



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Third Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Seniors and Housing
Consideration of Main Estimates

Monday, March 14, 2022
7 p.m.

Transcript No. 30-3-6

**Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature
Third Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC), Chair
Sigurdson, Lori, Edmonton-Riverview (NDP), Deputy Chair

Amery, Mickey K., Calgary-Cross (UC)
Carson, Jonathon, Edmonton-West Heday (NDP)
Dang, Thomas, Edmonton-South (Ind)
Frey, Michaela L., Brooks-Medicine Hat (UC)
Gottfried, Richard, Calgary-Fish Creek (UC)
Hunter, Grant R., Taber-Warner (UC)
Loewen, Todd, Central Peace-Notley (Ind)
Loyola, Rod, Edmonton-Ellerslie (NDP)*
Reid, Roger W., Livingstone-Macleod (UC)
Sabir, Irfan, Calgary-Bhullar-McCall (NDP)
Smith, Mark W., Drayton Valley-Devon (UC)

* substitution for Jon Carson

Also in Attendance

Ceci, Joe, Calgary-Buffalo (NDP)

Support Staff

Shannon Dean, QC	Clerk
Teri Cherkewich	Law Clerk
Trafton Koenig	Senior Parliamentary Counsel
Philip Massolin	Clerk Assistant and Director of House Services
Nancy Robert	Clerk of <i>Journals</i> and Committees
Sarah Amato	Research Officer
Melanie Niemi-Bohun	Research Officer
Warren Huffman	Committee Clerk
Jody Rempel	Committee Clerk
Aaron Roth	Committee Clerk
Rhonda Sorensen	Manager of Corporate Communications
Janet Laurie	Supervisor of Corporate Communications
Jeanette Dotimas	Communications Consultant
Michael Nguyen	Communications Consultant
Tracey Sales	Communications Consultant
Janet Schwegel	Director of Parliamentary Programs
Amanda LeBlanc	Deputy Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participants

Ministry of Seniors and Housing
Hon. Josephine Pon, Minister
David Williams, Assistant Deputy Minister, Housing

7 p.m.

Monday, March 14, 2022

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

**Ministry of Seniors and Housing
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors and Housing for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2023.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce the officials who are joining you at the table.

Ms Pon: Thank you so much, Madam Chair. Good evening, everyone and members of the committee. I'm very pleased to be with you tonight to present the 2022-23 estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. With me this evening are the members of my executive team. I would like to introduce them. To my right: Lisa Sadownik, my deputy minister; David Williams, ADM, housing division. To my left: Sylvia McConnell, acting senior financial officer, and Neil McDonald, executive director of the seniors program delivery branch. And a whole bunch of executive members in the back are here with me.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

My name is Jackie Lovely. I'm the MLA for Camrose constituency and chair of this committee. We'll begin starting to my right, please.

Mrs. Frey: Michaela Frey, MLA, Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Smith: Good evening. I'm Mark Smith, Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Reid: Roger Reid, Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Amery: Mickey Amery, Calgary-Cross.

Mr. Loewen: Todd Loewen, Central Peace-Notley.

Ms Sigurdson: Good evening. Lori Sigurdson, Edmonton-Riverview.

Member Loyola: Rod Loyola, Edmonton-Ellerslie.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I'll go to the members participating remotely. Please go ahead, Mr. Gotfried.

Mr. Gotfried: Richard Gotfried, MLA, Calgary-Fish Creek.

The Chair: I'd like to note the following substitution for the record. Member Loyola is substituting for Member Carson.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that microphones are operated by *Hansard*. Committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and visual stream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Members participating remotely are encouraged to have your camera on while speaking and your microphone muted when not speaking.

Remote participants who wish to be placed on the speakers list are asked to e-mail or send a message in the group chat to the committee clerk, and members in the room are asked to please

signal to the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of main estimates. A total of three hours has been scheduled for consideration of the estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. Standing Order 59.01(6) establishes the speaking rotation and speaking times.

In brief, the minister or member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of the minister's comments a 60-minute speaking block for the Official Opposition begins, followed by a 20-minute speaking block for independent members, if any, and then a 20-minute speaking block for the government caucus.

Individuals may only speak for up to 10 minutes at a time, but time may be combined between the member and minister. After this rotation of speaking time we'll then follow the same rotation of the Official Opposition, independent members, and government caucus. The member and the minister may each speak once for a maximum of five minutes, or these times may be combined, making it a 10-minute block. If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send an e-mail or message to the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee, I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break? Okay.

Ministry officials may be present and at the direction of the minister may address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting.

Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and the committee will adjourn.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused; however, the speaking block time and the three-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

Any written material provided in response to the questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

The vote on estimates and any amendments will occur in Committee of Supply on March 21, 2022. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. The original amendment is to be deposited with the committee clerk with 20 hard copies. An electronic version of the signed original should be provided to the committee clerk for distribution to committee members.

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both the questions and the answers without interruption during estimates debate. Debate flows through the chair at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

I would now invite the Minister of Seniors and Housing to begin her opening remarks. Go ahead, Minister. You have 10 minutes.

Ms Pon: Thank you so much, Madam Chair. Good evening again, everyone. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to present the 2022-23 estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. Over the past two years my ministry, which consists of approximately

249 staff members, contributed to and supported our overall COVID-19 pandemic response. My ministry worked hard to ensure that vulnerable Albertans were able to stay in their houses and homes. Seniors with low income continue to receive financial benefits, and those living in seniors' lodges across Alberta were kept safe.

I'm pleased to report to this committee that my ministry's 2022-23 operating budget is \$701.2 million, a 6 per cent increase over last year's forecast and 4.2 per cent over last year's original budget. With Alberta's second balanced budget in over a decade, thanks to responsible fiscal management, my ministry will continue to support our seniors and those in need of safe and affordable housing.

My ministry's programs and services support the safety and well-being of seniors, a population now in excess of 700,000 people. We are maintaining seniors' benefits for those most in need, ensuring vulnerable seniors can count on a stable source of income.

Alberta's financial support for seniors is a major reason why we have the lowest seniors' poverty rate in Canada. Keeping seniors safe, healthy, and engaged in their community is, of course, essential to my ministry and to me personally. Throughout the pandemic my ministry worked with seniors' groups, community partners, and stakeholders to support our seniors.

The month of March offers us hope that the worst of the pandemic is behind us, but we will not let our guard down. We will continue to support Alberta seniors in a partnership with our government and community partners. With Budget 2022 the Alberta government is providing more than \$8.6 billion in services and support to seniors each year. This includes financial supports, health benefits as well as housing and health supports for seniors with low income.

Let's talk about housing. Providing safe, stable, affordable housing for seniors and Albertans with low income is of vital importance to me and my ministry. Since becoming the minister, I have travelled across the province, meeting stakeholders and organizations to discuss the challenges and the successes of Alberta's affordable housing system. Over the next 10 years we will take action to provide more affordable housing, affordable and accessible housing options for Albertans with low income.

Last November I launched stronger foundations, Alberta's affordable housing strategy. It maps out the long-term changes needed to provide safe, stable, affordable housing for an additional 25,000 households, an increase of more than 40 per cent, over the next 10 years by focusing on partnership and innovation. Stronger foundations will enable Alberta's government to serve more Albertans and get more value for taxpayer dollars by shifting the government's role from being a builder and owner of affordable housing units to being a funder and a regulator, attracting new investment and new partners by enabling more innovative funding, and delivering models focused on strategic, long-term partnerships to help us meet Alberta's diverse needs now and in the future and continue to protect the most vulnerable and ensure they are not left behind.

7:10

Let's talk about estimates for seniors. I will now take a few moments to discuss the specifics of my ministry's estimates. In 2022 to '23 Seniors and Housing will allocate \$491 million to provide seniors financial assistance. Our core program, the Alberta seniors' benefit, provides an average monthly benefit of \$144 to more than 174,000 eligible seniors. This year we again see stable funding for two home equity loan programs, the seniors' home adaptation and repair program and the seniors' property tax deferral program. These excellent programs support seniors who wish to

remain at home in their chosen community. This is so important to the health and equity of life of many older adults. We have also provided a moderate increase to a special needs assistance for seniors program, which offers financial support to eligible seniors with low income for critical needs, to address a projected high in growth due to an increasing population.

Ask me about housing. As for housing, over the next three years we will begin the implementation of stronger foundations affordable housing strategy with an initial investment under our capital plan. We will also follow through with all previous capital development commitments and continue to support capital maintenance in existing housing. The first years of implementation of our affordable housing strategy will focus on needs assessments in communities and the development of innovative models and the new, expanding partnerships.

Capital plan 2022 allocates \$281 million over three years to provide new and regenerated affordable housing units and to maintain government-owned and supported housing units across Alberta. About 110,000 Albertans live in 57,000 government-subsidized units. This fiscal year we have a budget of \$112 million in capital spending. You will see as we begin implementing the strategy, we will shift towards more grant investment. This year the budget breaks down into \$67.5 million in capital grants and \$44.6 million in capital investment. In addition, capital plan 2022 allocates \$85 million over three years in capital maintenance and renewal funding to maintain the government-owned and supported housing units across Alberta.

Included in Budget 2022 is about \$118 million over three years in capital and \$25.3 million in operating funds as we begin implementing stronger foundations. An additional \$20.7 million from stronger foundations capital funding will go to our Indigenous housing capital program. This program offers flexibility and autonomy for Indigenous communities to build affordable housing.

Finally, operating funding of \$25.3 million over three years will provide rent support for an additional 3,000 households in need of affordable housing. It will also fund the planning and implementation of the asset management strategy.

Conclusions. The changes that we have made to the affordable housing system like the rent subsidy program and our investment in stronger foundations will ensure Alberta is well positioned now and into the future. Thank you for the opportunity to present the estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. I'm looking forward to your questions.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

For the next 60 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer, which is just right here on the big screens, for a speaking block in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams.

Member, would you like to combine your time with the minister's?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

The Chair: Minister? All right. Very good. Please proceed.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Well, thank you so much. I want to acknowledge that we're on Treaty 6 territory, and I also want to acknowledge the Métis people of Alberta, who share a deep connection with the land. I also want to thank the ministry staff because I know, from my own experience as the minister some time ago, how hard they work to do what they can to sort of mitigate what we politicians do so that more and more Albertans are served. I just want to acknowledge that.

I also want to really present ourselves right here with the importance of affordable housing. It makes such a significant impact on people's lives. Just serendipitously, I got an e-mail from someone I helped some time ago – it was through my constituency – and his name is Giancarlo. He's a senior, and he lives with disabilities. He wrote: with MLA Sigurdson's help I was able to return to who I really am; I'm a kind-hearted, caring person who likes to help others where I can; I was able to help others because I had the foundation of affordable housing beneath me; I have done many things because of Lori's help.

I know that many MLAs probably can speak about the times that they've gotten these types of e-mails. Our work is really important. It's not just numbers. I know that with the estimates budget, you know, we're just sort of looking at numbers, but these are real people that are impacted. I just really want to bring that to the committee's attention.

I'd like to start off on page 162 of the fiscal plan, and there it talks about: over three years the capital plan will allocate \$118 million to housing. In the first year \$20 million will be invested, and this money, we understand, will come from the sale of government assets. You know, Minister, through the chair, this is wholly inadequate to address the housing crisis that we have here in Alberta. Compared to the average availability of affordable housing, Alberta ranks lower. On a per capita basis Alberta has fewer subsidized housing units than the rest of Canada. According to the most recent census subsidized housing represents just 2.9 per cent of Alberta's housing units while the Canadian average is 4.3.

Certainly, I've spoken with lots of stakeholders, and they say that the plan needs \$3 billion. It's, like, kind of a shock to see how little – and this isn't even government investment; it's from the sale of assets. It is just wholly ridiculous, really, Minister, that there's such a small amount being invested, \$20 million only in this fiscal year coming up. When will the minister invest the needed capital? I'm sure she's hearing from stakeholders that so much more is needed.

The Chair: This is shared time. I'm guessing, Member, that that's the end of your questions and you'd like to turn . . .

Ms Sigurdson: I asked her a question, yeah.

The Chair: Okay. But the questions need to be directed through the chair.

Ms Sigurdson: So each time I ask a question, Madam Chair, I'm supposed to say, "Madam Chair"?

The Chair: Please, yes, if you could, just so we can maintain politeness in the room.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Go ahead, please.

The Chair: Minister, are you clear what the question is?

Ms Pon: Not quite. I heard about affordable housing, Madam Chair. Just correct me if I've got it wrong.

I agree with the hon. member that housing is extremely important. That's why we did announce the stronger foundations strategy, the 10-year affordable housing strategy to increase an additional 25,000 households in 10 years and expanding up to 40 per cent more affordable housing for Albertans in 10 years. We realize that it is very important. I believe, Madam Chair, that the question the member asked is on affordable housing and why the budget doesn't indicate it. The member doesn't agree that what we

are trying to do is that we are trying to accomplish affordable housing.

Is that correct, Madam Chair, through you to the member?

7:20

The Chair: If you could clarify, Member.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, what I said was that the \$118 million that is being invested over three years, with \$20 million this year, is wholly insufficient to address the affordable housing crisis in this province. Certainly, housing stakeholders say that \$3 billion is needed to be invested. So this is laughable, the lack of investment from the ministry, and I'd like the minister to address that.

The Chair: As it pertains to the estimates for this year.

Ms Sigurdson: It's page 162, fiscal plan.

The Chair: Thank you. Thank you so much.

Ms Pon: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. As was mentioned, we have a plan. We expanded affordable housing to serve, as I mentioned, 25,000 more households over the next 10 years, and we require flexibility in the weight of a partnership amount or our government partner, community, nonprofit organization, and the private sector. Okay? We will increase that number of households that are served throughout the operating funding for also the rent supplements as well as capital investment by the government and the partners.

For the budgets in the coming years, we will work with communities, and needs are assessed in a partnership or development. We believe in working in a partnership – that's what the stronger foundations strategy was about – and working with the municipalities, three levels of government, and all the stakeholders. Let's build Alberta stronger. Let's build Alberta together. Please keep that in mind, Madam Chair. This is just the early stage of our economy's recovery after the year of recessions and the global pandemic. Our budget we'll reveal annually to ensure that it reflects both the needs of Albertans and also the current economic condition. We will continue to work on the stronger foundations annually and make adjustments.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: All right. We'll proceed back to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: I just don't feel I really did get an answer to my question, Madam Chair, because it was about, you know, what housing providers are asking. They're saying that Alberta needs a plan and that we need to get up to at least the average of what other provinces have, and we're below that. They say that the plan should be funded by \$3 billion. Sure, there's a plan. There's this new, you know, plan, but there's no funding for the plan, and this year it's only \$20 million. Madam Chair, I'm asking the minister: how does she make sense of that, that the community is asking for \$3 billion in investment and she's giving \$20 million? Is \$20 million sufficient?

The Chair: I'll direct that to the minister and her team.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. I've been around, and I've gone across almost the whole of Alberta. I haven't heard of anyone asking \$3 billion for affordable housing. I would love for the hon. member to give me the list. Then I could talk to them directly about how the \$3 billion affordable housing comes up, because this is our plan here, and that is a 10-year plan. Things just don't get done overnight. This government inherited a big deficit, and also that

affordable housing hadn't any good plan in place to build more housing, to fix the problem, a long wait-list. This government is working on it in an efficient way, in an innovative way, and also including our partners working together to build more housing. Our goal in 10 years . . .

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Minister, did you have something to finish off with before we turn it back over to the hon. member?

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Our plan here in 10 years is to build an additional 25,000 households and expand 40 per cent more for the housing and also that we use a wait-list. That is the plan. This plan is for 10 years, for the long term. It's not going to happen just tomorrow. We will plan, and we will implement it.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Back over to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Madam Chair, let's talk about that target of 3,900. You know, the minister is saying: in the first three years and 25,000 over 10 years. The numbers just don't make sense. It's not clear in the plan. She's talking about this performance metric in the business plan on page 96, 2(a). With a target of 3,900 in three years, how do you get to 25,000 in 10? At that pace only 13,000 units and subsidies will be provided by the end of the 10-year strategy. What's the modelling for this scale and investment to reach the 10-year target beyond the three years identified in the business plan? Please provide the modelling. Could the minister do that?

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.
Back over to the minister and her team.

Ms Pon: Based on our plan here, our capital plan for 2022, we invest about \$281 million over the next three years to provide more than 2,300 new and regenerated affordable housing units while supporting more than 2,000 jobs. Out of that budget of approximately \$143 million, approximately \$118 in capital and \$20.3 million in operating is allocated to support the initiative, the first of the implementations of stronger foundations.

Alberta's 10-year strategy is to improve the expanding of affordable housing. Let us give you some breakdown here: \$49.8 million to operating family and community housing, which supports the important work of the housing management bodies; a \$40.7 million investment in the Indigenous housing capital program over the next three years; and \$85 million in capital maintenance and renewal funding over the next three years. Units under construction and new in 2023 were approved and funded two to three budgets ago . . .

Ms Sigurdson: Madam Chair, if she's not answering my question, can I interrupt?

The Chair: No. For today, it will be shared time. When the minister has finished what she wants to say, then she'll turn it back over to you. If we could do that moving forward.

Ms Sigurdson: But if she's not answering the actual question, isn't there an issue with that? She's talking about the money allocated. I'm asking about the modelling, like, how she's coming to those numbers. She's not addressing the question.

The Chair: That would be the information that she wants to share with you. If we could proceed in that way for this session.
Minister, was there anything else that you wanted to add?

Ms Pon: Yes. I just need two more minutes if the member can wait.

The building of an additional about 25,000, as I mentioned, will bring us in line with the national average. Progress will not be in line. We are here to talk about the first three years of the budget and how much we can build for Albertans.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Back over to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. Well, the minister didn't answer the question. She didn't explain the modelling. She didn't say how she's coming to that 25,000. She just said a bunch of, you know, numbers that aren't related. It would have been nice if she did answer the question.

Just to address a comment she made earlier, you know, it is such a significant lack of investment by this government. I mean, I can't imagine that she hasn't heard this from housing stakeholders across the province, because I certainly have. When we were government, we invested \$1.2 billion. And you know what? That wasn't enough. We needed more because it had been neglected for so many years.

I'm going to move on to the business plan, 2.3, "utilize federal funding under the National Housing Strategy to support housing affordability for Albertans." One of the things that, of course, is very important is to work with other levels of government. Working with the federal government is key. There are federal matching grants, but Alberta is not maximizing our opportunity to have federal money. When we're comparing Alberta to other provinces, according to estimations Alberta is leaving \$187 million on the table. I've heard the minister say that she would ensure that federal funding would be accessed, but this is obviously not happening. Why are these funds not being accessed? Who can say no to 50-cent dollars?

The Chair: All right. Thank you so much, hon. member.

Now we'll turn the time over to the minister and her team for response.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. This government is committed to make the most effective use of federal funding, including identifying the future opportunity for cost-matching projects and making federal funding work for Albertans' needs. The 2019 national housing strategy bilateral agreement lays out the terms for Alberta to receive up to \$339 million from the federal government for affordable housing between 2019 and 2028. The Alberta government must have cost matching, which we do to access this funding. They allocated us about \$24.4 million for 2022 under the terms of the bilateral agreement. Alberta is also expected to receive the full – the full – allocation of \$31 million in 2022 to 2023.

7:30

We never waste the opportunity to address and get funding from the federal government. So far we fully utilized \$561 million in cost matching from the federal government. Don't forget that a month ago I just made an announcement, cost matching \$440 million, that the rent supplements are matched with the Alberta government and federal government for the rent subsidy. That's what we do, and we will continue to do that.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.
Now we'll turn it back over to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I'm sadly still not clear why the \$187 million is not being utilized by this government. This is money left on the

table. The provincial government is not working with the federal government. Certainly, this is well known in the sector. It's just unclear why the minister would not want to utilize these funds.

In addition, there are federal programs, like rapid housing, national housing co-investment fund, and the rental housing financing initiative, that are available to housing providers. I just want to know what the government is doing to support agencies to access these funds. I've heard stories of housing providers really having difficulty accessing these funds. The provincial government isn't investing. Then the federal government says: no; the provincial government has to step up before we go in. Sometimes municipal governments – like, I know that Calgary has stepped up where the provincial government hasn't. It's just kind of mind boggling why the provincial government is not supporting local housing providers to access these programs and to support them to maximize and then support Albertans to have, you know, a significant increase in affordable housing units across this province. Why is the minister not supporting local housing providers to access these programs?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Now we'll direct the conversation back to the minister and her team.

Ms Pon: Well, thank you so much, Madam Chair. It is an important issue, and it has been an issue to me and to my team, too, because every chance when the federal government has done cofunding and also that rapid housing initiative, RHI, that's something between the federal government and a municipality. Quite often they even don't consult with the provincial government. The federal government just went ahead and allocated funding to the different associations and then to the municipalities. I did raise these questions to the minister of housing, Canada Mortgage and Housing, that we would like to participate. The reason and the issue here is that when they use cofunding and also the rapid housing initiative, they just skip the middle, which is provincial. We would love to participate. We would love to give a hand to the federal government to help them on partnership and choosing the right partner to get this funding and build the right affordable housing. We always continue to work on it with the federal government and raise that issue.

Unfortunately, when they confirm that they give the funding to the municipalities, we already have a budget set, and then I'm sure that all those payments from the ministry – they are aware of that, that the budget is already set. When suddenly the federal government assigns a budget to a municipality and then comes back and asks the provincial government for money, that would be a little bit difficult. That needs to be changed. That's why I had a request and had a meeting with the minister of Canada Mortgage and Housing, how we can work together, collaborate a little bit better, and then make sure that next time, when they assign some cofunding of federal rapid housing's budget, we will participate, and we will consider and have some of that budget counted in the links of a budget cycle.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Well, certainly, my understanding from talking to the stakeholders in the sector is that the provincial government is not stepping up. It's nothing to do with the federal government. The federal government is investing significantly. So some of what the minister says flies in the face of what I'm hearing from stakeholders.

I'd like to look at the fiscal plan, page 165, and we're looking at capital maintenance and renewal. You know, when I was in the role of minister, we had a billion dollars in deferred maintenance in provincial public housing. The minister is currently – this year, \$38 million; next year, \$23 million; the year after that, \$23 million – investing in this area. Of course, it's just very similar to the lack of investment in the overall housing plan as this is significantly underfunded. I'm hearing from housing management bodies that they are operating units or buildings to fail because they have so little funding to support them. There are serious consequences to this lack of investment. Units are and will be closed and thus not available for affordable housing. We already know that we're way behind the other provinces and we don't have enough. The repairs become costlier as they're left unattended to, the life cycle of buildings is shortened, higher costs due to lack of energy efficiency upgrades – this investment is ridiculous. So much more needs to be put in.

So I want the minister to tell us – you know, this fiscal year it's \$38 million – what percentage of that is the total ask of the housing management bodies? Like, how did they come up with this \$38 million? How did they find that this number was sufficient? What is the total request? Each year housing management bodies always submit their asks for capital maintenance and renewal. And let's face it; we have old housing stock. A lot of the housing stock is 30 years old, but if it's well maintained, then those units can stay open. Since this government hasn't been building any new since they've been in office, we've got to maintain those, or people won't have housing. That's my specific question: what's the total ask of housing management bodies in terms of capital maintenance and renewal?

The Chair: Now we'll go back over to the minister and her team for a response.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Our government is committed to being good stewards of our affordable housing assets. We are currently developing a very good framework that will help ensure that the government-owned affordable housing buildings and property are used efficiently to meet the current and the future needs of Albertans. We have been working very closely with housing management bodies. In fact, my team, during the pandemic, had almost weekly and monthly meetings with all the housing management bodies: what the challenges are, how we can meet the needs.

Our plan here: we're going to continue getting the feedback of housing management bodies and the stakeholders. The plan we have here does allow more flexibility for housing providers, which is to meet the local needs and help make the most of taxpayer spending and ensure that the housing system is fiscally sustainable. This is very important because we cannot just spend rockily and keep spending and not saving the money and planning for the future to make sure that our program is sustainable. So for the capital plan 2020, as I said, we allocated about \$85 million over three years in capital maintenance and renewal funding to maintain the government-owned and supportive housing across Alberta. All the appearances of capital funding commitment will be honoured.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

7:40

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll turn it back over to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, the truth really is that Calgary or Edmonton could completely use the funding that is in that budget for this year, you know, just one of those big cities. That's how low that

investment is. I guess I'd like the minister to tell me: how many units are unavailable due to the lack of funding? How many units are going offline that she knows about, that she would know about because she's supposed to be in charge of this, because they're not being repaired? It's hard to do suite turnovers; they're just being left. So that means affordable housing isn't available for Albertans. I'd like to know how many units are unavailable due to the lack of capital maintenance and renewal.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll turn it back over to the minister and her team.

Ms Pon: May I just turn off my mic for a few seconds? I just have a discussion here, please.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms Pon: I'm ready now, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Ms Pon: Thank you so much. We talked about what the city of Calgary, for example, is expecting from capital planning 2022, and what I can share with you is that the capital plan 2022 continues funding for projects, that total more than \$32 million, in Calgary to build 127 more affordable housing units. The capital plan for 2022 for Calgary again – and I allocated this to housing operators – a possible \$12 million for capital maintenance and renewal of the social housing over three years.

Over the next 10 years, Madam Chair, we will take actions to provide more affordable and accessible housing options for Albertans with low income. Once again, our affordable housing 10-year strategy, stronger foundations, which is the focus on all these issues we currently have right now for many years: this is the stronger foundation to help us build more partnerships and help us fix all these problems that we, short of funding, will continue to partner to create more capital.

We'll talk about Edmonton here, which, as the hon. member did mention, is a big, bold city. For Edmonton capital plan 2022 continues funding for projects, which total more than \$19 million, to build more than 124 affordable housing units and to keep existing units in good condition. Capital 2020 for Edmonton: we allocated housing operators possibly about \$9 million for capital maintenance and renewal of social housing for over three years.

Once again, for both major cities we are going to continue to work very closely with municipalities. Currently we are just consulting about the needs assessments of each municipality. For that needs assessment I'm asking each municipality, stakeholder, and the housing management body: what do we need? We believe that one size doesn't fit all. We are going to work closely with all the stakeholders in the municipality together to provide a solution for the problem.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, the minister shouldn't have to ask housing management bodies what they need because she should know, because she gets the annual reports from them, and they do ask them. I know one large provider said that they got 30 per cent of their ask. I mean, this information is already there for her, so I don't know why she is not up to speed on it. I guess I'd like to have her table how many units are sitting empty because of lack of maintenance. That would be helpful for me.

But I'll move on. I think that this is sort of an issue with administration, and I know that the UCP cares very much about cutting red tape. That's very important to them. They've created their own ministry about that. But this is something that I've heard from many housing management bodies, that there are issues with projects over \$5,000. Sometimes it's just suite turnover. Someone has moved out; they need to do some renovations. Anything over \$5,000 must be approved by the ministry, and the ministry also decides on who is the contractor for that particular work. This process takes months, sometimes years, and it's very frustrating to housing management bodies across the province because they want to do the work locally. They want to be able to hire people locally. They want to be able to have relationships with people who are doing the work instead of someone coming from one of the major centres to do it, and that seems to be the way it is now.

Certainly, I've heard very clearly that they'd like this to change. This is something that the minister can do, and I just wondered what she is planning in terms of, you know, either speeding up this process, giving the housing bodies more responsibility locally to hire locally. What are some of the things that she's doing about this issue? I know that they're talking to her about that because they've shared that with me.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Back over to the minister and her team for a response.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Well, thank you to the hon. member for bringing up this issue and sharing it with me. I would like to refer this question to my ADM Williams to provide some technical answers to share with us. ADM.

Mr. David Williams: Thank you, Madam Chair. Yes, we have heard similar concerns about the process required to receive renewal approval for capital maintenance and renewal programs. We are working currently with all operators, as was the recommendation from the expert panel in the fall, to review the capital maintenance and renewal, or CMR, process, to review how better to do it more efficiently, and to work through that. There are a number of considerations in terms of how contractors are selected and making sure that we follow all of the trade agreements and proper procurement practices, which takes a little bit of time, especially for some of our operators who operate more in the not-for-profit space, which are subject to slightly different rules. Budget '22 contains additional operating dollars for a review of the CMR program, which will be undertaken shortly. We're working our way through to better optimize and speed up the process to ensure that we are having units, you know, as they go through the suite renewal process, vacant for the minimal time possible. We're working with both Calgary and Edmonton and a lot of the other larger providers to ensure that we do that.

Part of the problem, you know, with contractors – again, it's about finding the availability of labour across the province and ensuring that we have the competent maintenance staff to do the repairs when needed. We work through the approved procurement processes to make sure that we can get the appropriate work done in as timely a manner as possible.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Anything to supplement the answer, Minister?

Ms Pon: No. I'm good. Thank you. I think my ADM provided a very detailed process. Thank you.

The Chair: Great. Okay. Thank you so much.

Back over to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: From my understanding, what was shared was that they're going to review this. Things are still status quo. Okay.

Page 169, affordable housing partnerships and strategy implementation. Most of the funding for this is coming in later years. I know that the minister is very excited about her new plan for housing, but I'd like to understand sort of: what is the money going to be used for here? What agreements will be in place? How will the UCP ensure that funding will go to affordable housing in perpetuity? That's one of the huge issues with a previous program that I think is similar to this one – it's known as the ASLI program – where short-term contracts were made with developers to build seniors' housing. Sometimes contracts were only 10 years, and we need housing in perpetuity. So what is the minister doing to make sure that any kind of contract she signs with private developers will be continuing forever, really? That's what government grants should be going to. It shouldn't be going to make millionaires out of a bunch of developers, and I think that's really what the ASLI program did, and then it became about the financialization of the seniors' housing sector.

We know the story of AgeCare. They got millions and millions of government grants, and – guess what? – it's been bought out by Axiom, which is a wealth-generating company. It's about profit. It's not about seniors' care. You know, the staff are being squeezed. The seniors are getting less and less service and asked to pay more and more. Shareholders are making money. I mean, I certainly don't want that to happen to the affordable housing sector, but I feel like this plan is going to allow that. I wonder what the minister is doing to make sure that that does not happen.

7:50

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll turn it back over to the minister and her team.

Ms Pon: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. The asset management framework will lay out very clear and transparent the criteria for asset sales and transfers. The agreement will have very clear terms and conditions through the outline of the affordable housing expectations, when it's needed, and also a small number, approximately one-sixth of the total 3,000 real estate assets, we will consider for sale over 10 years. That is a very small number. In general the assets that we want to sell are either unused or underused and are not getting the maximum value for the community or taxpayer dollars. That's what we want to do.

All proceeds, as well, from the asset sales will be reinvested into the Alberta affordable housing system again and through the Indigenous housing capital program, partnership projects, maintenance, and redeveloping of existing housing stock, rent supplement programs, and the programs that maintain the growth and the supply and assessment of affordable housing for low-income families.

This is very important, that assessment. We will set out very clear and very transparent that the people we see at the sales – the asset sales will be, again, reinvested back into affordable housing. That's why we have the 10-year affordable housing strategy plan, stronger foundations. That's why we have this asset management plan to sell all these unused, underused assets. That will convert, number one, the capital and then increase the capital, convert to cash, reinvest, and then build more housing.

That's why the additional 25,000 households in 10 years and expanding 40 per cent of households by 2035.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you. Well, I'm happy to hear that the minister says that she'll be transparent about the process. In that spirit, I guess, I would like the minister – I know that there was an assessment of the value of public housing across the province that was completed, I think, by Colliers. I'm just wondering if that report will be made public.

The Chair: Thank you very much, hon. member.

Back over to the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. I just wanted to confirm with my team. What I can share with the hon. member as per her request is that we will share the asset management framework when the report is submitted to us. It's under review right now. We will share the framework of that asset management in the future.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right, Minister.

Back to the member.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Yeah. That's kind of unfortunate because, of course, the minister is saying that she wants to be transparent, but she's now saying that she's not going to release that report. We know that that is foundational for the work going ahead.

In terms of asset transfers with properties will properties be sold to REITs, you know, real estate investment trusts? We know that Boardwalk has been involved certainly on the committee that developed the new report. Recently they just upped their rents by 26 per cent this last year. How will the minister ensure that rents will be affordable in perpetuity? I mean, this is such an important question. Whenever the private sector gets involved in affordable housing, their desire isn't about making sure those units are affordable; it is about profit. REITs are about profit. If we're going to use the private market to do this, which the minister thinks is going to be the panacea – it's going to fix affordable housing, it's going to bring all sorts of investment into that area. But how is that going to support low-income people to have low rents?

Like, will there be – I mean, affordable housing, that this ministry is mostly responsible for, is just below market, 10 per cent or so. It's called affordable housing, and then there is social housing, which is rent geared to income, which nobody's talking about. The minister seems to have abandoned this whole part of her portfolio where this is rent that is geared to people's income. These are often very low-income people, and nothing is being done in this sector. Certainly, the private sector is not going to care about supporting people with rent geared to income. I just need some help to understand how this is going to work because it seems like it makes no sense unless the government steps up and does some investment, which they're not. If the minister can help me.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Back over to the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. When we considered and presented this stronger foundations affordable housing 10-year strategy, we went through all the details. Most importantly for us is how to protect our Albertans, how to make sure that they have a home that is stable and also that they don't have to worry about that they can get kicked out. Nobody – nobody – will get kicked out of their house even though we implemented this strategy. This is the number one thing. We do this strategy for Albertans. What we did here to prevent that from happening: when we have the partnerships with the private sector and the nonprofit organizations and then kind of transferring those properties and projects for them to

manage, that is a contract that is going to be signed with the government.

As I mentioned at the very beginning, this government will not continue to be the owner or builder. We are unable to manage that for long term. That's why the stronger foundations is important, to make sure that we have established a partnership. We're having all these partners come in, and when they are going to take over some of the project, they will have to sign an agreement, a contract, to make sure that the rent will have a cap. Also, there are other conditions to protect that. They will not, after they take over and it's converted, that building or that project, then mark up rent. That will be laid out very detailed in the contract. Also, we will put a caveat on the title if we're going to transfer the title. That's how we're going to protect our government and also protect our Albertans. Once again, nobody gets kicked out. We're doing this because we want to expand and provide more housing for Albertans who are most in need.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: I'll just let the minister know that people are already being evicted, you know, even from housing management bodies because of the lack of funding that the government is giving.

I'll ask a more specific question that perhaps the minister can answer. Of these 25,000 new units, tell me how many will be just 10 per cent below market and how many will be rent geared to income.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Back over to the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Currently we just made that announcement about the stronger foundations. All the work is still under – and we just started to implement this plan in January. So all of the key details: we still need to work on it before we implement that plan. Stay tuned.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Back over to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I can tell the minister that I think it's going to be only 10 per cent below market because there's just no investment. There's not enough investment, and the private sector is not going to do it. People who need that rent geared to income won't have anything. And guess what? They'll fill up those spaces in just under, you know, 10 per cent, and they'll go deeper into debt. They'll become more precariously housed. People who need their rent geared to income may be evicted, precariously housed. They may become homeless. That's what's going to happen, and her plan is not addressing their needs. Certainly, talking to people in the sector, they say that there's nothing going on in terms of the rent geared to income. That needs government support, and this government is not stepping up.

8:00

Albertans are concerned, of course, that their rental home not become an investment, and that's what happens when REITs gets involved. They want their home to be a home and not a shareholders' unit for trade, so I have concerns when public dollars from the ministry will help increase the profits of already profitable corporations. I mean, the minister is being quite vague here. She's saying, "Oh, we have a plan," but there's nothing in it. She's just saying, "We have to work out those details"; well, these are fundamental details. So if the minister can at least give some bones

to this very skeleton plan that she's talking about. I mean, Albertans have every right to be completely horrified by what this government is doing and the neglect in this area of affordable housing.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll go back to the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. We have a plan. I would welcome the hon. member to come to my office. I can go through the details with her. For an example of our plan that we are working on with HomeSpace so that in Calgary there's this real other place – that's one of the projects that we are so proud to work on with the three levels of government, with the provincial, federal government, and the cities, and the nonprofit organizations. We all put together some money and converted a hotel into affordable housing, which is meant to serve the mixed income. For market rent, below the market rent, some of them deep subsidy: this is what the plan is about.

We also have the rent subsidy, which is how we break it down to temporary rent subsidy and also the deep subsidy, and this will never change. Affordable housing's plan is to continue to support those ones who are most in need, and we'll continue to provide the deep subsidy for those people. The plan is working, and we also have the projects in Lethbridge as well. We will continue to do that. Like I said, our affordable housing strategy plan is 10 years. It's not going to push everything at once. This government takes a very prudent approach. We just balanced our budget this year, after eight years, a decade. We take a very prudent approach and plan before we take a big step, and we will continue to do that.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Back over to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Well, through you, Madam Chair, just to say that I shouldn't have to go to the minister's office. We are here in estimates to discuss this and her plan. She needs to explain now, and she needs to respond to the questions here now.

Madam Chair, the minister spoke about HomeSpace in Calgary. Yeah, they're a housing provider that does the deep subsidy, and they have a few buildings opening up in the next year, I understand. They have the bricks and mortar; I think they worked with the feds on that, just like in Edmonton. Edmonton has some buildings that are almost ready to be opened up, but – guess what? – there's no operating. Because these are people moving from homelessness into housing and oftentimes some people do need those wraparound services, they need those operational dollars to make it happen. HomeSpace doesn't have them. Edmonton doesn't have them.

Mayor Sohi talked about feeling that the government slapped Edmonton in the face because they had asked – it's not an extraordinary amount of money, but they were refused that. So what does that mean? More people are not going to be well housed. More people are not going to move from homelessness to housing, and this is called permanent supportive housing.

There are those three types of housing. There's affordable, which is about 10 below market; there's the rent geared to income, which is bricks and mortar, but much deeper subsidy, social housing; and then there's permanent supportive housing. It is the bricks and mortar, it's often the deep subsidy also, but then it's wraparound services, so these are the three levels of housing that the government is responsible to fund and support. Certainly, HomeSpace and, here in Edmonton, Homeward Trust, I mean, are not getting the operational dollars. What's the minister doing to advocate for them to get that money? They can't house people without it.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll go back over to the minister and her team.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. The city of Edmonton is directly allocating about \$56.8 million in funding under the federal rapid housing initiative. This federal rapid housing initiative program has two streams, which is \$500 million under the major cities stream, with direct allocation to major cities in Canada, and about \$500 million in the applications-based projects stream. For those in the projects stream no funding will come directly to or through Seniors and Housing. Applications to assess this funding are led by communities.

Edmonton is expected to request funding through the CMHC investment fund under the national housing strategy. The majority of the submissions are expected to require a provincial contribution to make their projects available. Between 2021 and '22 Edmonton announced a new project under the rapid housing initiative. Major cities funding is deemed about 385 affordable housing units and a total of \$56.8 million. Edmonton is likely a strategic opportunity to highlight the municipal and the federal government are ready and willing to contribute. But the need for the province to contribute, of course, is affordable housing project. We're looking for the opportunity each time when they're looking for the partnership.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, the opportunity is now, Madam Chair. You know, these buildings are ready to go. People want to move into them, but they need those operational dollars. Now is the time, and the UCP government has a balanced budget. They have room to wiggle here, they have room to move, and they can make choices that would support so many Albertans to live in dignity, and it's really devastating that the government continues to choose not to support them.

Well, I'd like to talk about the Indigenous housing program, fiscal plan, page 169. Our government allocated \$120 million to this, and this government did increase it slightly this year, but it's only \$40 million approximately over three years. We know that, again, this is a really insignificant amount to address the needs for Indigenous housing. We know that they have specific needs. Oftentimes they need larger units because there may be extended family members in them. You know, I guess I just want the minister to explain why this program is also severely underfunded.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll turn it back over to the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. This is a great program. I can take three hours to talk about this program because we are so proud of it. We have allocated about \$40 million for this program. Since I was appointed as the Minister of Seniors and Housing three years ago, we started building, and we already have about 10 projects almost that Indigenous and our friends and family have a place to call home.

The budget is different because we changed the program. As soon as we inherited the previous government, those programs: that is not workable. For the budget that they allocated, they haven't even built one house in the four years. But when we took over, we already have 10 projects. We already spent close to a \$30 million commitment in the Indigenous housing and build a house for our friends in the Indigenous. The total 10 projects: they create about 189 units so far for our friends and family in the Indigenous

community. We will continue to do that. As you can see this year, we increased another \$10 million and just to contribute – and we will make sure that we'll build homes for our Indigenous community.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to you, hon. member.

8:10

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I'd like to move over to seniors. We know that we have about 700,000 seniors in our province. We know that we're experiencing very high inflation right now. Costs of groceries, insurance, housing: it's all going up significantly. The Alberta seniors' benefit, which government cut back in – like, they deindexed it in 2019 and have continued to do that year after year.

What's really interesting is that the minister – I can remember her correcting me in previous estimates because I said, "It's a cut, it's a cut," and she said, "No; it's a pause." So here we are in 2022-23, and it's still a pause? Or is it a cut? Can she explain that?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll turn that back over to the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. We did pause indexing for seniors' benefits while we were trying to get our fiscal house in order, and we did. We have balanced the budget. We need to ensure that we are taking the necessary steps to support the efficiency and sustainability of our program. As the hon. member said, we have 700,000 seniors. We have 4,000 adults turning senior, 65, every single month. We have to take a prudent approach and well planned to make sure this program and service is enough to sustain the program for the seniors most in need. So we have to maintain seniors' benefits for those most in need and ensure that our vulnerable seniors can count on a stable source of income. That's important.

As I mentioned, at December 31 we have 700,000 seniors; however, we are so proud to say that we will continue to support our seniors. Our government provides more than \$8.6 billion in service and support to Alberta seniors each year. This includes financial support and health benefits as well as housing and health support for seniors with low income.

Alberta is one of the provinces that offers the highest benefits to seniors with low income in Canada. It's because of Alberta's financial support for seniors, the major reason, that's why we have the lowest senior poverty rate in Canada. For instance, for the payment currently, the Alberta seniors' benefit for single seniors, we pay about \$285 per month, but on average for a similar province they only pay \$60.

Besides that, I would like to share with the hon. member, too, that currently there's no Canadian province indexing a monthly seniors' supplement to inflation. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly Alberta did, but the UCP government changed it. We did have a seniors' benefit that was indexed. So I guess I'm going to correct the minister this time, and I'm going to say that it's not a pause; it's a cut.

Budget 2019: the UCP deindexed the Alberta seniors' benefit, special needs assistance, supplementary accommodations benefit, the seniors' lodge assistance program. That was a \$55 million cut back in 2019, and it's accumulated over the years. Of course, now we have high oil prices; we even have a surplus the UCP is talking

about, and the minister says: well, we needed to get our fiscal house in order. Well, it's beyond in order.

Even through a pandemic, which has been very difficult for seniors – it's been, I think, the demographic of the population, of seniors, probably the hardest hit by it, but still the minister is not an advocate. She's not advocating for seniors. They've done what they wanted to do, but it's vulnerable seniors who've had to pay the cost. It's deeply disturbing to me, and I really do not understand it.

So I just will ask the minister again. You know, I'm sure as the minister of seniors she talks to seniors every day. I certainly talk to seniors all the time, and I'm hearing all the very difficult stories that they're experiencing, so I just need to have some understanding of how she still thinks this is legitimate when the budget is at surplus.

The Chair: All right. There's only one second left, so that is the time. That concludes the first portion of questions for the Official Opposition.

Just to advise you on the coffee break, we will do that after hon. Member Loewen has his time with the minister. There will be fresh coffee for us all.

We'll now hear the independent member. Please proceed with your questions.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thank you very much. Thank you, Minister, and thank you to your staff, too, for being here today. I appreciate the good work that you do.

My questions will be relatively short, so I don't think we'll use up all our time, but I just have a few questions I'd like to ask. Regarding page 97 – and that's in the business plan – there's a line item. I'll just give you a little time to look for it and everything. We don't need to rush. There's the line item Alberta seniors' benefit. In 2020-2021 that line item was around \$400 million, and then in the '22-23 estimate it's up at \$476 million. What accounts for that dramatic change between those two time periods?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Now we'll turn it over to the minister and her team.

Ms Pon: Thank you for the question, Madam Chair, through you to the hon. member. That is a change; that's for sure. The number one reason why is that populations go up, okay? As I mentioned, we have about 4,000 adults turning 65 every single month, and that's why we have to reserve some money. Also, many seniors accessed the 2020 Canada emergency response benefit, too. If you remember, that's what made up the loss of employment income due to the pandemic.

Also, that anticipates the increase in the ASB caseload in 2021 and '22, and it was not realized, and that's why there's such a large number there. The ASB forecast between '21-22 was lowered by \$24.5 million, about 7 per cent, to be frank, as a result. However, the adjustment in 2021-22 has had no impact on the ASB budget in 2023, when the CERB program has ended. In fact, with this program, everyone eligible gets it.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the hon. member.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you very much. Thanks for the answer, Minister. I appreciate that.

Also on page 97, under revenue, the line item investment income, when we look at that line item there, there was a dramatic change between the '20-21 actual and the '21-22 budget. Then the forecast for '21-22 dropped down significantly again, and then the estimate

is still kind of in that same line item. I'm just not sure why the difference between the '21-22 budget versus the forecast in the estimates for '22-23.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll turn it back over to the minister and her team for a response.

Ms Pon: Sorry for the wait, Madam Chair. Let's refer to that investment income, hon. member, that I think you're referring to, and that change is just because of the interest, the income, earned from a cash balance in the bank, which is from the Alberta Social Housing Corporation's bank account. That is the reason.

8:20

The Chair: That concludes your remarks, Minister?

Ms Pon: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Hon. member, back to you.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thank you very much. Thanks, Minister. I appreciate those answers.

My final comments are maybe more comments than questions, but I'll maybe have you respond on just part of it anyways. Obviously, we had a discussion earlier today on the seniors' facilities that are being planned for my constituency. I really appreciate that. The communities appreciate that. We're looking forward to those projects coming to fruition, and we're looking forward to that. Now, the only comment I have or, actually, a question, I guess, in regard to that is inflation. I don't know if there's anything that accounted for inflation in your budget, so I'm just wondering if you have accounted for that. Obviously, inflation is something that's kind of reared its ugly head here just in the last few months. We're noticing it quite dramatically, especially in construction costs. I just wanted to know if you have something allotted in there for inflation moving forward.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll turn it over to the minister and her team.

Ms Pon: Thank you, hon. member. About inflation, this is concerning, of course. When you go to buy groceries, that \$100 doesn't buy you too much stuff. We talk about inflation and how it could impact the capital projects. We just recently approved a few projects in your constituency, and we're so excited, looking forward to that and to that announcement.

How are we going to manage that extra cost because of inflation? We will continue to monitor that increased cost for the materials due to inflation and, of course, how this will affect the budget and budget planning. As we all know, the budget is planned way ahead. In every capital project budget we always hold contingency funding for unexpected causes that may arise. We have the monies put aside to deal with this kind of extra cost. Luckily, today all projects have been sort of managed within the approved program budget, and we anticipate that that will continue.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to you, hon. member.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you very much. That concludes my questions. I appreciate your work and the staff's, too. Enjoy the rest of your estimates today.

The Chair: Minister, this is still your time. There are 12 minutes and 46 seconds left if you would like to share any information but a 10-minute maximum speaking allotment for you.

Ms Pon: I thought it was 10 hours, Madam Chair. Well, thank you so much. I'm just so excited every time I come to the estimates because I can share with Albertans, share with all my colleagues, all the MLAs in the House, how much we do care about affordable housing and seniors.

For affordable housing, we are committed to provide safe and stable housing for families, seniors, survivors of family violence, and those with health and disability issues. We will continue to do that. Of course, as you can hear, I'm so excited that for the next 10 years we are taking action to provide more affordable housing and accessible housing options for Albertans with low incomes. Once again, I would like to mention that Alberta's stronger foundations affordable housing strategy maps out very thoughtful changes needed to provide safe, stable, affordable housing for an additional 25,000 households by focusing on partnership innovation, and that's very important. I heard a lot of stakeholders come to me and say: thank you, Minister; this is long overdue. This is a major structure change in 25 years in affordable housing.

The strategy we're looking for is to reduce the wait-list by 30 per cent by helping Albertans to find housing that meets their needs and simplifying the process so they can access affordable housing faster. I couldn't agree more. That's very important. As I mentioned, the stronger foundations housing strategy will enable the government to serve more Albertans and get more value for the taxpayer dollars by a few things.

We are going to shift the government's role from being builders and owners of affordable housing units to being a funder and regulator, attracting new investments, attracting new money and new partners to enable more innovative funding and delivery models and create more efficiency and generate more affordable housing; focus on the strategic, long-term partnership to help us to meet Alberta's diverse needs now and in the future. Budget 2022 reflects the first years of that implementation as we conducted needs assessments, as I mentioned, in the community, developed innovative models, and expanded our partnerships. That's what most of the mayors talked to me about, that that is a wonderful thing that we do, because we listen. Because we listen, we hear what they're looking for, and we work on solutions together. We build something, we plan something for individual need, not the cookie cutter, not the one size fits all.

However, we must also keep in mind that this is a very early stage of the economic recovery after years of recession and a global pandemic. Our budget will be reviewed annually to ensure it reflects both the needs of Albertans and the current economic conditions.

Member Loyola: Madam Chair?

The Chair: Yes.

Member Loyola: Madam Chair, a point of clarification. Just a question to you, Madam Chair, and to our help here. I'm assuming that the independent member had a specific line of questioning, so if the minister is going to add any additional information, it would be in line with the questioning of the independent member and not that she simply just be given an additional 10 minutes, as she was already given at the beginning of the meeting, to address questions of the members around the table. I mean, this is the estimates process, where members of the Legislature are asking questions of the minister, and that's our primary focus here today.

The Chair: Agreed. The member and I did speak. He is trying to be in other estimates sessions that are happening this evening at the same time, so he's going to be checking *Hansard*. The minister is elaborating, and if you're not hearing that, I am.

Member Loyola: Well, that's my challenge, Madam Chair. What she is offering right now is not in the line of questioning that we just heard from the independent member. I would request that we simply move on to the private members of the government caucus so that we can get back to lines of questioning to the minister.

The Chair: Minister, I will turn it back to you. The independent member and I did speak. He advised that he needs to hop over to the other room but will be checking *Hansard*, so if you could continue to answer the questions that he addressed with more robust answers, then you can most certainly proceed.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. I would love that sort of question. In fact, I would love to share with you the achievement of how many projects we have done in the past. As I answer some of the questions that the independent member was asking – "Oh, well, you know, what are you doing in the community?" – I'm going to refer to our ADM for housing.

ADM Williams, would you like to share with the members our achievements and projects?

Mr. David Williams: Thank you, Minister. Madam Chair, one of the projects that was referred to was one of the projects up in Spirit River. That project was to demolish the existing Pleasant View Lodge and replace it with a new facility that would accommodate 52 DSL and 40 lodge spaces, at a total cost of \$24 million. I'm able to report to the committee that despite the recent market volatility and commodity prices, with budget pressures on the lodge, we are still able to proceed, and we are moving forward and closely managing those budget pressures. We did have budget target room to reallocate to this project from budget surpluses on other recently completed projects, and we were able to execute the construction contract. As design is fully developed and implemented, we'll continue to move forward. This is a pretty innovative project, and we're working with our existing lodges to develop new and continuing care spaces that will provide seniors with greater support and help senior couples remain together when their care needs change. The project is an excellent example to highlight of a partnership between the provincial and local governments working with our housing providers and with Alberta Health Services to move forward on the capital project.

8:30

There are a number of other lodge programs in a similar vein, including a project in Manning. This project is to redevelop the existing Del-Air Lodge to accommodate 16 DSL units and 37 additional lodge spaces at a total cost of \$8.2 million. Again, the budget pressure here, that the member referred to in his question around managing inflationary pressures, is being managed because of off-setting savings from additional projects in the capital plan, where we were able to achieve savings through innovative procurement methodologies and fixed-price contracts.

Currently within the lodge partnership program there are two remaining projects, both of which are well on their way, including the project in Oyen and the project in Drumheller.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: All right. That concludes your remarks, then, Minister?

Ms Pon: Yes. Thank you.

The Chair: Very much appreciated.

With that, hon. members, I hear there's fresh coffee. Let's take our five-minute break.

[The committee adjourned from 8:31 p.m. to 8:37 p.m.]

The Chair: All right, everyone. We will resume.

We do have someone from the Official Opposition who has just joined us. Please go ahead and introduce yourself, sir.

Member Ceci: Thank you, Madam Chair. Joe Ceci, Calgary-Buffalo, MLA. I appreciate it.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. Member Ceci.

Now we will move over to the government caucus for 20 minutes of questions from the members. Would you like to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Reid: Yes, please.

The Chair: And the minister?

Ms Pon: Yes, please.

The Chair: Very good. Proceed.

Mr. Reid: Well, Minister, thank you so much to you and your staff for joining us tonight, and thank you for all your hard work that you do on a very important portfolio. I do want to start with some questions that are focused, really, on the needs and the situation that we face in rural Alberta and what rural Albertans can expect from your government in terms of focus on their needs through Budget 2022-23.

I want to start by asking for some information on supportive housing for rural Albertans. On page 187 of your estimates under section 4, housing, can you please take a moment and talk about the work your department is doing to address rural supportive housing in Alberta?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

With that, we will turn it over to the minister.

Ms Pon: Well, thank you so much, MLA Reid. These are important questions, because it's often that when I talk to some of the stakeholders, they always say: oh, well, the government used to be just only focused on the big cities. That's not true of this government. We have balanced the budget and are also trying to build equally and fairly throughout Alberta.

The first info I would like to share with you is that the 2022 data continues the funding of \$193 million for 23 projects in communities around the province, of course including some of the smaller towns other than Edmonton, Calgary, and Red Deer, that will provide 1,161 housing units for Albertans in need. In addition, the investments in the capital maintenance and renewal of our social housing in the communities outside of Edmonton, Calgary, and Red Deer total about \$4.4 million in 2021-22.

Capital projects are just one way of providing affordable housing to Albertans in need, and rent assistance may also be available in the community for eligible Albertans, so it's not necessarily always building affordable housing. We also make sure that we support those families who would like to stay in the communities they choose, and we support and provide a rent subsidy for those families.

Federal funding enables the redesign of the rent supplement program, including introduction of the new temporary rent assistance benefit to help more Albertans in need. As was

mentioned just recently, about a month ago, we announced the matching funding with the federal government for rent supplements of an additional \$444 million for the next few years.

Again, Alberta's stronger foundations affordable housing strategy is a 10-year strategy which is transforming the affordable housing system, and of course we continue to work on it. Rural areas are also always on our map. Budget 2022-23 reflects the first year of implementation. That's what we're doing, and we will conduct, as I mentioned a few times, a needs assessment in the communities, particularly in the rural areas, because we heard enough through the people and getting feedback that – you know what? – please don't do one size fits all. Each community in rural areas has different needs, and that is what we're doing, providing needs assessments to the municipalities, the stakeholders, and getting feedback and working with each individual community and rural area to find a solution, to find a plan that will work both for the province and the municipality.

The budget this coming year: we will ramp up as communities' needs are assessed and partnerships are developed. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the hon. member.

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. I appreciate your answers, and I know that pretty much every one of the communities in my riding of Livingstone-MacLeod is working very hard on some needs assessments for their housing needs, and I look forward to having you sit down with them and discuss what those possibilities could look like for our rural residents in Alberta.

We've heard a number of times tonight about the concerns around inflation and the rising cost of absolutely everything. One thing that's a reality for us in rural Alberta is that we really do feel it in significant ways because we just live a long way from a lot of things. So when gas goes up, it certainly has an impact for us. The cost of transport of goods into our communities is significant.

In light of this, I'd like to ask if you can tell me what the government is doing to help support affordable housing in terms of these rising costs, especially or specifically for rural Albertans.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Back over to the minister.

Ms Pon: Well, thank you. As I mentioned before, the federal funding will help us redesign the rent supplement program, which is very important, including introducing a new temporary rent assistance benefit to help more Albertans. Building takes time, but these rent supplements definitely can help some Albertans who need a rent subsidy. Then they stay in a market rent project or building and stay in their own community, and we just give subsidies.

Also in Budget 2022 – we'll leave the first years – as I already mentioned, we will continue to implement the needs assessments, as you mentioned. Right now we're just starting the consultations with all the rural areas, and we are looking forward to getting some feedback from your constituency as well. We are working together and putting a plan together and will see what is the best way to provide some affordable housing or some of the other needs that are required in your constituency.

I'm not saying that it's going to happen tomorrow, but what I'm saying is that we're going to get all of the information from the different constituencies and communities. We will prioritize and start working on it.

The capital plan continues funding \$193 million for 23 projects in communities, as I mentioned, around the province, so that we'll

provide, again, 1,161 housing units for Albertans in need. Thank you.

8:45

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.
Back over to the hon. member.

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. I appreciate that very much and look forward to helping you connect with constituents to help you make well-informed decisions about those priorities to benefit our rural residents.

One more follow-up, I guess, related again to rural residents of Alberta and this time specifically with seniors. We know that it really is an issue for seniors as they age facing the challenges of remaining in their communities, close to their friends, close to their family. We know full well that the longer they're able to stay in surroundings that are familiar, the better their life is, their health. That has just great benefits, and our communities benefit from their presence as well. Specifically related to looking at the needs of seniors in rural Alberta, can you tell us how Budget 2022 will help to support keeping aging seniors housed in their own communities?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member, and back over to the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's such an important question, hon. member, and this government is always encouraging and we will ask and help seniors who wish to stay home in their chosen communities. That's very important. In fact, over 90 per cent of seniors choose to stay at home. We will continue to explore different kinds of innovative options to enable people, including seniors, to stay in their chosen communities, which is close to friends and family.

We have a few programs that we offer seniors who choose to stay in their home community. One of them is called the seniors' home adaptations and repair program, which supports independent living for urban and rural seniors in Alberta by helping them to use the equity in their home to make necessary repairs or adaptations. Another program that we offer is low-interest home equity loans, which is to a maximum of about \$3,000 per household to seniors with household incomes of about \$75,000 or less. The homeowners must have about 25 per cent home equity. This is another way that people can borrow some of the money that they built in their equity.

The program is supportive either by way of the home adaptations and repair, including the most requested expenses of the following, like house roof repair and replacement, window updates, furnace replacement or repair, flooring replacement, and also bathroom repairs and adaptations. This is the most common program that seniors ask for in their requests for help.

The programs also include some grant components to help eligible seniors with a low income, particularly, who do not qualify for a loan. Some of them qualify; some don't. Somehow they probably don't have sufficient equity or are mobile-home owners on rented land, so what we can do is that we have some grants to offer and provide some financial support for those critical home repairs so nobody is left behind.

Another program I'm very excited to share is a senior property tax deferral program. This will promote the independence of the senior by allowing senior homeowners to defer property tax, the payments, until they sell their home, which is a fee of additional funds for each month. This is another way that we can help seniors, to charge them later, and then they can enjoy some of the benefits from the government. Most important is that when the seniors are approved for a loan, the profit will pay the property tax directly for this program to municipalities on behalf of the senior. The seniors

will repay the loan with the interest when they sell their home and sooner if they choose. That is something that we can help with temporarily until they sell their home.

Also, then, across ministries, Health is responsible for long-term supportive housing with the support and care provided in congregate or independent living units. In accommodations that provide senior housing, that's another program that may change over time, when required to move to accommodations with a higher level of care. That is some of the programs we offer also in partnership with Health. We offer these programs to look after seniors who want to be independent and stay in their own homes.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.
Back over to the hon. member.

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you again, Minister. It's been alluded to a couple of times tonight and has kind of floated around the room: lots of expenses related with your ministry for the needs of our vulnerable Albertans and our senior population, ways to help those folks out. But we know we can't spend without generating revenue. I have to imagine that with your capital plan and the opportunity to invest in new development and maintenance and upgrades on things, there must be some anticipation from your ministry in terms of how the capital plan that you're putting forward will help create some good-paying jobs for Albertans. Of course, I'm going to think of opportunities for rural Albertans as well as we do that, provide those kinds of opportunities for folks that live outside of our major centres.

Minister, if I could ask you if you could maybe comment again on how you see your ministry creating those opportunities for good-paying jobs for Albertans and probably also maybe tie that in about what you think the other anticipated impacts of your capital plan could be for our province.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.
Over to the hon. minister.

Ms Pon: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. That's exactly what our government does. Alberta's recovery plan is working. We offer lots of jobs, lots of investments coming. Every capital in the capital maintenance and renewal project will provide economic stimulus, including the creation of temporary jobs during the planning and also with the site construction phases of the facility and very often permanent jobs once the facility is operational. As soon as the project is started, from the beginning until the end, it's not the end. We will continue to provide job opportunities.

Budget 2022 is supporting more than 2,000 jobs across the province and approved capital projects over the next three years, and that's just as offered by Seniors and Housing. For example, the three recent projects create an average of 271 jobs, like: Fort Saskatchewan, 121 jobs; Londonderry project, 640 jobs; and also the Indigenous housing capital plan, another 54 jobs. We will continue to do that and increase the different kinds of projects and will create opportunity.

You say: how is it going to impact the capital plan and the economy? Of course, expanding affordable housing is a part of Alberta's recovery plan, as I mentioned, to build a stronger prosperity by creating jobs and provide a safe, stable place for Albertans to get back on their feet and pursue new opportunity. The affordable housing strategy could create up to 2,000 full-time jobs and each year with important contributions for our partner organizations. That's what the stronger foundations affordable housing 10-year strategy is about. We want to create jobs, and we want to have a partner working with us to create more jobs for Albertans.

Every dollar being invested by Alberta's government will receive \$2 of a new investment from a partner, including the federal government, who is cost-matching dollars. So we will focus investments in awaited projects such as Londonderry housing development, as I mentioned, which is to hire talent to help with the construction. At the same time, they're also the tenants of the project as well. This is a such an exciting and innovative idea, the project that we will participate in.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Member, did you have anything else?

8:55

Mr. Reid: I do. Thank you, Chair. Minister, we've been talking a lot about tangibles. We've been talking about structures and housing. I want to refer to page 187 of estimates and talk about funding for programs for our seniors. In the budget it states that you're maintaining grant funding for seniors community organizations across the province. A couple of questions. Can you explain the goals for this funding? Also, can you explain what we can anticipate to address something that's of great concern to me, of course, issues around elder abuse in the province? What do you say to Albertans who are concerned that seniors are not getting the services and supports that they need to stay healthy and safe regardless of where they live and especially during this time of the pandemic? Who is their voice to government?

Thank you.

Ms Pon: That's a lot of questions, Member. Well, thank you so much. I'm very excited every time I talk about seniors, and I'm so excited to share what my team has done and continues to do to support our seniors. My ministry is focused on projects that work very closely with the social sectors and the health care system to better make sure they integrate health and social services for seniors. The goal with this as a project is to deliver nonmedical support to help seniors remain in the home in the community. We understand that not necessarily all the seniors that require care stay in a hospital or long-term care. We understand that. We will focus on how we're going to deliver nonmedical support to seniors. Some of this work is enabled through the healthy aging Alberta initiative. We are working closely with them. It's a really significant initiative that my ministry should support, and we are continuing to support that.

Healthy aging Alberta is community led to bring together senior service organizations from across the province to serve resources, training, and experts. We hear that it is very important when seniors stay at home. They might need some extra care, home care. What I want to make sure is that we provide necessary training and resources to home-care individuals to take care of seniors. This is an initiative that enables organizations from the community of practice for the priority areas such as caregiver support, elder abuse, as you mentioned, and fall preventions in age-friendly communities. The organizations that are being involved that help the aging Alberta initiative are informed by their direct work with seniors.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister. That's our time.

I would like to pause and introduce a member from the government side who has joined us. Please go ahead.

Mr. Hunter: I'm MLA Grant Hunter from Taber-Warner. Good to be here tonight.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

With that, we will move back over to the Official Opposition. You have 10 minutes in total. Are you going to share your time?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. Please proceed, hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to talk about 2.2 of the estimates, special needs assistance grants. In the estimates it so shows that they've been underspent this year. Of course, special needs assistance grants are for seniors on very low income. This program was significantly cut in 2020, by \$8.3 million. Of course, that's continued along. These financial supports are for seniors who've applied for the Alberta seniors' benefit, so once again it's the very, you know, low-income seniors.

There's been millions and millions of dollars cut in services for seniors. The personal response service was cut from \$31 down to \$20 monthly, and no longer is the installation of \$82 covered, so that's about \$214 a year. No laundry costs are covered; that's \$41 a month, so \$492 a year. Please remember who's paying for this. This is people who are on low income. These are seniors in our communities, and this is what the UCP government has decided to do to not support them. A decrease in funding for lift chairs from \$817 to \$500; orthotics decrease from \$409 to \$300. Funeral costs, a one-time reimbursement, was \$1,226; this has been eliminated. Health supports have been eliminated. These are several supports for low-income seniors that have been cut clearly by this UCP government. Certainly, none of this has been adjusted to inflation to support people through a very difficult time.

The minister has repeatedly said that she and her ministry are supporting seniors, but this defunding shows absolutely the opposite. When is she going to index to inflation the special needs assistance program and fund the items she has defunded, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Back to the minister.

Ms Pon: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. First of all, I'd like to mention that the member mentioned the reductions – I think it was the past fiscal years, until the end of 2020-2021. To answer one of the questions she has about 2.2, the special-needs care grant, we did that up a little bit, 3.8 per cent, and just for your information, in Budget '22 this will increase to adjusted caseload growth. We mentioned that every month we have 4,000 people that turn 65 years old, so we are just prepaying for it.

Let's talk about now, talk about this year's budget, 2022 to '23. Our budget is 18.8 per cent for special needs, an increase of \$600,000 over the '21-22 budget of 18.2, so this is an increase. Alberta is the only province that has a program like this with the same type of supports, all accessible in one place without the need to apply to different places and different programs. Of course, we want to continue to support our seniors. Every month, as I say, because of the 4,000 Albertans turning 65, we want to make sure that we sustain this program and continue. We will focus on supporting seniors with low income – that's very important – so they can live in their homes and chosen community, as is always our focus.

In '21-22 just imagine this, hon. member. The question about – we experienced a low demand for the program primarily due to COVID-19 and as seniors are hesitant to schedule in-person service and to allow service providers into their homes, so we anticipate we might get take-up for the seniors' special needs assistance program. It would be similar if the impacts of the pandemic continue. We hope not. We're hoping this is over. It will potentially increase more

people's vaccine, of course. This is going to be slowly the die down, hopefully, of the pandemic. So all or any savings or unspent dollars from this special needs assistance program are used to help off-set the COVID-19 pressure in the seniors' lodge with additional expenses related to the pandemic.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.
Hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. Well, certainly, we know – and the minister said it herself, and we saw this in the Alberta seniors' benefit, too – that the reason that the budget is going up is not because more is being allocated; it's just because the population is growing, so individual seniors are not receiving more, and it is just about population growth. Certainly, the list that I articulated previous to the minister's response shows how much seniors are really being, well, more than nickelled and dimed, for sure, but hundreds of dollars are no longer available to them, and these are vulnerable seniors. Yes, you're right. It is not this year; it was last year and the year before. But guess what? It's accumulating, and this is what the UCP government has done. It is not supportive of seniors. It is actually taking more away from them.

Having said that, I'll move on to seniors community grants, 2.4 in the estimates. Again, similar situation. There was \$2 million allocated to community groups when the NDP was government. The UCP quickly cut community grants upon coming into office to less than \$1 million, \$900,000, actually. These grants support community agencies to provide preventable services, Madam Chair, in their communities. They're vital to support community agencies, to address things like elder abuse. Social isolation, transportation, mental health issues, certainly, are a few challenges that seniors face.

9:05

The funding was cut in half, and I'm hearing from community agencies that they have had to cut programming. Some have closed completely due to their lack of funding. Sage here in Edmonton had a health clinic that was exemplary and provided really important services to seniors with complex needs. That program is now no longer. The work that is done in these programs actually saves money for the government because people are supported in their communities. They don't use those more expensive health services because of that. Can the minister help Albertans understand why she would continue to keep funding so low when we know that this is such an important area and it does support seniors all across our province?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.
We'll turn it back over to the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. I just want to be clear on the questions from the hon. member. You know, she's referring to 2.4, seniors community grants. That's what I'm hearing. She did mention that based on my chart here, and she said that that is a change in the budget, but when I look on my chart here, the '21-22 budget, that estimate is \$900,000. That's no change. I'm not too sure what the hon. member is referring to.

But referring to that grant that we talked about, the seniors community grant program, we know this is important. These are community grants that help organizations to provide support to seniors and to help them remain independent, of course, and participate in their community. This funding is also used to support innovative projects and research that are necessary to inform the

policies and the development. We will continue to support the community-based response and needs of a diverse senior population, including the issues such as isolation, which was important during the pandemic, and help aging in the community. We support the seniors staying at home in their chosen community.

Then preventing elder abuse, which is getting – we want to look into the ways to prevent that and deal with the elder abuse in the system due to COVID-19. Also, as I mentioned before, the nonmedical supports seniors need to remain living in their own home in a community: on the service, we'll continue to support and continue to work with stakeholders, nonprofit organizations and support our seniors. If you're looking for the elder abuse, which really comes from my heart, the case management at the local, the regional level, the response to all the elders who experience one or more forms of abuse, I did allocate about \$750,000 of the budget for the organizations who look after seniors, looking to do some research regarding elder abuse.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister. That concludes our time.
It will move back over to the government side. I believe that hon. Mrs. Frey will take the question.

Mrs. Frey: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here tonight. I also want to thank your staff, both political staff and also department staff, for being here today. I know the past couple of years have been very difficult. You've all probably taken a lot of phone calls from my constituents, my constituency office, and I know you've done an excellent job of responding to them and giving my constituents the help that they need. Thank you very much.

Minister, I also wanted to say thank you on the record for all of your visits to Brooks-Medicine Hat, whether that's the Miywasin centre or Newbrook Lodge or the Cypress View Foundation. I know that the residents definitely enjoyed seeing you. It was nice to have the minister in the community, involved in the community, and showing up in southeastern Alberta. We really appreciate that. We've been neglected by previous governments, and I certainly have to appreciate that.

On page 93 of your business plan you identify that the ministry will continue to provide timely supports to seniors most in need both during the pandemic and during the recovery. Hopefully, we are going to stay in the recovery portion of the pandemic. What has your ministry done to support seniors throughout this pandemic? Once again, I'm referring to page 93.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.
We'll turn it over to the minister for a response.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. I had such a great time, MLA Frey, when I was in Medicine Hat. They're so lovely, those seniors, and I'm looking forward to my next visit. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not easy for anyone. It was a challenging time for the last three years for everyone, particularly for seniors. We are looking at doing more for the seniors to present the health and well-being that'll keep them safe, and we will continue to make sure we decide to support their living and that seniors' lodges have the necessary resources to help keep the residents of these facilities safe and healthy during the pandemic.

By the way, I would like to say that we thank all the front-line health individuals, the doctors, all the nurses who have been taking care of all the seniors in long-term care and in the hospitals. Thank you so much for doing that.

We will continue to provide the eligible costs and support all the seniors' lodges and make sure that all the seniors' lodges and the residents and staff are safe while the public health orders remain in

place. My ministry and my team are constantly in contact with Health and Alberta Health Services, senior-serving organizations, and housing operators, that provide the real-time update and guidance on how to best implement public health orders and to provide support in responding to the challenge, and listen to the immediate needs, and we understand that that's very, very important. These community-based seniors' services, the ones serving such organizations which I imagine in Medicine Hat, deliver the service and the support which are very critical to help the older Albertans remain in home and engage in the community, and we will continue to provide support to these organizations to help us look after the seniors.

My ministry constantly, as I mentioned, keeps contact with the community-based seniors service organizations and provides a real update. Even myself, I almost covered the whole of Alberta with five road trips and visited all the rural communities and listened to them and visited all the seniors. They're so lovely. It is very important to hear from them and for all the stakeholders and all the staff that work at the seniors organizations. How are we going to support them? What kind of support are they looking for? Of course, it's listening to the needs. That's why you see that our policy has continued to change to make sure that we are efficient and provide the solutions to all those issues that they may have.

Last but not least, we'll continue to help them. Last summer – I just want to let you know – we hosted a four-part webinar service. I'm not too sure you heard about that. It was hosted by one of my designated executives, Kesa, and the four-part event met with seniors to help support mental health, which is very important during the pandemic for seniors and the wellness of the seniors, the caregivers, and the service providers. These webinars are focused on that we connect and also that we enter as Albertans the world's transition to postpandemic life. We want to make sure that seniors have been looked after. It's not just physically but mentally as well.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.
Back over to the hon. member.

Mrs. Frey: Thank you, Madam Chair. I have quite a few questions that I wanted to get through, but I think something that's really important for my constituency, just because of where I'm located – in Brooks-Medicine Hat we are home to CFB Suffield, Canadian Forces base Suffield, which also hosts BATUS, which is the British Army training unit Suffield. On page 96 of your business plan I do notice that you have an objective dedicated to improving the experience of military members or families, veterans, and reservists in Alberta. I know that in my riding there are quite a few military families that live there both from the Canadian Armed Forces and from overseas. It's very important to my riding that we hear this answer, Minister. Can you please provide some details on how the ministry will achieve the objective?

9:15

Also, if you have time, just because I notice that my block is running out here, Minister, I was wondering if you could touch on your work to combat elder abuse, as indicated on page 95 of your business plan, key objective 1.2. I know that for many of us we've heard horrible stories in our offices about what can happen to elders and seniors when people take advantage of them, and I know that as a compassionate conservative, Minister, you very much care about this. I'm curious as to what your ministry is doing to combat elder abuse.

I'm sorry if I didn't give you enough time to answer all those questions. My goodness.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'll just speak faster, okay? Don't stop me.

The Chair: Okay. Gotcha.

Ms Pon: On page 96 – thank you, Madam Chair. We talk about in the business plan how we are dedicated to improve the experience of military members. This is so very important. Then to this group here: thank you for the service to our country. We are so lucky that the Premier has appointed MLA Brad Rutherford, the MLA for Leduc-Beaumont, as the government of Alberta's liaison to the CAF, who has worked tirelessly to build and maintain the relationship between the organizations serving the military and our veterans as a community and then to support the projects they have with military members and their families and the veterans. Some of the projects that MLA Rutherford has recently supported will make a difference in the life of military members and their families in Alberta.

Let me just give you a few of the achievements of the projects that he has done and did very well. One of them is Edmonton's Veterans' Village, which is the development led by the Homes for Heroes Foundation that opened in December 2021. In Alberta the government provided \$1.1 million in funding toward the development. That's what we call the tiny home project, but they're not tiny. It really just means so much for the military, particularly the retired, that they have a place they call home. Also, the two Heroes in Mind designated projects are the advocacy and research, and under these projects they're providing expanding the treatment for essential service of the providers. The Alberta government provided more than \$360 million in funding for those projects.

Last fall MLA Rutherford also connected with a variety of stakeholders, including a CAF base, to hear about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and understanding emergency issues. Also, I believe that MLA Rutherford helped create scholarships in partnership with the Minister of Advanced Education that provide opportunity, and we want to recognize the veterans or the family, recognize their contributions. MLA Rutherford continues to work with the stakeholders to identify the ways to further support military members and their families and veterans in Alberta.

On page 95 – and you did ask about focusing on the prevention of elder abuse.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister. That concludes our time.

We'll return, actually, over to the Official Opposition. Please proceed, hon. member.

Member Ceci: Thank you, Madam Chair, for the opportunity to address the minister briefly. I just want to ask about pages 186 and 187, number 4.2, mostly on the capital side if I could. I'm just not sure – maybe this has been asked already; I apologize – why the forecast is \$92 million, I'll call it, and the estimate for this year is \$46 million. Would that be for capital maintenance and renewal projects in provincially owned housing?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll turn it over to the minister and her team for a response.

Ms Pon: All right. Apologies, Madam Chair. I just want to make sure I clarify to understand his question correctly. If I may, I want to clarify. Did the hon. member have a question regarding 4.2 under capital payments to related parties, under housing, assistance to Alberta Social Housing Corporation? Is that correct?

Member Ceci: Yes.

Ms Pon: Okay. Well, thank you so much. The 2021 forecast had \$91 million, and then the estimate in 2022 dropped to \$45 million. It indicates a drop of about 49 per cent in that column.

Member Ceci: Why?

Ms Pon: Thank you. Yes. The reason why is because it is a lower investment compared to the previous forecast due to, of course, the new direction of stronger foundations. Also, we kind of shifted directions as well from becoming the owner and builder to a funder. So that's why we search for this number, and \$45.9 million is actually a capital investment for ASHC property as well.

Member Ceci: Does that line also include capital maintenance and renewal of provincially owned properties?

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Ms Pon: I'm just looking into the more detailed information if you don't mind. Just give me a couple of minutes here, please.

Madam Chair, I'm ready.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Ms Pon: Thank you for letting me take extra time here. No, it's not included. I'm looking back at the capital investments. This is for capital investments.

Member Ceci: All right.

Ms Pon: Thank you.

Member Ceci: I take your note that you have a different strategy. You're going to be a funder as opposed to something else, I guess. I forgot what that is. I just want to ask about capital maintenance and renewal for a second. I was looking at the city of Calgary's properties, and they're only getting 67 per cent or so of what they've asked for to keep provincial property units operating at a good level. If they don't get the full amount, those units, of them, will fail. The buildings will fail, the outside will fail, the internal workings will fail, and they have to decamp those buildings. Do you address those on an emergency basis when that happens?

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.
Minister.

Ms Pon: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair. The answer is yes. Okay. The capital plan allocates housing operating about \$12 million in the capital maintenance and renewal funding for social housing in Calgary over three years. We will continue to do that. My team is working very closely with Calgary housing. All that is is that on any majors or urgencies that we require, we always have a discussion since we are always trying to accommodate those urgent requests.

9:25

Member Ceci: Unfortunately, probably too many buildings are being operated to failure.

Can I ask you about taxes? I asked this in the Municipal Affairs meeting. Grants in place of taxes are only half of what the province owes. Do you pay taxes to the different municipalities around the province for provincially owned buildings?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Ms Pon: No, we don't.

Member Ceci: And how much . . .

The Chair: Sorry. Please, if you could direct the conversation through the chair.

Member Ceci: How much would that have been had you responsibly paid your taxes?

Ms Pon: How much? Madam Chair, I will refer this question and more technical questions that are not related to operational to my ADM of housing. ADM Williams, please.

Mr. David Williams: Thank you. We don't track the specific number in terms of the tax bill because a number of the properties by regulation are exempt from assessment. If they're exempt from assessment, there would be no assessment levied, so we don't track that figure.

Member Ceci: It's not the grants in place of taxes that you're under at all?

Mr. David Williams: No.

Member Ceci: Okay. Thanks.

I guess it's back to 4.2 on the capital side. Are those monies there to leverage federal dollars and municipal dollars to address new capital building? Does it leverage monies from the federal government and the municipal governments to build new buildings?

Ms Pon: Madam Chair, thank you. So you talk about capital payments to related parties, 4.2?

Member Ceci: Yeah.

Ms Pon: Oh, okay. Yes.

Member Ceci: It does?

Ms Pon: It does.

Member Ceci: Is it adequate in terms of accessing all federal dollars that are available for Alberta on affordable housing, on housing?

Ms Pon: I'm sorry that I couldn't hear you clearly. Would you mind to repeat it again?

Member Ceci: Sorry. Is that amount adequate to access all the available federal dollars for Alberta?

Ms Pon: Yes. Madam Chair, as I mentioned before, we will use every single dollar and cost-matching federal dollars in our project, and so far we did that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

The hon. member.

Member Ceci: Yeah. Thank you very much.

Just one more question probably. I wonder why this number at 4.2 on the operating side bounces all over the place from \$112 million to \$98 million budgeted in '21-22. Then the actual forecast is \$119 million, and we're seeing an estimate of \$102 million. Why is it bouncing like that and not progressing in reasonable growth?

You have 20 seconds.

Ms Pon: Madam Chair, sorry. Can I clarify that? My apologies. Somehow that wasn't clear. Can I ask you: are you referring to under operating expenses, 4.2, assistance to Alberta social housing, for the '21-22 forecast?

The Chair: Thank you so much. That concludes our time for the opposition.

We'll now move back over to the government side. I assume that you're going to have shared time again if that's all right with you, Minister. Shared time? Please proceed, hon. Member Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and good evening to the minister and her capable department officials for being here tonight. I want to thank you for spending this evening with us and answering our questions in relation to Budget '22 and the questions around Seniors and Housing.

Madam Chair, as you know, in the summer of 2020 I chaired the Affordable Housing Review Panel, a committee that was made up of experts who embarked on a province-wide review of this . . .

The Chair: Sorry, hon. member. I'm just having a little bit of trouble hearing you.

Mr. Amery: All right. The Affordable Housing Review Panel embarked on a review of affordable housing in this province, and we were able to speak to hundreds of stakeholders, individuals, and organizations to find out how to improve affordability in this province. As a result, a number of key recommendations were made, but I think some of the ones that I want to particularly highlight are in respect to business plan outcome 2, initiatives supporting key objectives, in relation to your discussion on the affordable housing management plan.

I think that was one of the first recommendations that the committee made in that report and a number of others which will form the basis of my questions here this evening. The minister might agree with me, Madam Chair, that the basis for any housing transformation, at least one that is effective and designed to meet the needs and demands of the next decade and beyond, requires a solid housing asset management plan. The problem was, Minister, that when we were working with officials it became clear that one of the problems was that there was no comprehensive housing asset management plan in order to help consolidate the information within your ministry into a single resource that we could easily access.

Key objective 2.2 on page 96 of your business plan indicates that the minister plans on implementing this affordable housing management plan. Can you describe to us here this evening what the purpose or what the goal is, I should say, in optimizing the affordable housing portfolio through this housing management plan, how long it will take, and how you intend to do it?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.
Minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Budget 2022 projects about \$90 million in asset sales proceeds over the next three years. Alberta's government is committed to being good stewards of our affordable housing assets, so we are developing the other framework that will help to ensure the government-owned affordable housing buildings and a property, which is asset management, are used effectively to meet the current and future needs of Albertans.

Basically, for asset management, it's that the properties that we're willing to sell are properties that are unused, underused, and are no longer required. It is probably about one-sixth out of 3,000 real estate properties we considered selling over the 10 years. And,

again, those proceeds from the sales, we will invest back into affordable housing. That's how to help us to reach that goal for an additional 25,000 households in 10 years.

Of course, it is also to save the taxpayers' dollars as well when you have the properties unused or underused, sitting there for a long time, and possibly spend a million dollars just to maintain the operating costs for those properties. That's why we decided to sell it for the people, that we have a better use, and as well that we save the taxpayer dollars.

The asset management framework, that you and I mentioned a couple of times, we will lay out very clearly – and transparency is a criterion for asset management sales and the transfer as well, so we just want to make sure that the people understand that these agreements will have clear terms and conditions to outline what affordable housing is expected, when it's needed, and it's very important. We want to make the most of affordable housing assets as part of our 10-year plan and then to improve and expand Alberta's affordable housing system and also align it with the Affordable Housing Review Panel recommendations.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back to the hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Certainly, and thank you to the minister for that answer. I want to talk a little bit about the stronger foundations, which you've mentioned a couple of times throughout your presentation, Minister. I want to know if you can help tie in this housing asset management plan and how it specifically relates to the work that you are doing on the stronger foundations affordable housing strategy. In short, what does this housing asset management plan mean with respect to the stronger foundations model that you have described here today and many times prior to that? And how is the plan going to work within the stronger foundations strategy to develop the goals that you have within that framework?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.
Minister.

9:35

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. I mentioned that this plan will allow more flexibility for housing provided to meet the local needs and help make the most of the taxpayers' spending and make sure that the housing system is financially sustainable. This is very important as our population is growing very rapidly, and we have to have a plan, we have to make sure that the program is sustainable. The asset management framework, as I mentioned, is a very clear, transparent, criteria for asset management and transfer. We will be working very closely with our housing partners to deliver the three years already planned, and I look forward to releasing the planning framework in the coming months.

That's why this is important, the stronger foundations. We're including and inviting all the strong partners from the nonprofit organizations and the private sector to be involved with this affordable housing project in their own community. That's what we want. One size doesn't fit all. We need the feedback of the local community to help us with the needs assessments.

More importantly, we want to make sure that we're making the most of affordable housing so the asset is a part of our 10-year plan, as I mentioned so many times, to improve and expand Alberta's affordable housing system. This is based on the review, as you know, from the 19 recommendations of the Affordable Housing Review Panel.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Minister, for that answer, and thank you, Madam Chair. I want to move on to something else that we've identified in your business plan, key objective 2.3. The review that we spoke about earlier, the affordable housing panel review, identified challenges in finding federal programs and leveraging some of our nontangible and tangible but not necessarily monetary assets to help satisfy some of the requirements for federal funding of affordable housing strategies.

We also identified a need to work with Indigenous communities to help bolster affordable housing projects and federal funding for these initiatives. Minister, recommendation 6 specifically said that the ministry and the department should "engage and facilitate collaboration among housing management bodies, not-for-profit organizations, private industry and Indigenous organizations/governments to build . . . capacity and develop appropriate housing solutions."

A couple of years ago this government signed a bilateral agreement with the federal government under the national housing strategy. Can you describe, based on your business plan, key objective 2.3, how this agreement will support housing strategy affordability for Albertans and, in particular, for the communities that I asked you about earlier?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Alberta's government continues to work with the federal government to provide quality housing, affordable housing, that meets the needs of Albertans. We are maximizing the federal funding to support Alberta communities and those who need the affordable housing. As you can see, in the last few years, our big announcements on the part of the federal minister, on all those large affordable housing projects, which is that there is a partnership with the federal government and the municipality as well. Alberta partnered with the federal government to provide cost matching, as always, and the funding to support affordable housing through the national housing strategy and bilateral agreement, which we signed for the next nine years. To date Alberta has received the maximum federal funding through the agreement.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

That concludes our time with the government side. We'll go back over to the Official Opposition.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay, Madam Chair. The minister said repeatedly how important seniors' concerns are to her, and I'm just wondering how many times she has met with the Health Advocate, who is responsible to respond to seniors' concerns, and can she give us a brief overview of those updates of those meetings, when they were. Only the 2019-2020 report is available. The Health Advocate is supposed to submit an annual report every year, and there is nothing for 2020-21, through the chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. The Seniors Advocate was consolidated with the Health Advocate's office back in 2019. So I would suggest that the hon. member refer this question to Alberta's Health ministry and get the answer.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I think I'm just going to push on this a bit, Madam Chair, because the minister has said very clearly many times – many times in question period, many times publicly – that the Health Advocate was going to be taking care of seniors' concerns, and seniors were going to be well served, yet she's showing us at this very moment that she has no understanding of what's going on. She can't identify the times she met with her, can't talk about the report. I mean, obviously, her words were hollow.

Mr. Hunter: Point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: A point of order has been called.

Mr. Hunter: Madam Chair, I just wonder what this has to do with the budget estimates that we're going through right now. I mean, this is probably a question that could be asked of the minister at any time, maybe even during question period, as the member has lots of opportunities to ask that. I'm just wondering what line item she's referring to in terms of this one here to be able to address this. Now, she is addressing a Health issue. Obviously, we have estimates that are happening tomorrow. We've got six hours of Health questions that will be asked. I think that would be probably more appropriate where that would be done.

The Chair: Hon. member, can you tie it to estimates at all, your question?

Ms Sigurdson: It's 2, senior services.

The Chair: Page 2?

Ms Sigurdson: No. Number 2 on the estimates, on page 187.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Hunter: A point of clarification, Madam Chair. I just looked at what she's talking about, what the hon. member is talking about. Number 2, on operating expenses, says senior services. There's nothing in that line item. I'm just wondering once again: what is she referring to specifically?

Ms Sigurdson: The whole section, then. Just referring to the whole section.

The Chair: The minister has indicated she'd like to answer, so we'll just go to the minister. Thank you, hon. member.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. As I mentioned, I do care about seniors; that's why I'm the seniors minister. The services that we provide to seniors, I can lay that out. A number of supports for seniors in Alberta, including the Alberta seniors' benefit, provide a monthly financial supplement to eligible seniors with low income to assist with living expenses.

Special needs assistance for seniors provides financial support to eligible seniors with low income, for basic needs, including some appliances and specific personal support.

The supplementary accommodations benefit provides a monthly benefit to support eligible seniors with low income living in long-term care and designated supportive living, for accommodation costs.

The seniors' home adaptation and repair program, which allows eligible seniors to finance home repair and adaptation through a low-income home equity loan with the government. A grant component is also available to seniors with low income who do not qualify for a loan.

The seniors' community grant, which we mentioned before, will provide community organizations with funding to develop, deliver, and test innovative programs that address the ministry's priorities, including elder abuse prevention, age-friendly communities, social housing inclusion, and old ageism.

Of course, the seniors' property tax deferral program, which is supporting all of the seniors who want to stay home and stay in the community they chose. It allows eligible seniors, the homeowners, to defer all or part of their property tax through a low-income home equity loan with the government. These are all the services that we provide to seniors.

Ms Sigurdson: Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you.

The Chair: Hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I'll move on to the rent supplement. Obviously, the minister didn't answer the question at all there. The rent supplement budget was cut by 24 per cent in 2019, and it was later shut down. Of course, this created a lot of people precariously housed, and some went into homelessness. This all occurred when Alberta had the highest unemployment rate in our country, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic. Many Albertans did not have the support they needed, which created significant difficulties for families, including many challenges with mental health. An agreement with the federal government was signed in July 2021, so just this past summer. Alberta was one of the last provinces to sign on. Minister, how come you left Albertans to languish for so long during this time with no rent supplement program?

9:45

Certainly, the intent of this agreement with the federal government was to be an additional support for the rent supplement, not replace an already existing program. Other provinces gave additional, but Alberta just cut their program and had it closed for some time. Why did the minister also reduce funding from about \$1,200 for the deepest rent supplements to \$750? Why are people who qualify for those only getting \$750 now, and why did the minister reduce the funding available to vulnerable Albertans? This program should be, like, a huge win for us. Instead, we were left to languish during a very difficult time in our province, and I just don't understand why the minister left people without this important program for such a long time, through the chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll turn the time over to the minister to provide some answers.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Our rent supplement program: this year we allocated about a \$68 million budget for this program and provided subsidies to eligible households that are renting from the private sector and private landlords.

I want to emphasize one thing, that it takes time to change the program really thoughtfully. This is a rent assistance program, so we designed it last year to provide more flexibility to the tenants and give working Albertans access to temporary help as well while maintaining some long-term supports for those most in need.

We created two different programs. The first one: I will say that we designed the temporary rent assistance benefit, which is providing subsidies for up to two years to help eligible tenants afford their rent while the subsidies improve their finances. Then the second one is a rent assistance benefit which is a long-term benefit. We are helping those people who require subsidies and

provide that directly to the tenant as well. That helps to maintain stable support for the most vulnerable.

I would like to emphasize that for this rent assistance program, because of the program that we designed, we made efficient use of federal funding to support Albertans and Alberta communities and those in need of affordable housing. Households that receive those two support programs, RAB and TRAB, have increased by household by almost 1,500 from 2020. That's why this is very important, that you take your time and design a program that meets the needs of Albertans most in need.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Currently AISH recipients receive an exemption of \$735 when in social housing. When they turn 65, this exemption disappears, but their needs are still the same. They're exactly the same person. They're just a year older. They must pay significantly more in rent. Why is this so? When is this going to be fixed?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Ms Pon: I'm sorry. If I may just clarify the question, are you talking about, Madam Chair, the AISH program? Sorry. I missed part of it.

Ms Sigurdson: It's the transition from AISH to seniors.

Ms Pon: Okay. Thank you. Thank you for the clarification.

The AISH receivers, when they turn . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We will go back to the government side, and I believe it's Mr. Smith. Please proceed.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. Madam Minister, thank you for all the work that you and your ministry do. Through the chair, I've just got two questions that I'd like you to consider. First, I see that under element 3.2 the provision for the Alberta seniors' benefit program is increasing to \$359.4 million. How does this program contribute to seniors remaining independent and living in their communities? That would be found on page 187 of the estimates.

A follow-up would be: can you provide some details about how the special needs assistance program supports Alberta seniors? Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, hon. member Smith. Yes, the Alberta seniors' benefit program increases by \$359.4 million because we want to maintain the financial sustainability for seniors with low income. This is very important because it makes sure that they integrate and adapt to participate in the community. Also, the community supports seniors' independence. I always mention that we support those seniors who prefer to stay home in their chosen community. Our seniors' benefit programs are one of the reasons that Alberta has the lowest senior poverty ratios in Canada.

For your follow-up question, we can provide some detail about the special needs assistance program. The special needs assistance program for seniors provides financial assistance to eligible seniors with low income for their basic needs, including some appliances. Specifically, it is a personal and health support. Alberta – I just want to mention this – is the only province that has programs like this with the same type of support and that are all accessible in one place

only. We've done away with the need to apply to several different programs, and we combined it all together to make it easier for seniors to apply to this program. We are really focusing on supporting seniors with low income so that they can live in their home in their chosen community. We know that using the special needs assistance for seniors and the supports can keep seniors in their home and out of that higher level of care, which also is the greatest cost for us.

Thank you, Member. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Minister. One more question, and then I'm going to cede my time over to MLA Hunter. I see the minister continues to maintain the budget for the seniors' home adaptation and home repair program. How does this program benefit seniors in rural communities, like mine in Drayton Valley, and in urban communities?

The follow-up would be that the seniors' property tax deferral loan program has also been maintained. How does this program support seniors to stay in their communities? Both of those would be found on page 187 in the estimates.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.
Minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Yeah, this is a good program. It's very popular, too. This program supports independent living for seniors, as I have mentioned, in the rural areas and in urban Alberta by helping them to use the equity in their home to make necessary repairs and adaptations. This program offers very low interest. The home equity loan maximum is about \$40,000 per household to seniors with a household income about \$75,000 or less. Homeowners must have a 25 per cent home equity to qualify for this program.

I imagine that the program supports a wide range of home adaptations and repairs, including roof repairs, replacement, window updates, furnace repair or full replacement, and bathroom repairs or adaptations. Those are the most common that are required for older homes. This program also includes grant components to help eligible seniors with low income who do not qualify for a loan. We understand that they probably don't have enough equity in their home. For those who require financial supports for critical home repair, we will provide that support as well.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Now over to the hon. member. Please proceed, Mr. Hunter.

9:55

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, I just want to point out some things that I thought were good news. On page 187, 1.1, the minister's office budgeted in 2021-2022 \$644,000, and the actual was \$603,000. The deputy minister's office was \$712,000, the actual \$603,000. Minister, I wanted to congratulate your team on being able to show leadership within your ministry even at the levels that we just saw there on those line items. I wanted to also thank you for the efforts that your ministry has made in terms of being able to bring us to balance, which I understand – and I know you understand – is necessary to be able to provide sustainable services to our seniors and to the vulnerable in this province. So thank you very much.

I do have a couple of questions, and I hope I can get through these. You've previously said that you will continue to support the Indigenous housing capital program. I see that commitment in the capital plan on page 162, including \$40.7 million allocated to this initiative over the next three years. Minister, I'm just wondering: is this program fully funded? Are there transfers coming from the federal government to be able to off-set the cost of this, or is this just a provincial program?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.
Minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, MLA Hunter. This is a very important question. As I said, we want to make sure that everyone in Alberta, in Canada, particularly the Indigenous community and friends and family, have a place to call home. The Indigenous housing capital program is government supported. It's designed, delivered, and owned by Indigenous people. They own it. They become a homeowner. Since 2019 the Alberta government has committed about \$31.2 million under the Indigenous housing capital program. We are so proud to share with you that we have completed about 10 projects and a total of about 189 units.

In the capital plan 2022 we have increased funding to the Indigenous housing capital program from about \$20.7 million to \$40.7 million over three years to help to improve access to affordable housing for Indigenous people in need. We are so grateful to get the support from the federal government for the bilateral agreements so that we can share some of the funding and cost-matching on some of these projects to provide this housing for Indigenous communities.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, through you, Madam Chair, to the minister. On page 162 it goes through the 2022 capital plan. I know that back in the 2019 capital plan you outlined a commitment to provide 2,700 units for family and community housing. How's the progress being made on that?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.
Minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you so much. We have made great progress. Since 2019 there are more than 1,700 new units and 350 shelter spaces that have been completed in three years. We continue to invest in Budget 2022 about \$281 million over the next three years to provide more than 2,300 new and regenerated affordable housing units, which support more than 2,000 jobs. In the budget's coming years we will ramp up as the community needs. I mentioned a couple of times that one size doesn't fit all. We are starting the consultations with the different rural and urban communities. We're looking for their feedback regarding how we're going to build housing and what kind of housing, what kind of design. What do they really need in their community?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister. I hate to interrupt, but that is our time.

I must advise the committee that the first portion of time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded. I'd like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, March 15, at 9 a.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Health.

Thank you, everyone. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10 p.m.]

