, we also recognize we need to have a bigger conversation about fairness and really helping the thousands of people who need it.

Corporate taxes, wealth taxes, inheritance taxes, and deductions - these are some of the important parts of the conversation of what we want our tax system to look like and who it should benefit. We find another idea about the tax system that we've been talking about for a while now, and that's cutting the HST entirely off all grocery products. This is because we believe that Nova Scotians trying to afford the essentials need a break from increasing housing costs. That's why the Nova Scotia NDP government removed all provincial tax off family essentials, including children's clothing, footwear and diapers, and all provincial tax off power bills and home heating.

The government likes to stand tall on their More Opportunity for Skilled Trades and Occupations (MOST) tax refund program, but now is the time to actually demonstrate how it's working. I've talked about how this program is gender-blind and also disadvantages folks who might have life circumstances that take them a bit longer to get through a post-secondary trades program.

One thing we need to know is: Who has been accessing this program? What's the gender breakdown? What's the age breakdown within the folks who are eligible? What are their other socio-economic backgrounds? We also need to know what sectors folks are in. We also need to start tracking for retention past the age of eligibility. This program is not going to be effective if it keeps people for a couple of years, but then they move to other jurisdictions once they pass the age of 30. I have long wondered why we actually have an age limit on the MOST program as well. I wonder about 30. The UN recognizes youth as up to the age of 34 for most programs and policies.

The other action that we didn't see in this budget is the actual basic personal exemption amount increased. It is now indexed, but we are far behind. If we use the federal government as a marker, it's about \$50,000, I believe, and that would be the same as the MOST program. So on one hand, if it's recognized across Canada - that up to \$50,000 - that folks earning up to that really do need a break, why aren't we doing that in our own province? Really, we're limiting ourselves by only targeting folks in certain sectors and under the age of 30.

Overall, our caucus is in favour of re-examining our tax system to make sure it is working for average Nova Scotians. We've talked many times in this House about the report from Food Banks Canada. It was released last year and embarrassingly gave Nova Scotia a failing grade - the worst across the country. The report condemned this government for taking minimal steps to address the issues of high poverty and affordability difficulties.

Fifty-three per cent of people in Nova Scotia feel that they are worse off than they were a year ago. This is a higher percentage than in any other province. The purchasing power of frozen income assistance rates has reduced every year that the government fails to act. Failing to index this program is, in essence, an annual cut. People who rely on the government for their income need to see significant increases so they aren't forced to live in crushing poverty.

We understand that because the government has been forced by a legal decision, they are providing additional funding to folks with disabilities. I would also argue that we should be really recognizing that all folks who qualify for income assistance need our support. It shouldn't take a court case to make us try to overcome crushing poverty levels.

As of 2021, the poverty rate among seniors in Nova Scotia was 9.1 per cent, the highest across Canada. Nova Scotia also saw the highest percentage increase to this number between 2020 and 2021 among all provinces. In Nova Scotia, the Seniors Care Grant is the

only designated low-income supplement available to seniors. Recipients, as we know, are required to keep receipts for eligible expenses and to apply every year.

Only P.E.I. has a similar program to this, where folks have to apply and provide receipts, but it's actually up to \$1,700 per year. Every other province or territory has a program to supplement seniors' incomes that is not designated for certain expenses and that is automatic. They have income eligibility requirements and require recipients to be in receipt of either or both OAS and the GIS. Four provinces have standard amounts, and the rest have a sliding scale on income.

We heard at committee about the challenge on the department to administer this program - that they were overwhelmed by the applications. It takes a huge number of resources to administer this program, but the delays in the process have had very real effects on seniors. I assume that all of you have heard from seniors who wonder why it took three or four months to receive their grant. In addition, of course, they had to apply up front. There's a very easy way to make this less stressful, more automatic, more dependable for seniors who need it most, and that is to make this an automatic supplement based on income each year.

Nova Scotians need to be able to pay their power bills. We need to make Nova Scotia Power work for Nova Scotians so that Nova Scotia Power profits are tied to saving money and improving the grid. We want the creation of a low-income power rate to ensure that households are not spending more than they can afford on power bills. We want to reverse the Houston government's cuts to HARP, and index the program for future years.

We of course applaud the action taken on the school lunch . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order. I'd just remind the member that you can't use the term to describe the government that you did.

The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: I apologize for that. We applaud the development and announcement around the school lunch program. We know that so many folks across Nova Scotia have been working to provide food in schools for children for many years, as volunteers. We know that teachers and administrators have undertaken a lot of extra work and expense to make sure that the students they teach are not hungry when they're teaching them. We will be watching the development of this. We're concerned.

I'm still concerned about the time that has passed that it took the Liberal government to do this, and that it took the PC government to do this. We're talking about generations. I'm concerned about the time it will take to roll it out fully. However, we certainly are thankful to all of those Nova Scotians who pushed for this for so many years.

However, children don't live in isolation. They live in families and in communities. Between 2020 and 2021 in Nova Scotia, there was a 35.7 per cent increase in the prevalence of all children living in households experiencing moderate to severe levels of food insecurity.

I remain concerned about this government's approach to food security. It's hard to actually capture what the government is doing. It's across government, across departments and programs. Different departments have different programs - Education, Health and Wellness, CCTH, Agriculture, and probably others. I would suggest to this government that they probably don't know all that you're doing on food security, whether you're having any results, and that a government-wide commitment to increasing food security - which we didn't see in this budget - and a government-wide commitment to coordination would surely give better results in food security.

We've also been taking a look at other fees that the government requires, and comparing them to other jurisdictions. One area that we have been looking at is the vehicle registration fees. As the Premier likes to say, Nova Scotians need to drive, and he's right. In vast areas of this province, people rely on their car, and it is fundamental to how they live and work.

Why, then, do we have license plate sticker fees? There's no evidence from other jurisdictions that it has an impact on safety, and it does literally nothing for your car. As our leader likes to say, it's the most expensive sticker you'll ever buy. We see this as nothing but a cash grab from the government, and it contributes a pittance to the government coffers. Eliminating this fee wouldn't impact the government, but for Nova Scotia families it could be the difference between being able to get to work, get to school, get to medical appointments, and support your family.

We're four days in, and I've already had a lot to say about this government's treatment of the Coastal Protection Act. In 2021, Nova Scotians elected this PC government knowing that the PCs had supported the Coastal Protection Act along with all other parties, and expected it to be enacted to guide our collective action to protect and manage our coastline.

Over the past 2.5 years, we have heard from thousands of Nova Scotians who have voiced their support for the implementation of the Coastal Protection Act. They want to have a government that prioritizes coastal protection and development, that builds on our past, and prepares Nova Scotia for our future. Municipalities also strongly called for the legislation to help them as they faced enormous pressures in their jurisdictions. It seems to me that this government never intended to implement this Act. After unnecessary delays, they called for a third round of consultations and promised transparency on these consultations, which they have yet to deliver. Instead, results are being withheld. The minister refuses to release the actual data, and we find out that many Nova Scotians' input has been silenced, as their emails languished in a junk folder.

[11:45 a.m.]

This government claims to listen to all Nova Scotians. In fact, that claim was behind a lot of policy delays that we've seen. But then the minister, in this House, said, Well, actually then there were several MLAs who had strong opinions on the Coastal Protection Act. Some of them raised their hands in this House. We're left to ask, Who were all the people who had access to the minister - MLAs, developers - whose opinions were allowed to override thousands of Nova Scotians and a previous decision of this House?

Despite the fact that the minister now refers to the "Coastal Action Plan," Nova Scotians, individuals and municipalities alike, can now consider themselves abandoned. This government has - surprise - developed a map that will also become an app to help show Nova Scotians what different parts of the coastline will look like in 2100. They have promised to eventually provide some draft bylaw text for municipalities to consider.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting with the Nova Scotia Youth Climate Council. This is a group of scientists and activists who understand and prioritize intersectionality as key to action on climate change. They know everything is connected, and they know we need urgent action. Why doesn't this government understand this?

The budget is predicated on continued population growth. We think this is important as well, but it shows very little in terms of how - we want people to come, and we want people to stay, but what are we doing in terms of migrant and immigrant retention? So many folks are coming and struggling. They are surprised to find themselves in a place where they can't find housing, where they can't afford housing, where it's hard to see a doctor. We hear about this all the time in our offices. We have a goal, but we actually don't have a plan to get to that goal.

On the other hand, we have a labour shortage. That's a persistent challenge against all sectors. It's holding us back, businesses and institutions alike, but it's not an employees' market, so to speak. People are unable to build the lives they want, so they're not building them in Nova Scotia.

We also need to assess what messages we are giving the world. Is Nova Scotia a welcoming place? Do we want new Nova Scotians? Consider the government's implementation of a minimum increase to international student fees, with some unsubstantiated idea that international students should pay the true cost of education, without considering the immediate and long-term social return on investment from welcoming international students.

While the in-province tuition cap has tightened, out-of-province domestic students' tuition is now uncapped. What is the message that we're sending? We want to grow the population, grow the economy, keep young people here, and attract more people to build their lives here. What are students to understand if they see themselves dealing with a

province where the Province is willing to raise tuition fees - to leave them unregulated? They're already the highest tuition fees in this country, and to see a government dealing in poor faith with universities themselves, given the dropping of a new funding and governance arrangement with universities with little consultation. I can actually probably say "no consultation."

I just want to say a few words about agriculture, because it's such a critical sector in our province and so critically linked to our ability to feed ourselves and local foods. No question, it was a hard year - maybe the worst year in living memory. Farmers are on the front lines of the climate crisis, the affordability crisis, and the labour crisis. We have heard this government - although not in this budget, I don't think, although I'd have to go double-check; I didn't see the words "Nova Scotia Loyal" in this budget. Maybe they're there.

Basically, there's been a lot of talk about Nova Scotia Loyal, a commitment to local food and a food and beverage strategy, and yet we're two and a half years in and we haven't seen any information about what consultations have brought forward or any plans.

We heard from the minister yesterday in this House that the reason the Food and Beverage Strategy remains stalled is that there were 1,900 responses to a consultation. I think that lots of folks would wonder, Well, why is that creating a delay, since it's not evident that this government ever takes into account those consultations with the decisions they make? Many programs that support the agriculture sector actually have been on hold, waiting for the announcement of the Food and Beverage Strategy. I think most people have given up, but they used to be waiting for the Nova Scotia Loyal program.

The sector is incredibly clear on what they need to succeed. I feel that you can't find a sector that's more united in saying what is needed. They need a sustainable and dependable approach to business risk management. This ongoing approach of paying farmers back, trying to make up for what happens in terms of climate crises, is not enough. People need to have investments that will allow them to see a future for their farms. Things like funding for greenhouses, which we did do some of last year, but the next thing the farmers are seeing is that they can't insure them. They can't insure their crops, they can't insure their infrastructure, and we are seeing a decline in the number of farms in this province. I don't think - in an era when we all want to prioritize local food - that this is the trend that we want to see.

Overall, I would say that, across three budgets, we've seen this government underestimate revenue, surprised by additional revenues over the course of a year, over-appropriating so that we see that there is a projected deficit that then becomes a surplus, and, in the middle of all that, the government has had a billion dollars-plus in additional appropriations spending each year. This seems to be like the budgeting process of this government. At the same time, this results in growing the absolute debt, the net debt-to-GDP ratio, and debt servicing cost.

The Minister of Finance and Treasury Board spent a lot of time in the Budget Address ensuring Nova Scotians that the deficit budgeting will have no long-term impact on the well-being of this province. Nonetheless, in a context where there is so much happening outside the democratic budget process, and tens of millions of dollars being spent outside normal government procurement processes - as we see with Hogan Court - there are many reasons to be concerned.

Nova Scotia hasn't fully recovered from Liberal math and austerity measures in poverty reduction, health and mental health, education, poverty reduction, and more. The spectre that PC math might spin toward austerity without having overcome the major challenges of the day in housing, health care, homelessness, cost of living, and climate change, is indeed quite concerning. We don't want our environment and the most vulnerable of our neighbours to suffer as a result of PC math and PC budgeting.

We remain deeply concerned about additional appropriations. When we ask for an update to the Finance Act to develop a useable process for additional appropriations, this government and various ministers tend to act outraged that we don't want to support Nova Scotians facing emergencies. There are, in fact, examples from all other provincial governments and the federal government where governments can function and respond to emergencies, opportunities, and unforeseen circumstances quickly and efficiently, and then still come back to their respective legislatures to ensure continued oversight. What shouldn't be routine is a government actually planning to implement major policies and programs, and that the money to fund them is dealt with all outside of the legislative process.

Yesterday, the Minister of Community Services indicated that more is on the way regarding income assistance. If this is truly alluding to the transformative change we need now in Nova Scotia, it should be done here in the People's House, in consultation with all elected representatives.

In advanced education, we see a trend of two other things in additional appropriations that would really benefit from policy discussions about what we're actually achieving. First is the unplanned, but of course welcome, one-time payment to students receiving Nova Scotia assistance. This has happened three years in a row, yet there hasn't been any real relief in tuition for students in Nova Scotia. Many potential students missed out on that payment because they looked at the high wall of high tuition, costs of food, rent, and essentials, and already decided that they couldn't take out a debt to even try to make ends meet. So there weren't students being supported by that.

In addition, four universities over the past two years have received year-end payments for multi-year expenditures to establish new programs. Last year the minister couldn't tell Nova Scotians why these payments were made in lump sums, not contingent on spending or progress, and could not tell us if they would sit idle in other institutions' accounts gaining interest, or who would benefit from that.

These are all but a handful of examples of the way that this government continues to spend Nova Scotians' money without legislative oversight. In fact, there's over a billion of them.

We have reviewed the proposed budget for 2024-2025 and we look forward to the ongoing and in-depth review of the budget proposals in the Estimates process. We will also be listening to stakeholders, and we'll strive to represent their ideas and views here in the People's House. What we needed was a budget that delivers solutions to meet today's challenges.

We needed a budget that provided a feeling of relief, so that Nova Scotians know they'll be able to access primary health care and emergency care when they need it. We needed a budget that builds a strong foundation to address the pressure people feel today. We needed a budget that would bring more opportunities within reach for hard-working people.

We all want to work hard and get ahead. We all want a safe home that we can keep warm in the winter, and a community we love. The Premier likes to talk about the spirit of Nova Scotians, the Bluenoser spirit. There is so much to celebrate and so much to acknowledge that comes from the Bluenose spirit. I know that Bluenosers are ready to work together and work hard. Whether you live in a city, a town, a rural or Mi'kmaq community, we share a common hope for our future and that of our children and grandchildren, and we share pride in this beautiful province.

But we also hold strong principles, and we want to see these principles borne out in the budget: that we can stay healthy with the support of an accessible health system; that we have a fair shot at affordable, safe, and accessible housing; that we can have help with everyday costs when we need it; and that we have an economy that is clean, green, and strong. This is the budget we need, and the budget New Democrats will fight for.

THE SPEAKER: With the end of Responses to the Budget Address, the Estimates are now referred to the Committee of the Whole House on Supply.

The honourable member for Eastern Shore on an introduction.

HON. KENT SMITH: I beg leave to make that introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

KENT SMITH: In the East Gallery you'll find one of my old friends, Steve Wentzell, from the Eastern Shore. Steve is the co-president of the Eastern Shore Gold Sox, a young ladies' softball association, where his daughter and my daughter have played together for the last few years. I'd like the House to welcome him here today. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Welcome. We welcome all guests to the gallery.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: I move that you now leave the chair and the House resolve itself into Committee of the Whole House on Supply.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: I'm really happy here to speak on Supply for the next 15 minutes on the budget this year. I want to start by saying, of course, there are at least three big things in this budget that we support, because they were Opposition ideas.

Those three ideas are indexing income tax brackets, or bracket creep, as it might be more commonly known. That's a good thing that we've proposed and talked about as recently as this week.

A universal lunch program: I know the member for Sydney-Membertou, here in front of me, has been talking about this for many, many years and he spoke very well on it yesterday, and on the impact it's going to have on our children across this province. So, of course, that is a wonderful thing.

And as we heard earlier this week as well, I think, the coverage for continuous glucose monitors for diabetics. Every one of us in this Chamber will have dozens and dozens of people in our constituencies who will receive, in many cases, life-saving or certainly life-improving treatment as a result of that. Those are all things that we in the Liberal Party have been advocating for, and we're happy to see in the budget.

Now, as I've talked about as well, one thing that really, really concerns me when I look at this budget in more detail is the fact, as was alluded to earlier today by the member for Northside-Westmount, that this year the government is expecting to spend less money - \$32 million less - in housing than they did this year.

I can find no explanation for that, I can find no justification for that, no reason as to why the government would do that when we are dealing with an ongoing and, in many ways, worsening housing crisis. In the past year, rent in Halifax has gone up 11 per cent, year over year, despite the fact that, as we all know, there is a rent cap in place. Outside of Halifax, rents are up just as much if not more, and in many cases, you're looking at rents easily into the \$2,000 and above range in Halifax. People are absolutely struggling to make ends meet when it comes to housing, and that has a direct link on so many other aspects of your life. To say that the government wants to spend less on housing is, I think, a massive mistake. In Estimates later today, hopefully we'll get a chance to get a justification from the minister on that, because I can see none.

[12:00 p.m.]

Again, we see no changes to the big mistake of changing the rent supplement program. For this year going forward, again, only those spending 50 per cent or more of their income on housing are going to be eligible for rent supplements. It should be 30 per cent. That is the accepted definition of affordability for housing. If the government says, Well, we didn't do it because the feds wouldn't come forward with more money, well, the Province should pay for it then. That's what should happen, because one thing this government will do is spend money in areas where they've talked about health care, for example, yet we don't see spending on other areas that would be significantly less expensive and yet just as meaningful, just as important, like rent supplements. So that is something that I'm very disappointed that we see no change on.

No new funding or programs for community housing: Non-profit, non-market community housing is a huge gap in our current funding. I say this to people every time I get a chance to, because it's shocking when they hear it, but if you look at the budget this year . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order, order. There's an awful lot of chatter in the House. I just ask that everyone take it down a notch while the honorable member is speaking.

The honourable member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: Thank you, Speaker. I appreciate that, I do.

If you look at the budget, this year we're going to spend about 45 per cent of the budget on health. We hear about that constantly: it's up 36 per cent over three years, and how wonderful that is. Yet on housing, we are essentially flat, or declining in the most important areas, which are housing programs. We're going to spend less than 2 per cent of our budget this year on housing, and when you look at polling, housing is the number one, or 1A issue in this province. To think that we're spending only 1.5 per cent of our budget on housing is something that I think Nova Scotians need to know, and I think they would be really surprised by, because it's simply not enough and it's not meeting the demand when we have thousands of people on the wait-list for public housing, when we have over 1,000 people in the HRM either living on the street, living in a car, couch-surfing, having no idea where they're going to spend the night. There's absolutely no justification for that minimal amount of spending on housing.

Another issue that is a big problem is in the area of community services and income assistance. Again, for the third year in a row - this is the third budget that this government has introduced, and for the third year in a row, income assistance is not being increased. Worse than that, the rates of income assistance are not being indexed to inflation. What is the reason for that? Why would the government decide to do it for income tax brackets, for other tax credits, and not do it for the most vulnerable Nova Scotians? That is a question

that we are asking on the Opposition side. I hope we get a chance to hear the answer, because it just doesn't make sense. To index income assistance rates for those on the lower end of the scale has a bigger impact than it does for other Nova Scotians who are more fortunate.

There is no justification, in my mind, to pick and choose which things you're going to index, and indexing income tax brackets is a good thing. We've put that forward. We agree with that.

But to not do it for income assistance recipients is a massive mistake, a huge oversight. To pretend that a one-time \$150 payment is going to go far enough to help these people out of the really difficult circumstances that many of them are in - as others have said, \$150 a year is, I believe, about 40 cents or 41 cents per day, which obviously is not nearly going to do it.

Another thing that the member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island touched on - and I know the member for Kings South talks about this a lot too, with great reason - is debt. Debt is not always a headline issue, but if you look at where this government is going, it's pretty alarming. Over the next five years, we're projected to add about \$1 billion to our debt each and every year, so \$5 billion over the next five years. By the time this government's term ends, about 15 per cent to 20 per cent of all the debt will have accumulated under this government in the last four years.

The net debt-to-GDP ratio - which was about 32 per cent when this government took office - by the time we get to 2028, at the end of the projections here in the budget, it's going to be at 38 per cent. We're going from 32 per cent to 38 per cent under a Progressive Conservative government, which is strange. But that is what's happening right now.

There are many of us in the Chamber who have young kids, including myself - and Speaker, I know you do. And I think it's a mistake for us to say, 20 or 30 years down the road, when many of us are not working any more: Oh, our kids will take care of it, because we're just going to pile on \$1 billion of debt a year. I think that's an abdication of responsibility.

It would be an easier pill to swallow if the government could point to endless results coming from all this spending, but we just don't have that. We just don't have that. We have double the number of people without a family doctor. In some parts of the province, including my constituency, you're looking at an increase of 300 per cent to 400 per cent - three or four times more people in Bedford, in Hammonds Plains, in Sackville, in Dartmouth, in Halifax without a family doctor.

We see housing costs spiralling out of control. If the government is spending - in my view, recklessly - and running deficits every year, which they seem, I would say, proud

of, that would be fine if they could say, Oh, by the way, all this spending we're doing is making life better for Nova Scotians. But it is not. It is not, and the evidence shows that. That is not a matter of opinion; that is a matter of fact here.

I also wanted to touch on another issue that has come up in the last little while, or something that I don't think gets enough attention, which is transparency and oversight. The Auditor General has come up a lot lately. Well, we also need to talk about the order-making powers of the Information and Privacy Commissioner for Nova Scotia, which the Premier promised would be done. That hasn't been done. We see nothing in this budget. We see a flat budget for the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner for Nova Scotia. The Minister of Justice has talked in the past about how complicated it is, and how long it's going to take. I very much doubt as to whether we're going to see any reform of FOIPOP. I don't think we're going to see any order-making powers for the Information and Privacy Commissioner as well.

I think most government information is going to remain in a black box, unfortunately. We're going to ask for documents, and they'll come back six months later with a bill for \$1,000, and then we'll get 99 per cent of the documents blacked out. Unfortunately, that is the state of play. It's been the state of play for too long.

We saw it with the Coastal Protection Act. We saw two and a half years of consultations, a 2.5 per cent response rate on a survey, and we have no idea what the responses were. If I was interpreting it, I would suspect that the responses were not good. The responses were not what the government wanted to see. If they were, I think they would publicize that, because governments like to point out good news and people who agree with them. But we're not seeing that on coastal protection. We're not seeing any advances on transparency. I think Nova Scotians should be concerned about that, because if they don't have the information to make decisions and to judge government on what it is doing, then it's a failure of the government and it erodes trust in our institutions, which is really the last thing we need these days.

Overall, if you look at the budget, there are some positives - ideas that we have put forward. Parties can argue about credit, and that's okay, but the fact is, Nova Scotians are going to save some money. More students - more kids - are going to have full bellies at school and have an easier time learning, and that's great.

Many diabetics and their families in this province are going to go to bed with more peace of mind. They're going to go throughout their days with more peace of mind. They're going to have fewer health complications. They're going to have fewer problems because their glucose is being monitored on a continual basis. That is wonderful. These are all ideas that we support and will continue to support.

But for the two major issues that continue to be 1(a) and 1(b) in this province, which are housing and health care, I still see nothing substantial in this budget that will move the

needle on them. As I've said, we are spending less on housing this year than we did last year, which makes no sense and is counterproductive and will not help Nova Scotians. And yes, we are spending a lot of money on health care, but the results are not there, and that is the key thing. It is not enough to sit in the House, to go to press conferences, to put out press releases and say, "Wow, look at all the money we're spending. Isn't that good?" That's the first part of the argument.

The second part of the argument is, "Oh, and by the way, all this money we're investing is leading to these better outcomes for Nova Scotians." And so far, in the three years that this government has been in power, they've spent a lot of money, and the results have not been there for Nova Scotians. There is no doubt about that.

Unfortunately, I think this is, with a few exceptions, a status quo budget that has cuts in areas where we need to invest a lot more money and invests a lot more money in areas where we are not seeing results. I think that's a negative combination, and it is not doing Nova Scotians the service that they expect and deserve from their provincial government.

I think there is still a lot more to learn about why these decisions have been made. I'll be happy to discuss those at Budget Estimates and beyond, but I think we're spending less where we need to be spending more, and where we are spending more, we are not getting the results that Nova Scotians deserve.

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

[12:28 p.m. The House resolved itself into a CW on Supply with Deputy Speaker Nolan Young in the Chair.]

[4:30 p.m. CW on Supply rose and the House reconvened with Deputy Speaker Lisa Lachance in the Chair.]

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

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

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: That concludes government business for the day. I move that the House do now rise and meet again on Monday, March 4th between the hours of 4:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m.

Following Daily Routine, we'll move into continuation of the Committee of the Whole House on Supply, Subcommittee on Supply in the Red Room, and the Law Amendments Committee will take place from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. in the Red Room. Thank you and have a great weekend, everyone.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is to adjourn.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The House stands adjourned until Monday, March 4th at 4:00 p.m.

[The House rose at 4:31 p.m.]