



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Seniors
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, November 18, 2015
3:30 p.m.

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First Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Ministry of Seniors

Hon. Sarah Hoffman, Minister

Mike Leathwood, Assistant Deputy Minister, Housing

Shannon Marchand, Deputy Minister

3:30 p.m.

Wednesday, November 18, 2015

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

**Ministry of Seniors
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Good afternoon, everybody. I will start reading our standing orders, and hopefully the minister will get here.

I'm Heather Sweet. I'm the chair of the Families and Communities Committee. I'm the MLA for Edmonton-Manning. I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2016.

I'd ask that we go around the table and introduce ourselves for the record, and when the minister arrives, she can also introduce her staff. For the record Mr. McIver is substituting for Mr. Rodney, Member Cortes-Vargas is substituting for Ms Payne, and Mr. Gotfried is substituting for Ms Jansen.

Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard*, and we'd ask that BlackBerry's, iPhones, et cetera, be turned off or set to silent or vibrate and not placed on the table as they may interfere with the audiofeed.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. Before we proceed with consideration of the main estimates for the Ministry of Seniors, I would like to review briefly the standing orders governing the speaking rotation. As provided for in Standing Order 59.01(6), the rotation is as follows. The minister or the member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf may make opening comments not to exceed 10 minutes. For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of the third party, if any, and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of any other party represented in the Assembly or any independent members and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes private members of the government caucus and the minister may speak. For the time remaining, we will follow the same rotation just outlined to the extent possible; however, the speaking times are reduced to five minutes as set out in Standing Order 59.02(1)(c).

Members may speak more than once; however, speaking times for the first rotation are limited to 10 minutes at any one time. A minister and a member may combine their time for a total of 20 minutes. For the final rotation, with speaking times of five minutes, once again a minister and a member may combine their speaking time for a maximum total of 10 minutes. The speaking rotation is set out in the standing orders, and members wishing to participate must be present during the appropriate portion of the meeting. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their speech if they wish to combine their time with the minister's time.

If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send a note or speak directly with either the chair or the committee clerk about the process.

Three hours have been scheduled to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors. With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting. The clock will continue to run through the break, usually after the third-party slot. Are members in agreement with this process?

Mr. Gotfried: Madam Chair, we're in agreement. However, I just want to have it on the record that sometimes we're losing some time because of that. We would prefer that there be a stopped clock for the break.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you. We will take a break with the clock running.

Committee members, ministers, and other members who are not committee members may participate. Ministry officials may be present, and at the direction of the minister officials from the ministry may address the committee. Members' staff may be present and, space permitting, may sit at the table or behind their members along the committee room wall. Members have priority for seating 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 we will adjourn. Otherwise, we will adjourn at 6:30 p.m.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and the clock will continue to run.

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

The vote on the estimates is deferred until consideration of all ministry estimates has concluded and will occur in Committee of Supply on November 23, 2015.

If there are amendments, an amendment to the estimates cannot seek to increase the amount of the estimates being considered, change the destination of a grant, or change the destination or purpose of a subsidy. An amendment may be proposed to reduce an estimate, but the amendment cannot propose to reduce the estimate by its full amount. The vote on amendments is deferred until Committee of Supply convenes on November 23, 2015. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. Twenty copies of amendments must be provided at the meeting for committee members and staff, and the original must be provided to the committee clerk.

I would now like to do introductions, please.

Mr. Smith: Mark Smith, Drayton Valley-Devon, vice-chair.

Mr. Yao: Tany Yao, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Cyr: Scott Cyr, MLA, Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Orr: Good afternoon. Ron Orr, Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mrs. Pitt: Angela Pitt, Airdrie.

Mr. McIver: Ric McIver, Calgary-Hays.

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

Ms Hoffman: I'm Sarah Hoffman, honoured to be the Minister of Health and the Minister of Seniors as well as the MLA for Edmonton-Glenora. I'm pleased to be joined by Deputy Minister Shannon Marchand, Assistant Deputy Minister Mike Leathwood as well as Darren Baptista, who's our senior financial officer.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Hinkley: Bruce Hinkley, Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Cortes-Vargas: Estefania Cortes-Vargas, Strathcona-Sherwood Park.

Mrs. Littlewood: Hello, everyone. Jessica Littlewood, MLA for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Ms Luff: Good afternoon. Robyn Luff, Calgary-East.

Mr. Shepherd: David Shepherd, Edmonton-Centre.

Mr. Westhead: Cameron Westhead, Banff-Cochrane.

Ms McPherson: Good afternoon. Karen McPherson, MLA for Calgary-Mackay-Nose Hill.

Mrs. Schreiner: Hi. Kim Schreiner, MLA for Red Deer-North.

Dr. Swann: Good afternoon. David Swann, Calgary-Mountain View.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I would like to now invite the Minister of Seniors to begin her opening remarks. You have 10 minutes.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I'm here today with several staff from my department. I sometimes say that it takes a village to be a minister, and that is absolutely true for days like today in particular. Beginning with Deputy Minister Shannon Marchand; Mike Leathwood, the assistant deputy minister responsible for housing; and Darren Baptista, senior financial officer, here at the table, I'm also joined by John Cabral, assistant deputy minister for seniors services; MaryAnne Wilkinson, assistant deputy minister for strategic services; Jessica Lucenko, director of communications; and Janet Gomez, who is executive adviser in the deputy minister's office. Also, from Alberta Health I'd like to introduce Corinne Schalm, executive director for continuing care.

Thank you, Chair and to all of you for attending today. It's my pleasure to be here to review the 2015 Alberta Seniors budget estimates. Since I've assumed this portfolio, I've had the pleasure of travelling around Alberta to see the contributions that our seniors make to our communities and the important work of my department in supporting seniors and vulnerable Albertans. As Albertans we understand the importance and benefit of a well-supported population, one where low-income and vulnerable Albertans have an opportunity to live in safe, quality housing and where seniors are given the supports to maintain independence and be cared for with dignity in the communities that they have helped to build. The Ministry of Seniors plays a crucial role in building stronger communities, stronger families, a stronger Alberta.

Budget 2015 for Alberta Seniors and all other ministries in the government of Alberta is about stabilizing key public services, returning to fiscal balance, and supporting jobs, economic growth, and diversification. The budget for Alberta Seniors is \$619.9 million in operating funding. No reductions were made to my overall budget for 2015. The Alberta Seniors budget invests in a system of supports for seniors that will assist them in remaining independent and continuing to participate in their communities.

More than half of my ministry's budget is allocated to the Alberta seniors' benefit, a program that supports low-income seniors with monthly income supplements. You may have had a few calls about these.

Budget 2015 also supports Alberta seniors in how they choose to live as they get older. We know that many Albertans have indicated their preference to live in their own residences and communities throughout their seniors years, and our investments support this as well as other efforts to help ensure that seniors can remain independent with protection for their safety and security. We are repairing, renewing, and renovating seniors' lodges throughout Alberta. We've also committed to continuing the work to install fire and safety system upgrades in government-owned and -supported seniors' housing.

We have ensured that there are no changes to the Alberta seniors' benefit program so that our low-income seniors will continue to receive the vital supplementary income that they rely on.

However, my ministry isn't responsible solely for the well-being of Alberta seniors. Through our housing portfolio we also provide affordable and social housing to lower income and vulnerable Alberta families. Our social housing and seniors' lodges portfolio is a vital asset, one that spans the province and encompasses more than 36,000 units in 240 communities, more than 3,000 buildings, more than 2 million square metres of space, and an insured replacement value of over \$7 billion.

This is an asset that we must protect, most importantly, for the individual Albertans and families that call these units their homes, and \$144 million has been allocated over five years to the capital plan for maintenance and renewal projects. Another \$387 million is earmarked for five years for renovation, renewal, and replacement of seniors' lodges and other affordable housing. We'll be spending \$80 million to address safety issues such as installing sprinkler systems in seniors' lodges.

3:40

I was so glad to announce that we are investing in supportive living units for long-term care and dementia care across Alberta through the affordable supportive living initiative. Capital funding for these projects has been moved to the Alberta Infrastructure budget while program supports will remain with Alberta Seniors. Funding is included for the completion of previous ASLI projects and for new projects that were announced on October 29. Our government is committed to investing in long-term care and dementia care, and we are proud to be creating 2,000 new spaces over the next four years. These new beds will support our goal of ensuring that seniors have access to appropriate care when they need it, in their communities, close to their support networks, their family, and their friends.

I'd like to spend a few moments to talk about how we're going to promote the quality of life and well-being for seniors in our province. Alberta is home to nearly 510,000 seniors, and that number grows by about 50 people per day. By 2030 there will be almost a million Albertans over the age of 65. That's an incredible number.

Alberta seniors are remarkably diverse and make significant contributions to our communities. They are business owners, employers, and employees. They are parents, grandparents, mentors, and friends. They are volunteers in community organizations. In fact, about half of Alberta seniors participate in some sort of community volunteer work, and that's to be commended. I am pleased to say that we work hard to recognize these efforts through the Seniors' Week activities and the minister's senior service award program. Our seniors are essential to the vibrancy of our province, and my ministry is committed to providing the supports and respect that they deserve.

Budget 2015 includes \$343.8 million for the Alberta seniors' benefit program. As I said earlier, that's a little more than half of our ministry's entire budget. This program supports low-income seniors, and benefits are provided on a sliding scale: the lower the senior's income, the greater the benefit. Approximately 150,000 Alberta seniors receive this monthly benefit. The average benefit is about \$140 per month.

Additionally, about 12,000 seniors residing in long-term care and designated supportive living units receive supports through the supplementary accommodation benefit. This additional support ensures that these residents can pay their accommodation fees and still have a minimum of \$315 in discretionary income remaining at the end of each month. The average benefit through this program is about \$470 per month. In addition to these direct financial supplements, my ministry delivers programs that help lower income seniors with home repairs and needed items like furnaces and hot

water tanks, which helps them stay in their homes while ensuring that these homes are safe.

The special-needs assistance program helps nearly 30,000 seniors a year purchase essential and critical items, including health supports like the continual positive awareness pressure machines; appliances like stoves, washers, and dryers; and home repairs, including hot water tanks and furnace replacements. So \$24.4 million has been allocated for the special-needs assistance program. Seniors are an important part of our communities, and we want them to receive the financial and social supports that they need to remain safe, secure, and healthy. These programs help to ensure that this is possible for many more people.

We're also investing in age-friendly initiatives and community-response models to address and prevent elder abuse. I was happy to mention this work in the House earlier this spring. Alberta Seniors works together with other governments, community partners, and Albertans to fight the abuse of vulnerable Albertans. This work includes developing information tools and training front-line service providers to recognize the signs of abuse. For instance, we've provided training sessions to dental hygienists, who might be able to identify and report signs of abuse for their senior patients. This is important information that should be shared with other health service providers, family members, and community supports. We also seek to encourage the development of community response models through our province-wide grant program; \$3 million has been earmarked for three years for the co-ordinated community response grant program. The application deadline for this year's funding is November 30.

We continue to offer property tax deferral programs that allow eligible senior homeowners to defer all or part of their property taxes through a low-interest home equity loan with the Alberta government. Since 2013 the program has issued approximately 4,800 loans. Additional project grants are available that support seniors' abuse shelters, housing registries for seniors, and research related to seniors and aging.

In conclusion, I'm proud of the work undertaken by the department, with a dedicated staff that is so important to our success, and I am pleased that Budget 2015 reflects the priorities of this government to support the well-being of Alberta seniors and vulnerable individuals and families. We've ensured stable funding for the Alberta seniors' benefit and special-needs assistance, both of which support lower income seniors. We have maintained funding for affordable and social housing supports to ensure that Albertans in need continue to receive these necessary supports. We are committed to meeting the diverse housing needs of Albertans and are committed to enhancing the safety and well-being of our seniors. The Ministry of Seniors will continue to work with Alberta Health to support the creation of 2,000 long-term care spaces.

The investment made through Budget 2015 will ensure that we achieve our commitments and continue to spend public tax dollars wisely by funding strong projects and stable programs that support Alberta families.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now begin our 60-minute rotation with the Official Opposition. Mr. Yao, I believe you'll be asking questions of the minister. Would you like to go back and forth?

Mr. Yao: Yes, please.

The Chair: Minister, you're in agreeance?

Ms Hoffman: I'm in agreeance.

Mr. Yao: Good afternoon. I'd first like to say thank you to the minister and her staff for being available this afternoon for our Seniors budget estimates. I do have a lot of questions to ask, and as time is short, I ask that in the event that the hon. minister cannot find an answer in a timely manner or is going to provide an extremely long response, we would perhaps table that question, and you can provide me with a written response afterwards. Would that be possible?

Ms Hoffman: As long as it's done in a respectful tone, I am open to that recommendation.

Mr. Yao: Thank you very much. Let us begin. To the budget, line 1.1: the minister's office budget has decreased its spending from \$689,000 to \$663,000, a difference of \$34,000. It's to be commended. Your office is also funded by Health. It is hoped that by combining ministries, money could be saved in staffing, but are staffing costs being shared between the two ministries, and if so, why the large expense?

Ms Hoffman: We did have a staffing line item recorded in the Alberta Health estimates. In our staffing overall, between the one office being run through my office as opposed to the two separate offices, we have fewer net staff than there were previously under the two ministries. The line items are completely separate. You were there the other night at Health estimates, so you saw that we essentially had flatlined in that line item, and this one has decreased.

Mr. Yao: The deputy minister's office is receiving an increase of \$14,000 to \$755,000 this year. Last year's actual expense for that particular office was \$847,000. What steps did you take to ensure that the deputy minister is spending within his budget?

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much. The actual Ministry of Seniors was one that was not a stand-alone ministry until halfway through the last fiscal year. Certainly, there have been efforts to make sure that we have an accurate and modest budget for the ministry. One of the pieces that we did is that we looked at what spending was like before the ministry was reintegrated into both Municipal Affairs and Health. Now it's been hived off again, so we have made sure that we're in line with reasonable costs. I think that if you were to look at some of the other ministries that have similar budgets, you'd be impressed with the financial prudence that's being displayed in the Ministry of Seniors. I know I am.

Mr. Yao: Surprising. That's good.

Line 1.3, strategic corporate services, has a massive increase, from \$3.4 million to \$7 million. What types of services are offered by this branch, and why such a massive increase?

Ms Hoffman: Corporate services, again, is one of the areas that was not in last year's budget because there wasn't a stand-alone ministry. It was important for us that we have an appropriate staffing level. An increased cost of \$271,000 within strategic corporate services is due to the severance payment that we saw for previous ministers under the last fiscal year. As well, we saw a decrease in costs of \$676,000 with communications due to a delay in hiring in positions in the last ministry because of, again, when the ministry was created. This year we're actually operating for a full fiscal year, and that's one of the reasons why you'll see that the budget is more accurately reflective of what it costs to actually run a ministry for a year.

Mr. Yao: So it's 3 and a half million dollars for administrative. There's no front-line staff in that?

Ms Hoffman: I'm going to ask my deputy just to help clarify that number, please.

Mr. Marchand: Sure. There are no front-line staff in that. It's IT . . .

Mr. Yao: Line 1.4: 2014-15 . . .

Ms Hoffman: Sorry; if you could just allow us to finish the response. I think you deserve a fair response, so we will just take a few minutes to do that.

Mr. Marchand: It is information technology, financial services, and policy and planning support for the work of the ministry.

3:50

Mr. Yao: Thank you.

Line 1.4: 2014-15 has an actual cost of communications of \$113,000, yet we see \$812,000 budgeted for the year. Why are we budgeting nearly a million on communication when \$113,000 was only spent for fiscal year 2014-15?

Ms Hoffman: Can you just provide clarity around which line item it is that you're referring to?

Mr. Yao: Line 1.4

Ms Hoffman: Oh, great. Thank you very much. In terms of the communications budget Alberta Seniors, as I said, is a new ministry, so that is one of the big pieces. The communications budget line item shows that the estimates compared to last year's actual reflect the fact that we have sufficient staffing in place now, that wasn't before, as well as our realignment. Individuals that would have been previously under the Public Affairs Bureau, under Executive Council, have been moved into the various ministries that they are more appropriately aligned with. Like I said, if you look at comparable ministries, we're well in line with staffing costs. I think we'd actually be on the smaller end.

Mr. Yao: Okay. Line 2.2, seniors strategies, sees an increase of \$1.5 million, to \$4 million this year. What exactly is seniors strategies responsible for?

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much for the question, the increase from \$2.5 million to just over \$4 million. Seniors strategies provides research and policy advice related to seniors' issues. That includes support for communities throughout Alberta for education and awareness of seniors' programs and services as well as that elder abuse prevention program that we talked about – and that's \$1 million worth of funding – and support to the Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta. These increased costs are related to a reallocation of staff and salaries, again given that there was a ministry created mid fiscal year last year.

Mr. Yao: All right. Line 3.1, program delivery, sees an increase from \$6.2 million to \$8.5 million. Is this increase going to seniors, or is it, like it suggests, going to department staff who deliver the program?

Ms Hoffman: That was 3.1?

Mr. Yao: Yes.

Ms Hoffman: I'll just find the right page. There were two main reasons. The first is an increase due to postage and printing costs for Alberta Health that were not transferred when the Seniors ministry was created last year, and the second is reallocation of staff

and their salary settlements, again, from what used to be under Health, with Seniors and Health being combined to being separated out. In terms of the postage and printing costs there were significant increases last year due to the rates but also to a desire for us to make sure that we had a reasonable response time. We certainly worked to make sure that we increased efficiencies there.

Mr. Yao: Okay. Some social housing questions. Budget line 4.3, housing strategies and stakeholder relations, is also seeing an increase, from \$1.4 million to \$4.2 million, a \$3 million increase. What exactly are you planning on doing with such a massive increase?

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. Great. So \$1.4 million to \$4.2 million. Thanks very much. The increase to housing capital programs and housing strategies for stakeholder relations was due to the addition of eight full-time equivalent positions during the year in addition to the internal reorganization of full-time equivalents within the division to address housing initiatives. There was some realignment.

The internal reorganization of staff is also the reason why we've seen a decrease in housing funding and accountability as the FTEs were transferred to other branches. The increased number of staff brings the department up to a sufficient level to ensure that we continue to effectively monitor and manage many capital projects within the ministry, including those ASLI grants, as were mentioned, and to fulfill commitments to address the recommendations of the office of the Auditor General in various areas of our business. We're really focused on the OAG recommendations, which are of course going to help us find savings in the long term.

Mr. Yao: Thank you.

The business plan, line 3(a), housing facilities condition rating index: is this index created by studying all housing facilities, or is it just a percentage? Can you explain this one, please?

Ms Hoffman: The business plan. Which page number?

Mr. Yao: Line 3(a), page 92.

Ms Hoffman: You're quick at flipping through documents. We're just not quite as quick. Here we go.

Mr. Yao: I'll ask some other questions related to that. How was this rating system created, and what constitutes a good, fair, or poor rating?

Ms Hoffman: This is why I bring an assistant deputy minister. I'll have him talk about good, fair, and poor while I pull up the line item information.

Please, Mike, take it away.

Mr. Leathwood: Good question. The facility condition index rating comes from Alberta Infrastructure, who inspects all the government-owned facilities. The facility condition index rating is a rating that looks at the estimated cost to replace worn-out building components over a five-year period versus the replacement value. The percentage in good condition is typically where you have a 15 per cent rating or less – in other words, you know, the cost to replace worn-out building components is less than 15 per cent of the value – then the fair condition is less than 40 per cent, and the poor condition is over 40 per cent.

Ms Hoffman: And it's the same scale that's used to assess in other ministries as well for good, fair, and poor, so it's . . .

Mr. Yao: All social housing?

Ms Hoffman: Well, for schools and for hospitals. It's the same assessment value rating. Thank you for that.

Mr. Yao: It is a standardized system, then.

Ms Hoffman: Yes, it is.

Mr. Yao: Thank you.

As these facilities age, it's worrying that more will slip from the fair to poor condition category. As stated in your business plan, "the majority of Alberta's government-owned and supported housing facilities were built between 1960 and 1980, with 50 to 60-year lifespans." The business plan calls for annual investment in renewal and preservation. How does your department come up with its priority list for renewal and preservation?

Ms Hoffman: A lot of it would be based on how the building is assessed in terms of good, fair, and poor, but the other piece would be around demand, too, and where demand is most warranted. I'd be happy to have – Shannon, did you want to start in supplementing?

Mr. Yao: Is this list online? Can communities see where they line up on your government's priority list?

Ms Hoffman: Sorry. You asked about the criteria that were used to determine where projects are coming, so we'll answer that question first, and then we'll be happy to take your second question.

Mr. Marchand: The criteria are, as the minister outlined, the facility condition index – what is the state of the facilities? – the state of demand in a community in terms of projections of either seniors' population or population growth, and the demand also characterized by waiting lists that may exist with the housing management bodies for social housing. Those would be the key factors that go into the equation and the business plans and the housing management bodies and the housing management bodies' planning and their readiness to be able to respond to the needs in the community in terms of a new project and having those identified.

Mr. Yao: Perfect. Is this list online, and can communities see where they line up on the government's list?

Ms Hoffman: We're certainly inheriting systems and trying to find ways to mostly align them, moving forward, with the values that we think are important, which are evidence-based decisions, having clear criteria, and moving forward with a sunshine list, essentially. In terms of being able to do that work, you can't take 44 years of culture and change it overnight, but we're certainly working diligently to make sure that those criteria, as were just outlined, are reflective of where the projects are moving forward.

Did you want to add anything, Mike? No? Good. Thank you.

Mr. Yao: Line 3.3 in the business plan calls for a renewal of "government disaster recovery housing programs, including disaster mitigation, response and recovery protocols for government-owned and supported housing." Will this renewal be a new program or a reworking of existing measures already in place by the department?

Ms Hoffman: Right. Line 3.3 . . .

Mr. Yao: Of the business plan, page 92.

Ms Hoffman: Page 92. Okay. I'll start, and then I'll ask either my deputy or assistant deputy to help supplement. In terms of the housing facility condition index – sorry; is that the piece that you're still looking at, on page 92?

Mr. Yao: Line 3.3.

Ms Hoffman: In a binder that's so well organized, it can still be difficult to find the right page. Here we go. We've renewed government disaster recovery housing programs, including the disaster mitigation, response, and recovery programs for the government-owned and -supported housing.

Did you have anything to add, Shannon? Please.

Mr. Marchand: The housing portfolio has been called on heavily in the last few years in response to the disasters around the Slave Lake fire and the southern Alberta flooding. This really is a piece of work that we're doing to take what we've learned out of those processes and try to turn it into some concrete protocols so that in the event that a future disaster occurs, we have a clear game plan that is informed by, you know, the lessons we've learned through the unfortunate experiences we've had to go through over the last few years.

Mr. Yao: Thank you.

Line 4.4, housing funding and accountability, saw a decrease of just over a million. Why this cut to accountability and housing funding?

Ms Hoffman: Line 4.4 is on which page? I know you're flipping back and forth through a number of different line numbers.

Mr. Yao: Page 208.

Ms Hoffman: I'm going to ask my deputy to begin on that one, and then I may add something at the end.

4:00

Mr. Marchand: It does relate a little bit to the earlier question you asked about why line 4.3 went up. There was a recognition that we had the staff complement not balanced appropriately between the portfolios to make sure we could cover off the work of the ministry in terms of the capital investments and the spending with the housing management body. A lot of it just reflects a reorganization internally.

Mr. Yao: What sort of oversight was provided by the accountability part of line 4.4? Same page, 208.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. Housing funding and accountability: again, this was part of the realignment. In terms of the estimated to actual we have a net increase to the department funding for 20 authorized full-time equivalents for the additional staffing to the requirements of project managing, monitoring, and operating, again, of the office of the Auditor General to make sure that the gaps were addressed from his analysis. That's for the 4.1 through 4.4 combined line items, so there are 110 staff in total in those different line items that allow for that. There was a change in program delivery of five staff to support the ASLI initiative.

Mr. Yao: Sorry. I read a decrease in funding there. Will this decrease in housing funding and accountability hamper their ability to do their job effectively?

Ms Hoffman: It's a realignment, but I'll ask my deputy to explain why.

Mr. Marchand: No, it won't. Funding and accountability is the group that really was responsible for the flow of funding to the housing management bodies. What we found we needed to do was put more of those resources in our capital planning areas so we could have appropriate accountability around the capital projects that are under way as well as putting some of them into the strategies and stakeholder relationships where we work closely with the housing management bodies in reviewing and developing their business plans and their budgets. On balance, our complement of people engaged in the activity has in fact increased a little bit with this budget. It's just reflected somewhat differently in the budget documents, but I'm not concerned that there's a risk that we will have less accountability as a consequence. The opposite, in fact.

Mr. Yao: The Auditor General on page 91 also found that many of the grant recipients . . .

Ms Hoffman: Sorry. Page 91 of the Auditor General's report?

Mr. Yao: Yeah. Many of the grant recipients did not comply in some aspect with the grant agreement. For example, they charged rental rates higher than allowed, had ineligible tenants living in affordable housing units. Affordable housing has always been an issue in Alberta, and it's frustrating here that units are not being used as they were intended. How will cuts to this accountability impact the department's ability to ensure that housing units are being utilized to their full advantage? How will your restructuring capture that?

Ms Hoffman: By moving staff from the funding and accountability line item into the capital programs line item?

Mr. Yao: Yeah.

Ms Hoffman: Certainly, making sure that we have appropriate oversight is important to us as every dollar that we spend could be used towards building a new unit if it's not being used properly for one area. We want to make sure that we're realigning that. The Alberta Social Housing Corporation works in collaboration with the government of Alberta to ensure that oversight and make sure that we're focusing efforts on the front lines.

Mr. Marchand, did you want to add something to that specific piece around the oversight in response to the Auditor General? Part of my understanding is that the 20 authorized full-time equivalents and additional staffing were due to making sure that we could address the recommendations of the Auditor General. When it looks at 4.1 through 4.4 inclusively, is there something that you wanted to add to that?

Mr. Marchand: The only thing I would add is that part of what we needed to do was beef up the staff we had. We had to have a much clearer model for how we were doing compliance and oversight so that it was clear what monitoring was looking like in terms of the recommendation that the Auditor had made. We've created those policies we need as well as increased the staff to be able to go out and to actually do the work.

Mr. Yao: Sorry. To clarify, in the July 2013 AG's report it was recommended that the Department of Municipal Affairs "improve its monitoring processes to ensure affordable housing grant recipients comply with . . . grant agreements." Again, this cut to housing funding and accountability: will it impact the Auditor General's recommendations in 2013?

Ms Hoffman: Rather the opposite. We've aligned the authorization of 20 full-time equivalents within the department to make sure

that we have the resources necessary to address the Auditor General's recommendations. That's inclusive through the three line items.

Mr. Yao: Okay. Housing management bodies. Currently there are 108 housing management bodies that your ministry oversees.

Ms Hoffman: Right.

Mr. Yao: With the cuts to housing funding and accountability, how is your department planning on overseeing so many individual housing management bodies?

Ms Hoffman: Sorry. Where are you referring to cuts in housing funding?

Mr. Yao: Line 4.4.

Ms Hoffman: Oh, under that same line item again? Again, it's just a realignment, so it's not actually a cut to housing funding. The housing purse is actually being maintained. In terms of the capital room we're investing, again, in expanding the replacement of the lodge program and other essential services to ensure that there are safe places for seniors to live.

Do you want to say the first part of your question again? Maybe I'm missing something.

Mr. Yao: Yeah. We just interpreted it as that it looks like there are cuts to the housing funding and accountability line. I just wanted to understand how you will oversee so many individual housing corporations if you're cutting from the one area that looked like it was responsible for that.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. It's actually 4.1 to 4.4, I would say, that's accountable, through the combination of those four line items, and as you'll see, the total sum of those four line items has actually increased by \$3.9 million. So there is going to be an increase to allow for the appropriate oversight to ensure support for those. Just because it's not under the line item that says "Funding and Accountability," you'll see there's been an increase to the capital programs line item; there's been an increase to the housing strategies line item. So it's a realignment, but there has actually been a net increase between those four line items, when you add them up, of \$3.9 million. It's just a change in the organizational structure and whom people are reporting to. It's certainly not a reduction in the oversight, but I appreciate your desire to ensure that we're providing proper oversight.

Mr. Yao: Line 3.2 of the business plan calls for the promotion of effective asset management. Are 108 individual housing management bodies really the most effective way of providing affordable housing?

Ms Hoffman: I have to point out that sometimes I wonder where individuals lie on the local autonomy piece. Certainly, we want to make sure that we get resources into the hands of those who are closest to the ground, to the people that need to be served. I've met with a number of the HMBs throughout Alberta, and I have to say that I think that they, by living in their communities and having close connection to the individuals who are in need of housing, seniors' housing and other types of social housing, have a pretty good pulse of understanding.

Did you, Assistant Deputy, want to add anything to that around the HMBs and the importance of why we have 108 and if we think that's specifically the right answer for a number or not?

Mr. Leathwood: The only thing I'd add is that we do encourage, where it makes sense, management bodies to work together on priority initiatives. As an example, they may share administrative services, payroll services, or project management services, but as the minister said, we want to support and enable local-based delivery, support those boards, volunteers in their communities. So we think it is a good system, but we're always there to stand to build capacity and ensure they're successful.

Mr. Yao: These housing management bodies: are they more or less property management corporations?

Ms Hoffman: I'd be happy to connect you with some that are in your own municipality and in the region if you want. Typically there are a number of different seniors' lodges or different types of supportive living initiatives as well as social housing that are run co-operatively, as was said, by a volunteer board. They'd have an executive director who helps oversee efficiencies. A lot of the time they also focus on fundraising initiatives to help add additional supports within the community.

For example, when I was in Jasper visiting their HMB earlier in the summer, they had invested in a community garden that was attached to the lodge, which was also connected to the hospital, so they have this ability for the seniors who are living there to have additional support. I think that sometimes by having individuals who are really closely connected – some of the volunteers on the housing body are children of some of the seniors living in these facilities – they understand that little piece around quality of life in a way that they can help address it at the local level.

Mr. Yao: Would you be able to provide the administrative costs for each agency, including boards? Can you provide that breakdown? We can table that one.

Ms Hoffman: We can respond in writing at a later point, I think, with that information.

Mr. Yao: Thank you.

To the chair: we'll table that question. Thank you very much.

Regarding housing corporations, on what line item can I find them in your budget? Are they counted on the government books?

Ms Hoffman: Sorry. What was the question?

Mr. Yao: In your budget are these actual housing corporations included in the books, or are they considered a separate entity?

Ms Hoffman: Like the Capital Region Housing Corporation?

Mr. Yao: Wood Buffalo housing, et cetera, et cetera.

Ms Hoffman: Okay. They're not reflected. They don't have a separate entity. They are separate entities, but they'd be under which line items as an inclusive allocation if you don't mind pointing those out to us, which should be the line items that they would receive funding from? Just like a school board I would imagine they would have their own budgeting process, and you would be able to see their administrative costs that way.

4:10

Mr. Marchand: Yes. So on page 215, which is the corporation statement of operations for the Social Housing Corporation, the money flowing through to the housing management bodies would really be represented in most of the expense lines. There's a portion of the money that's going to seniors' housing, and that would go out to the HMBs as well as family housing, the rent supplement,

and the other elements as well. So there is no sort of consolidated line that says: here's how much goes to housing management bodies. Although, by and large, the expenses of the Social Housing Corporation are not exclusive, the large majority of those expenses would be to HMBs.

Mr. Yao: When I was researching these housing bodies – I just noticed that perhaps these different agencies seem to utilize different accounting practices. Can you confirm this for me, and can you identify which of these housing agencies leverage their property value versus ones that do not?

Ms Hoffman: So do they use public-sector accounting practices, or do they . . .

Mr. Yao: Some leverage the value of their properties to enable maintenance and whatnot of their projects, as an example, whereas others actually consider their property to be a liability.

Ms Hoffman: Right.

Mr. Yao: Do you have clarity on which use which accounting practices, or can you confirm this for me, for starters?

Ms Hoffman: Yes. I am going to ask the deputy or his designate to talk about the – I'm assuming it would be PSAS that it would be governed under and then around the liability piece or whatever it may be.

Mr. Marchand: I'll ask Mike to speak to this.

Mr. Leathwood: Yeah. As public bodies operating under the Alberta Housing Act, they do have a requirement to operate in accordance with generally accepted accounting practices. There's a requirement for them to prepare and present their financial statements publicly. They have to submit them to the ministry. So they are open, public bodies that people can access information from. From an accounting point of view, they have to follow accounting practices, and from a public reporting point of view, pursuant to the Alberta Housing Act they do have to prepare and submit and make information public from a financial point of view and an operations point of view.

As far as leveraging properties, depending on the management body and the nature of the property that they have and how it's financed, some will leverage the assets, but if it's government-owned social housing, there's no ability to leverage them because we own it. But if they own it and they've received the grant funding and they perhaps already have a mortgage on it and they have the cash load to do it, then, yeah, that's encouraged, and the strong, good ones do that, and they end up doing more.

Mr. Yao: So yes.

Ms Hoffman: Also, I think that some of them who own land are another piece because, of course, social housing isn't just a responsibility of the provincial government but also in collaboration with the federal and municipal leaders. Sometimes there will be land that's owned by one order of government and the building is owned another, so of course they wouldn't have the ability to borrow based on that asset because they don't own the total asset.

Mr. Yao: Line 3.2 of the business plan calls for "a co-management approach with housing providers [to] promote effective asset management and project development strategies for effective preservation and renewal of government-owned and supported

housing.” Is this line suggesting an amalgamation of these housing management bodies?

Ms Hoffman: I know you’re very quick to get many answers, but sometimes in how quickly you speak, I can’t follow the line items that you’re saying.

Mr. Yao: Line 3.2 of the business plan.

Ms Hoffman: Okay.

Mr. Yao: Basically, is this suggesting that you are considering some amalgamation of some of these housing bodies, that you might identify some inefficiencies?

Ms Hoffman: Not this year. Certainly, if they have a desire around aligning and working collaboratively long term with their partners, we’re open to those ideas, but I think that for the most part they’re doing good work. They’re operating in a way that’s responsive to their communities and their community-led initiatives. So it’s certainly not part of my intention within this fiscal plan that there be any amalgamation.

Mr. Yao: Line 3.4 of the business plan calls to “collaborate with housing management bodies and other housing providers on enhancing their capacity to provide local housing options for those most in need.” Will this be collaboration or an amalgamation of these housing management bodies at all?

Ms Hoffman: So collaborating with those housing management bodies and those providers, but it’s certainly not our intention to have amalgamation of the housing management bodies. I haven’t heard them express – what you hear more often is: we’d like to offer more stock. You hear about their specific needs and their specific communities. They don’t usually say that their issue is that they think that they should be responsible for more. They really want to meet the needs of their local communities and think that they’d have tools to be able to do that if they had increased funding. Certainly, with the \$4.4 billion in capital funding, that will be working to determine where, specifically, those end up in terms of which ministry and which housing project. There is a significant desire from the housing management bodies to expand their scope of delivery in the years to come.

Mr. Yao: Lines 3.1, 3.2, and 3.4 call for some type of collaboration or co-operation. What guarantees can we have that this will lead to more efficient housing management bodies and not just more administration in government?

Ms Hoffman: Well, specifically speaking about co-operation, I think that is around finding those efficiencies in ways to work and maximizing returns. For example, I often think about similarities between other ministries. When I was at Edmonton public schools, I worked for all five years I was there to get a joint transportation initiative, not because that would take away any local autonomy from one board or the other but because if there are buses driving by kids’ houses that are going to the same general area, they should be stopping and picking up those kids on their way. It’s the same with looking at these types of initiatives. If you’re talking about a lodge renewal program and two communities within a reasonable distance between them, of course we would want those housing management bodies to look at ways that they can offer efficiencies so that we can have economies of scale in doing renovations or other initiatives. The sprinkler program, I think, is one way that we’ve been able to maximize some of those efficiencies by doing it on such a large scale.

Mr. Yao: In 2007 the department invested \$1.1 billion to create 11,000 affordable housing units for low-income Albertans. By 2013, the time of the AG’s report, 5,900 of these units had been built. In your business plan you allude to funding going towards new and existing developments. Are these developments part of the previous 11,000 new housing units, or are you embarking on a whole different housing development plan?

Ms Hoffman: I will ask Mike as the ADM to expand a little bit on that if that’s all right.

Mr. Leathwood: Yeah. The affordable housing program, the grant program you referred to, was a program that was very successful in adding and supplying a partnership approach for a five-year period that ended March 31, 2012. Our priority as a housing group in the last number of years has been the reinvestment back into the government-owned and -supported portfolio, knowing that it’s aged, in particular the lodges and, in particular, in rural Alberta. So the priority in the near term is to continue to invest in renewing that stock, a stock that’s vital in the community.

Mr. Yao: Okay. Much of the available social housing has reached the end of its lifespan. How many of these housing authorities are mandated to remove these liabilities from their books, and how many have the ability in their mandate to provide maintenance, repair, or even to rebuild?

Ms Hoffman: You’ll probably be happy to know that I reached out very quickly to the new federal minister responsible for housing. I think one of the big challenges we’ve been seeing – Alberta has a lot of projects that have been supported in the past by the federal government, but other jurisdictions like Ontario have an even larger stock of social housing. One of the big risks was that the federal government’s responsibilities around social housing, the contracts that they’d entered into, are coming to a close very soon.

When I’ve been meeting with the communities – Red Deer, for example – I said: what are your three big takeaways? Number one was, “Keep social housing social; don’t take our social housing projects and privatize them and put these units up for sale,” which some municipalities had experienced in the past. Number two was to maintain the current stock of social housing. Number three was to expand social housing because of the growing needs.

In terms of those being the top three drivers, of course, the housing management bodies are a partner in helping us deliver, but really this is an initiative that the federal, provincial, and municipal governments all need to own. It doesn’t matter which taxpayer is footing the bill. At the end of the day, we need to make sure everyone can live safely. It’s about quality of life not just for those individuals in need of housing but also for every other citizen in the community who’s impacted. When somebody isn’t living with respect and dignity for themselves, it impacts the whole community.

Mr. Yao: Yeah. To clarify, is there an ability to adjust the mandates of these housing bodies to maximize the value and return on investment?

Ms Hoffman: Sorry. Are you saying that you have a concern with the return that you’re seeing currently from the housing management bodies?

Mr. Yao: Again, I’ve seen some housing management bodies where, once the product expires and is deemed unfit by Alberta Health, it just gets sold on the public market. I’ve experienced that personally.

Ms Hoffman: So the “social doesn’t stay social” piece.

Mr. Yao: Exactly. I just look at that and can’t help but wonder why they don’t leverage the value of the property to build a new property on that. I’m trying to provide you with some solutions.

Ms Hoffman: I like that.

Mr. Yao: You told me once, “I’m a solutions-based person,” and I’m certainly trying to help you to find some solutions that won’t impact our bottom lines by utilizing and leveraging some other abilities to get the social housing out there, because the Wildrose believes (a) in helping our government, and (b) we do believe in helping our most vulnerable population.

4:20

Ms Hoffman: Thanks for helping the taxpayer try to see a return on the investment for everyone’s salaries in this House. That’s great.

In terms of that piece, it depends a lot on the specific ownership of the property. If one of those sites, as I said, has joint ownership with the land, that’s, of course, a bit of a liability. I’d say that one of the other liabilities is that I have talked to some communities that say: “Is it your desire to keep social housing social? If it is, we’ll work with you in partnership.” They just really want to know what the driving values are. I’d say that one of the driving values would be making sure that everyone has a safe place to live and that if we’ve got an asset, we don’t want to see a net reduction. Wait-lists have gotten longer over the last few years for people trying to access social housing, so we actually need to grow the stock, not shrink the stock.

We also need to work with other partners like Habitat for Humanity in helping leverage people who were at one point living in social housing to be able to live in a house that they help pay a mortgage on and help own, and that frees up that original space as well. I’m definitely open to other suggestions that you might have, but I imagine part of it would be . . .

Mr. Yao: I’m full of them.

Ms Hoffman: You’re full of a lot of things, yeah.

The Chair: Please continue.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Yao: Let’s change the subject a little bit here. Line 1.2 of the business plan speaks to the implementation of an elder abuse strategy. Could you explain a little bit more in detail regarding this initiative? I think it’s great.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. Thanks. That was really early in the time I took office, actually. It was a million dollars for this year. Basically, it’s been a number of grants that have gone out to various municipalities. I know one was in Lethbridge-East. It was about \$50,000, and that was to have a half-time person that was operating in the office topped up to a full-time person and, really, about doing those PD sessions with staff throughout the community.

We’re committed to working with Albertans, of course, to protect the safety of, particularly, those who are vulnerable. It’s estimated that 10 per cent of seniors may be experiencing some form of elder abuse. This is really about having tangible resources get into the communities, into the hands of people who are educated to help increase the education of others. We have 145 trainers who are certified to conduct workshops with members of the community. Alberta Seniors funds two seniors shelters as well, which include

the SAGE seniors safe housing in Edmonton as well as the Kerby Rotary Shelter in Calgary. Those provide emergency shelter and transitional spaces for individuals. Unfortunately, right now they’re just in the two major metro municipalities, but I’m certainly open to other ways to provide safe places for seniors who might be facing a variety of different types of abuse throughout their communities. Awareness is, of course, step 1, and then making sure that we have resources is step 2.

Mr. Yao: All right. Cuts to programs for low-income seniors: I’m looking for some clarity. Line 2.3, special needs and project grants, saw a reduction of nearly \$4 million this year. Seniors are telling us more and more that they wish to stay in their homes, as you know. The special-needs assistance program is a great tool to help ensure that low-income seniors are able to stay in their homes longer by helping out with maintenance of their properties. The actual cost of this program in 2014-15 was \$31 million, obviously showing a well-subscribed program. Why was this program cut to \$27 million, which is over \$4 million less?

Ms Hoffman: That was 2.2 or 2.3?

Mr. Yao: Line 2.3.

Ms Hoffman: Okay. Good. We’ve allocated \$24.4 million to the special-needs assistance program. This is a reduction, as you’ve said, of \$2.5 million from the previous year’s actual expenditure. The special-needs assistance program grant budget was reduced in anticipation of the new seniors’ home loan program. Our government is continuing to look at the option for seniors to improve and expand their home repairs and modifications for seniors who wish to remain in their homes longer term. We’re looking at having both a grant and a loan component to be able to expand the number of seniors who are eligible. For the 2015-16 fiscal year it’s expected that approximately 29,900 low-income seniors will receive an average of \$920 in assistance, for an estimated expenditure of \$27.5 million. Part of this is that we’re halfway through the fiscal year. We have much more accurate estimates than what would happen if you were at the beginning of a fiscal year.

Mr. Yao: Line 2.1 of the business plan: “Develop and provide individual community . . . supports that enable seniors to stay in . . . homes and remain active in their communities.” Your own annual report states that approximately 30,000 clients received a benefit from the special-needs assistance program to assist in supporting seniors’ independence. However, we do see cuts to the special-needs assistance and project grants. Why cut this particular program, that was developed to help seniors stay in their homes longer?

Ms Hoffman: Thank you for the question. Of course, we have a growing number of seniors. In my opening comments I said that at least 50 people turn age 65 or older in Alberta every day. I’ve heard that some days it’s a hundred people. We know that the number of seniors is continuing to grow. Everyone is very aware of the current fiscal situation. We want to be able to help more people, but we probably aren’t going to be able to invest significantly more money.

One of the pieces that we’ve done is that we’ve looked into a loan program, so leveraging that equity, to be able to have those adaptations done to your home. By having a loan component, not everyone will require a grant, so it’ll actually cost less overall. But it will help seniors today, which, of course, is our goal, to have immediate supports in their homes and making them safe for a longer term.

The reduction is because we're going to be expanding a loan component. There will still be some grant pieces, but there will be a loan component, which costs less to the overall treasury.

Mr. Yao: Line 2.4 of the business plan calls for partnerships with all levels of government to empower seniors with the support they need, yet we see cuts to the special-needs assistance and project grants as well as cuts to the Alberta seniors' benefits grants. This sounds more like downloading provincial responsibilities to other jurisdictions rather than collaboration. What steps are you taking to ensure that this does not happen?

Ms Hoffman: Of course, as I've said earlier around social housing being a responsibility for all orders of government, it's the same in taking care of our seniors. We're proud to have a significant role through the ministry. A lot of it has been about empowering individuals and communities to be able to be strong advocates for themselves.

We're certainly working in collaboration through our own Seniors' Advocate to make sure that these types of resources are available to seniors who need them. The Seniors' Advocate is a piece within the ministry that's important to making sure that everyone stands up and takes their own responsibility but also supports each other in leveraging these resources to make sure that seniors can live safely.

Mr. Yao: Line 3.2, the Alberta seniors' benefit grant, was allocated \$346 million last budget cycle. In this budget cycle we see the funding cut by over \$3 million. According to your annual report the Alberta Seniors Benefit program provides the Supplemental Accommodation Benefit to around 12,000 lower-income seniors who live in long-term care and designated supportive living facilities. This benefit ensures they have at least \$315 remaining in disposable income each month after paying facility accommodation charges.

Why was there such a cut to a program that directly helps low-income seniors?

Ms Hoffman: You'll see that when you compare the budget to the estimate for this year, there's a decrease, but when you compare the actual to the estimate for this year, there isn't. One of the reasons why we're looking at actually having a significant increase – last year it was \$330 million; this year it's \$343 million – is because the eligibility has not changed. The number of seniors who are eligible now has increased. The estimates weren't accurate last year. They had a variance between the budget and the actual.

In terms of our estimate this year, again, we're halfway through the fiscal year. We have the tax information. We're pretty confident about who's going to be eligible, and with that in mind we're able to budget accordingly.

But it's, really, a demand-driven program. It's not that we have made a decision to cut; it's that demand has warranted an increase from what the actual was last year, and we're budgeting for that increase.

Mr. Yao: I'll keep on referring to the Seniors' Advocate. In line 2.5 we see that the Seniors' Advocate is getting \$1 million in funding, and this is good. It's critical that seniors have a voice when problems arise, because, God knows, you don't listen to me all the time. What exactly will that \$1 million cover?

Ms Hoffman: Thanks for the question. I listen to you often.

Seniors have told us that they want a place where they can have a navigator to help them work within the system. Since the advocate office opened in April 2014, nearly 600 Albertans have asked for

assistance with seniors-related issues that have been supported through this office.

The Seniors' Advocate provides information and resolution supports to seniors and their families on issues that are relevant to them and advises government on trends and systematic issues they have seen through their call volume. If, for example, they get calls around financial abuse of seniors and if they've been tracking those trends, they can say: "You know what? These are some of the areas seniors are having." You know, everyone gets those phone calls where somebody answers the phone and wants to sell you something or congratulate you on having won something. They're able to update the department. The department is able to work with other ministries and help address those in a timely fashion. It's a \$1 million budget allocation for the advocate's office. We'll continue to look at the role and the mandate as we move forward, but 600 seniors have already been helped since April 2014, so we think that's a positive trend.

4:30

Mr. Yao: Okay. Who exactly does the Seniors' Advocate answer to? Is it AHS, or is it the minister directly? I've heard from seniors who feel that the Seniors' Advocate should be an independent officer of the Legislature. Some may feel uncomfortable raising issues if the Seniors' Advocate brings forward concerns to the very department that the concerns arose from. Has there been any thought to the idea of having the Seniors' Advocate made into an independent legislative officer such as the Child and Youth Advocate?

Ms Hoffman: Well, it's such a new office in general; it only opened in April 2014. We actually have the former Seniors' Advocate in the room. He is a department employee. I would say my intention in having a Seniors' Advocate is to deal with issues in a timely fashion, and part of the information that we need is where those trends are. So the advocate having access to my department staff is important to me.

Right now the advocate's role is being fulfilled by the Health Advocate, as you alluded to, and that's because there's a time of transition, looking at the mandate. But the calls right now are coming into the Health Advocate's office, and they certainly have access to myself as well as to officials in the department. At this point my goal is to make sure that we're using the information that's gleaned to address problems as quickly as possible. I've heard some of the same recommendations that you have. I'm not certain at this point that that would improve processes, particularly because it's still such a new role for Alberta.

Mr. Yao: Fair enough.

Line 1.4 of the business plan. What are the costs to refurbish older seniors' lodges with sprinkler systems? Your own annual report states that "some specific funding included investing \$23 million in preservation, maintenance and upgrades to the housing portfolio and a \$48 million investment in major regeneration or replacement of existing seniors housing." What line item is this under the budget?

Ms Hoffman: The fire and safety upgrades?

Mr. Yao: Yes.

Ms Hoffman: We will find that. While the line item is being found, I'll just say that the \$80 million commitment was made to fund upgrades to approximately 6,600 spaces. These are a lot of seniors that we think could be living in safer facilities, and we owe it to them to make sure that especially those with mobility issues have a

way to prevent a fire from having deadly effects. I believe it's under the Alberta Social Housing Corporation line item. Is that correct? Yes, it is. Okay. Good. Alberta Social Housing Corporation.

Mr. Yao: In your business plan you state that most of our government-owned supportive housing facilities were built between 1960 and 1980, with an expected 50- to 60-year lifespan.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah.

Mr. Yao: The business plan goes on to talk about renewal and preservation. Has the department considered the cost of demolishing older, less suitable buildings that are built of fire-combustible construction and instead building new facilities that better reflect the current needs of seniors and low-income Albertans?

Ms Hoffman: Thank you for the question. That's one of the reasons why we do that good, fair, and poor assessment, to make sure that you're constantly monitoring your stock. It's not just around fire-combustible materials; it's also about fire-resistant materials like asbestos. Sometimes in a facility there might be a really safe way to have items contained and continue to meet your needs long term. Other times the risk of doing asbestos abatement or the impacts financially around doing that abatement might be too significant. Certainly in terms of doing the assessment, that good, fair, poor rating is fundamental. Then, if it's deemed as being 85 per cent of the cost of replacing a building – I believe that's the threshold. If there's money granted for doing renovations and the renovations are 85 per cent of the cost of what it would cost to build new, we're going to invest in new rather than investing in maintenance if it's going to cost almost what it would to actually do a complete replacement of a building. That's the same in other ministries as well.

Mr. Yao: Thank you.

Performance measure 1(a) in the Seniors business plan, seniors' average income. The last actual number we have is from 2012. In 2012 the number of seniors who exceeded the national average for income was 18.3 per cent. Nothing is recorded for the next couple of years, and a target is simply recorded as: continue to exceed expectations. My question is this. In 2012 we knew that approximately 18 per cent of Alberta seniors exceeded the national average. Is this number growing or shrinking?

Ms Hoffman: The revenue for individual seniors?

Mr. Yao: Yeah.

Ms Hoffman: The last year that the data was available, period, was 2012. The average income for Alberta seniors 65 and older was \$43,905, and that compared to the national average of \$37,118. Unfortunately, we haven't been able to receive the data after 2012. I imagine that potentially has something to do with the long form census given the year of the data ending. It's Statistics Canada data. So it's that piece around it not being gathered since 2012 that would have driven our inability to have that more thorough data.

Mr. Yao: Was this long form information?

Ms Hoffman: I imagine it would be because that was the year it ended. I know it's StatsCan data.

Mr. Yao: Another strike against banning the long form, huh?

Ms Hoffman: It could be.

As we've both said, it's important that we have data so we can make the right decisions down the road. While we don't have any control – well, some – over seniors' income for the vast majority of seniors, we can do top-ups where we know that the income levels are not allowing them to live with respect and dignity. That's one of the reasons why we have the seniors' benefit.

Mr. Yao: Okay. Line 2.2 of the business plan calls to increase awareness of supports for seniors. It's a good strategy, and we have some excellent programs that may not be fully utilized. How is the department planning on ensuring that these programs that we already have are fully utilized?

Ms Hoffman: Thanks a lot for the question. One of the pieces that I think really helps in our communities is when we do have things like the seniors' recognition awards that we do through the ministry, recognizing the different volunteer initiatives that are at play in our communities. By inviting people that you're recognizing, they also learn about all the other initiatives that are happening in the community. For example, when I was at the Stony Plain event, their hospice was being recognized for the contributions that the volunteers who are part of the community were making, and there were people in the room who didn't know that they had a hospice right in Stony Plain. So it's certainly about gathering people in a space whenever possible.

In terms of the support ministry initiative to improve public communications, we're investing in the website. We have a pretty bang-up communications team that's really effective in driving the public media. We'll continue to partner with Human Services to provide training and resources on seniors' programs – when new Alberta seniors' centres are opened, that's certainly a priority – as well as continuing to collaborate with Alberta Health to inform seniors about seniors' programs before they turn 65. When you know somebody might be in a need of a health support that might be available when they're a senior, making sure they have that information at that time helps provide for a more seamless transition.

Mr. Yao: Line 2.3 of the business plan seeks to help seniors to leverage their resources to contribute to their independence. Is this a reference to the tax deferral program?

Ms Hoffman: It sounds like it to me, but I just want to make sure that we're looking at the right line item. It definitely would include that, yeah. It definitely is about that loan program and the current grants to be able to have seniors use – leveraging is certainly about the tax deferral system and being able to borrow around doing the nice-to-dos in your home to make it a comfortable place to live long term.

Mr. Yao: You know, the tax deferral program is a great asset for seniors who own their homes. Are there any other programs that you're considering to help seniors who rent? A good percentage of our population does rent, and as they start to age, they're going to be stuck with the same situations.

Ms Hoffman: When you're in a rental property, though, your landlord has certain responsibilities around keeping it to a certain standard. Some of the borrowing could be for things like putting in a furnace, which would be a responsibility of a landlord, of course, as opposed to the responsibility of a tenant. They wouldn't need to borrow for things that are essential upgrades to their home because somebody else owns the home and has those responsibilities. Really, it's focused around homeowners.

Mr. Yao: So no.

Ms Hoffman: Correct. Because it's not necessary.

Mr. Yao: It's not necessary to help seniors who rent currently?

Ms Hoffman: I'm saying that if you have a roof issue, your landlord has a responsibility to replace the roof or repair the roof. If you have a fridge that needs to be replaced, your landlord has a responsibility to do that. These are about being able to borrow against the equity of the asset that you have, which you have a responsibility to maintain.

But good try.

4:40

Mr. Yao: While the government is investing an additional \$25 million into the Alberta Social Housing Corporation to renovate and renew 800 affordable housing units, that money isn't new, but it has been pushed forward from last year, bringing the corporation's government assistance to \$165 million, up from \$139 million last year. That additional \$25 million for maintenance: was that carried over from last year? And, if so, what were the obstacles? Why wasn't the money spent last year? I recognize the previous government might not have been as efficient as we all like them to be.

Ms Hoffman: There is carry-over from last year. I'll get Mike, who was here before and is here now, to talk a little bit about some of the struggles but more importantly, I'd say, what we're doing in this fiscal cycle to help achieve those desired outcomes.

Mr. Leathwood: Correct. It is a carry-forward on committed projects. You know, the capital plan reflects the actual cash flow. While projects are approved, you don't see the actual spend in the plan until the project is spent. Ironically, we talked earlier about adding some additional staff. We have had challenges with staffing and comanagement with our providers to get the work done, so we are feeling much better about adding additional staff and working closely with our providers to ensure those projects do go ahead and the money is spent on the needed repairs.

Mr. Yao: You mention in your business plan that the "federal-provincial cost-sharing agreements supporting affordable housing, which have been in place for decades, will expire between now and 2033." It goes on to say that no new federal funding commitments will be in place and that the financial sustainability of Alberta's current social and affordable housing model will be a significant challenge. What is the size of the revenue shortfall that we can expect to see?

Ms Hoffman: Well, I expect to see the federal government step up. That's what I expect to see. I have made that very clear as I know the federal municipal leaders that have worked together have been very active on Parliament Hill before the election and, certainly, now and making sure that the needs are well known. I expect that we will continue to lobby them. We have a federal-provincial-territorial meeting in January where this will certainly be one of the top items of concern.

In terms of their current responsibilities, Deputy, would you mind commenting on that?

Mr. Marchand: To the question of the amount of money, I mean, it is something that we could come back with because we do have an understanding of what money is going to come off the table over the years as their mortgages expire. We don't have it at our fingertips right now.

Ms Hoffman: We'd be able to say what the current investments are.

Mr. Marchand: Yeah. We understand what they are. Mike, do you have anything to add?

Mr. Leathwood: The current transfers right now are \$92 million.

Ms Hoffman: Annually.

Mr. Leathwood: Annually. We get \$20 million a year for the next four years under the bilateral agreement that is a part of the investment, in particular lodge renewal. We also get another \$72 million a year under cost sharing of existing social housing. Those numbers are maintained for the next four to five years, and then, as the deputy said, we are working through the confirmation of how to move past that, and we'll be part of the dialogue when we meet with the federal government going forward.

Ms Hoffman: Those would be the dollars that potentially could be at risk, but we are working to make sure they continue to be invested. I don't think that that requires a written response.

Thanks for having that information handy.

Mr. Yao: Assuming nothing, though, what steps is your department undertaking at this moment to make up this funding shortfall?

Ms Hoffman: Well, advocacy, certainly, is front and centre in this. We all know how important it is to continue to maintain the current stock and that need is growing. To turn our backs on responsibilities that we have to the taxpayers that we all have a responsibility to support certainly isn't something that I would accept and I imagine that Albertans would expect. I know municipalities are working very actively to ensure that the federal government is well aware of the role that they play in ensuring safe housing for those who need it.

Mr. Yao: So this government does recognize that it does have a responsibility to taxpayers, just to clarify.

Ms Hoffman: Yes. Of course we do.

Mr. Yao: Absolutely. All right. I wouldn't have known it from your budget.

The ASLI program has seen a significant reduction in this budget. In fact, it's not getting any increase, and the funding has actually been cut to zero. Why was this decision taken?

Ms Hoffman: As I mentioned in my opening comments, the ASLI has been moved under the budget line item for infrastructure because we're actually in the infrastructure phase. ASLI was a project that we are honouring for the last round of announcements, so we're really excited that we brought forward the updates on that most recently. Seniors helped build this province, of course, and we're committed to investing in long-term care and dementia spaces so that they can live with the dignity and respect that they all deserve. We're also committed to building 2,000 long-term care beds. Whether that needs to flow from the previous government's plan under the ASLI project or whether there's another way to move forward in funding those spaces and bringing those beds online, I think it's really important for us all to be aware that we're committed to moving forward on ensuring that there are these appropriate spaces and level of care. It doesn't need to be delivered through one funding model for it to be effective. We want to make sure that we get the right spaces in the right communities addressing the right level of care. So ASLI doesn't necessarily – I don't know

if it was the silver bullet. I think we need to look at other models that will help us deliver these beds.

Mr. Yao: Yeah. I agree the model may not have been perfect, but why stop funding it altogether? What will happen now that we have to find a new model? Will work stop on building assisted living in Alberta until a more suitable model is found?

Ms Hoffman: No, because we have moved money from what was housed previously here to infrastructure. [Ms Hoffman's speaking time expired] Sorry. In round 2 I'm sure you'll be able to follow up on that one.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now move into the 20 minutes for the third-party opposition. Mr. Gotfried, I believe you're going to be asking questions.

Mr. Gotfried: That's correct.

The Chair: Would you like to go back and forth?

Mr. Gotfried: I would indeed.

The Chair: Okay. Minister?

Ms Hoffman: I am very happy to do that if the tone continues. I enjoy the collaboration and dialogue.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Chair. Minister, first, I'd like to thank you and your dedicated staff for your hard work over the past six months on behalf of Albertans in the face of some significant challenges and particularly on the revenue side of that balance sheet. Given my own background in affordable housing and attainable home ownership, I'm proud to have been a champion for low- and middle-income Albertans and in fact continue my engagement with many of the respected nonprofit groups that I've been lucky enough to create relationships with. Some incredible people work in this field and in this sector, and I think we're blessed to have those people working out in the various communities around Alberta.

I'd also like to commend the innovative thinking of those that I've had the pleasure of working with in your department, their innovative thinking and their passion, Mike Leathwood being one of those individuals. Coincidentally, some of that was during the past government, so there's been innovative thinking, and I think some passion has been directed towards this portfolio for many, many years. The housing capital programs that you're doing both under ASLI and also the other capital housing programs I think are a great leverage of resources, and I encourage you to continue doing those with the private and the nonprofit partnerships that are moving forward.

But seeing as many of the line item questions have been taken care of by the Wildrose Party here, I will move straight into some issues around ASLI, which I still require a little bit further clarification on. First, I thank you for your commitment of the \$120 million and the creation of the 2,000 seniors' living spaces of the previously announced \$180 million and 2,612 spaces through the reapproval of 25 of 31 ASLI projects. We have some questions in the interests of both transparency and on behalf of the possibly 612 seniors that may be affected, the project proponents, and all Albertans regarding the six projects which have not been reapproved to date. I'll just go very quickly through this: Holy Cross in Calgary, 80 beds; Golden Age Castle Keep in Edmonton, 106 beds; St. Michael's dementia in Edmonton, 100 beds; Hinton Mountain View centre, 48 beds; Diamond Spring supportive living in Redwater, nine beds; and Valleyview Court stage 2, 18 beds, for

a total of 361 beds in that particular group of projects that have not been reapproved at this point in time. Can the minister please provide us an update on the current status of these six project proposals, why they were not included in the reapproval, and the specific criteria by which they were rejected, noting that if that is a long answer, we would allow you to certainly respond in writing if that's more appropriate for you or a combination of the two?

4:50

Ms Hoffman: I'm going to do my best to make sure that we continue to have a dialogue. Of course, I want to thank you for the question. It's really important to me that if we're going to be investing money, the long-term viability of a project is there because I don't think it would be responsible for us to invest money up front and find within one, two, even five years that it wasn't viable based on demand or based on the complexity of a project.

I know two of the projects that were mentioned were major modernization projects, and there are, of course, additional complications when you're looking at some of those facilities.

I do want to honour corporate confidentiality and the reputations of the different proponents who put forward bids as well, but I will allow, if he's comfortable in doing so, my deputy or his designate to speak a little bit more around some of the criteria for the six. I do know that we did have extensive conversations in working with the proponents.

Mr. Marchand: Sure. I can begin and maybe pass over to Mike. As the minister said, I think some of the criteria, though, were about ensuring there was demand in all centres at the appropriate level. The financial viability of the projects was a key consideration both in terms of the capital to be able to mount the project and for sustainability of operations over the long-term life of the contract as well as really ensuring that the care component and how that was structured and planned met best practice and would be effective.

Is there anything to add to that, Mike?

Mr. Leathwood: A couple of things. One, I'd point out that the Redwater project is still proceeding. It's a 24-unit link between a lodge and the department, and nine of the units are going to be funded under ASLI to bring in a health care contract. That project is proceeding.

As Shannon and the minister said, we have had dialogues with all those partners. I'll point out that all those partners are currently partners that the government has contracts with and operating relationships with, and dialogue continues with them. I think in the spirit of what the minister has said around honouring, you know, those relationships, those dialogues will continue, but clearly there did remain issues with those projects – they are very specific to the project, but there were issues – whereas with the other 25 we did not have those issues. In the interests of moving ahead to get those projects in the ground and get the seniors cared for, we released the other 25.

Mr. Gotfried: Great. That answers that question and part of my next question.

Ms Hoffman: Okay. Good.

Mr. Gotfried: Obviously, there is some chance of approval of some of these other six projects as you work through that process as well.

Ms Hoffman: Well, whether it ends up being these specific projects or other projects for which both the proponents as well as the two departments involved, Health and Seniors, are able to see the confidence in their meeting the needs of the seniors, I think that that's important. Whether it's these specific six projects or whether

it's other projects with the same proponents, we're certainly open to dialogues and appreciate the efforts that they've made in the past to serve the needs of our seniors.

Mr. Gotfried: Absolutely.

It appears that the capital funding that has been approved is for long-term care and SL4-D dementia spaces. Some of the other ones that have not been approved to date, which may be ongoing, are for supportive living. Is there any intent now to build these supportive living facilities more on the government purse at potentially higher costs to the taxpayer than might have been achieved through this previous model of collaboration with the private or nonprofit sector, and should we expect any ideological evolution in the future funding of seniors' housing that might favour publicly owned and operated facilities?

Ms Hoffman: My goal is to make sure that we provide people who deserve to live in the right place in the right community with the right supports the very safest and most respectful living environment that they can have. Right now there are far too many living in hospitals or at home without the right support. We want to make sure that we're focusing our efforts on long-term care and dementia care beds because those are the highest level of care patients that really – I think when you're thinking ambulatory care, you focus on who has the most acute needs, and you focus on meeting their needs first. We're certainly looking at different ways that we can deliver the remaining beds to meet our 2,000 beds commitment, and it could be a variety of different service providers. Making sure that we get the right care in the right place is a driving value, and we believe that's long-term care and dementia care beds.

Mr. Gotfried: So what I hear, Minister, is that the approach of actually engaging either both the private and the nonprofit sector as appropriate is likely to continue.

Ms Hoffman: I will happily bring forward a very concrete plan around the remaining beds at a time when I'm comfortable to do so.

Mr. Gotfried: Sure.

Ms Hoffman: But at this point I really want to say thank you to the proponents who've worked with us in the past to meet the needs of seniors.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay.

Just a little bit of number clarification here, I guess, on the 2,000 long-term and SL4-D care beds that are in the budget over the next two years. There are 251 beds that were originally brought forward with those proposals that are not – there were 2,251 in those 25 that were brought into the proposals that were approved. The proposals were approved, not necessarily the number of beds. So I guess my question is: is the funding that's been put in place, \$120 million, for 2,000 beds, or do you believe you'll be able to do the 2,251, or will we see a slight increase in the budget to accommodate that?

Ms Hoffman: One of the pieces that the Premier has made clear as under my mandate is around the specific plan for the 2,000 beds. Of course, we'll be working with the proponents, and we'll be happy to bring out a very detailed public plan at a time when I am comfortable doing so, but I want to make sure I work through the channels appropriately. You will have a very clear picture. I just can't give it to you today. I'm sorry about that. It's under way, though.

Mr. Gotfried: Could we see a reduction down to the 2,000 beds with those 25 projects or possibly funding increased to accommodate the original proposals?

Ms Hoffman: I just want to be clear on our commitment. We're going to build 2,000 long-term care and dementia level 4 beds, and the beds that you're counting were not that highest level of care. They included SL4 and SL3 beds.

Mr. Gotfried: But in the 25 projects, if you do the math on those, there are 2,251 under the approved projects and 361 that were not approved.

Ms Hoffman: But they're not all level 4-D and long-term care beds.

Mr. Gotfried: That could be possible. We weren't privy to that information on the types of beds which were in those proposals.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. It was mix of different types of beds, and we're really focused on the 2,000 long-term care. There will be operating funding to support other types of beds as well, but our capital energy is certainly going to be focused on the 2,000.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. That sounds fine.

I think one of these questions may have been alluded to earlier. The ASLI \$617,000 program delivery funding is not reflected in this budget. I think we heard that that has been moved to housing funding and accountability, so not cut but just reallocated under a different budget. I just wanted to clarify that obviously you need funding to deliver those programs that were not in the budget and have come out of your other capital funding. Is that correct?

Ms Hoffman: For housing capital programs, line item 4.2 on page 208, you'll see a significant increase over the last year's fiscal actuals.

Mr. Gotfried: Right. There was another previous line that was program delivery cost, that was taken out, and this is under Housing Funding and Accountability.

Ms Hoffman: It's been incorporated into 4.2, yeah.

Mr. Gotfried: Line 4.2, okay, so it is covered. Nobody is being left unfunded in terms of the program delivery costs, okay?

Ms Hoffman: That's right.

Mr. Gotfried: I think we've talked about the total costs of ASLI, there.

Minister, can you provide us with any research or statistics you have with respect to the relative demand in the various communities or by specific region for the various levels of senior housing relative to supportive, assisted, long-term, and dementia care? You said that your focus is on the long-term and the dementia care, but do you have statistics that could be made available to us with respect to the research behind the needs that has led you to that decision?

Ms Hoffman: Yes. I'm trying to decide what the best, most appropriate way is of sharing those because I think today we're here to discuss the budget and the specific line items. I'm wondering if it would be a motion for a return. I know I used to draft those, and they'd be at the very beginning of session. You'd ask for different types of reports. I'm just trying to think of what the best way is to share that information.

Mr. Gotfried: You're comfortable sharing that?

Ms Hoffman: I'm trying to figure out the best way to do it, but we will certainly follow up with your office and find a way that we can share our data around the demand and specifically where people are

waiting in hospital, where people are waiting at home, by region. I think that that's a very fair question.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. Minister, are you confident, then, that the approved ASLI projects, given the statistics that you have access to, meet the current needs of seniors in the capital region, Calgary, and the other communities, noting that there's a possibility that we've removed a significant number of housing units through the ASLI program? Again, with those statistics that you have, are you comfortable that you are meeting the immediate needs of those communities?

The Chair: Member, I just want to take a step back and just maybe try to redirect it back to either the business plan or a line item just because I think the minister has tried to answer this the best that she can without breaching some confidentiality issues.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. Well, we'll move on to the business plan specific items here, then. We can leave that for further discussions, which I'm sure we will have.

5:00

Ms Hoffman: Perfect.

Mr. Gotfried: Returning to the business plan, there's no reference to results-based budgeting in the Seniors ministry business plan. Can you comment on that?

Ms Hoffman: Why we haven't made a specific reference to RBB in the business plan?

Mr. Gotfried: Yeah.

Ms Hoffman: RBB has been ongoing by a variety of ministries for many years. I am confident that it has been a driving factor in all ministries in preparing how they move forward most economically. I don't think it needs to be named as one specific strategy when it's a government-wide initiative.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. So it's likely here, too, just not specifically referenced in this business plan.

Ms Hoffman: That we've done results-based budgeting?

Mr. Gotfried: Yeah.

Ms Hoffman: We've absolutely done it.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. That's great.

In the strategic context section you outline at length about the rising number of seniors in Alberta, reaching almost 20 per cent of our population by 2030. Why has there been a \$13.8 million cut to the Alberta seniors' benefit over this three-year period when compared to the March 2015 estimates while at the same time we're seeing an increase of \$3.5 million in ministry support services above the 2014-2015 actuals, an increase of \$1.6 million above the March estimates in the same period, representing a 20.3 per cent increase, for a total of \$4.8 million. So we've seen a reduction in the Alberta seniors' benefit and an increase in ministry support services, which seems to not be the allocation of funding that we're hearing, about getting the money to the front line, which in this case would be the seniors.

Ms Hoffman: In terms of the ASB: I'll start there, and then we'll get on to the other component. In March the estimates – at this point in the year we have a pretty clear picture about how much people are making because we're already halfway through the year. Their

tax returns are done, and we're able to have a clearer focus on who's eligible and how we ensure that that funding is given to them.

In terms of – sorry. Ministry support services was the other one – right? – 1.1 to 1.4?

Mr. Gotfried: This was ministry support services, an increase of \$1.6 million over one year and \$4.8 million over three years.

Ms Hoffman: I think this goes back to the very first questions that were asked by the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, and that is that Alberta Seniors is essentially a new ministry even though it's not new – you know, the new that was old that was new again – so having to create a ministry mid-year. They had six months' worth of funding in last year's budget, essentially, that we're doing the comparators for. Additionally, the ministry was short-staffed for a great period of time when the ministry was created. Now we actually have a more accurate reflection of what it costs to run a ministry. Again, it's pretty lean when you look at comparable ministries of similar budget sizes.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. That sounds fine.

I had a question about fire safety. You've already answered that one, so that's great.

In desired outcome 1 why has reference to brain health and cognitive decline prevention been removed?

Ms Hoffman: Sorry. Which line item is that?

Mr. Gotfried: That's outcome 1.

Ms Hoffman: From the business plan?

Mr. Gotfried: These are all business plan related questions, just to clarify.

Ms Hoffman: Of course, it's important that seniors who do have brain health challenges are well supported as well as other Albertans within the system. I think that the goal is just slightly more general. The specific pieces around brain health have been moved to Health outcomes, so I think it was the alignment. Before, Seniors and Health were together, so some of the benchmarks were combined. Now they're separating the Seniors piece and the Health piece.

Mr. Gotfried: That's fair.

In desired outcome 2 there is no longer a priority initiative that strictly outlines consultation with seniors to understand specific concerns and needs. Having worked with lots of seniors groups, I know that consultation is very important to that community in terms of getting it right from their perspective. So that is no longer a priority initiative in outcome 2?

Ms Hoffman: Outcome 2 in the business plan again?

Mr. Gotfried: Yes. That's correct.

Ms Hoffman: The consultation, I can assure you, is still ongoing.

Do you want to touch base a little bit around why this isn't specifically mentioned as one of the benchmarks, please, Deputy?

Mr. Marchand: Sure. Thanks. It is ongoing. We're in constant communication with seniors communities and senior-serving organizations. There was no explicit initiative at this point in time, a major engagement strategy contemplated at this time, but there is ongoing dialogue with communities. Priority initiatives generally reflect significant strategies.

Mr. Gotfried: I know your department is very good about conference follow-up.

It appears that rent supplement funding is relatively stable compared to 2014-15, which demonstrates to me maintenance of the current caseload. My concern and, I guess, question is: given the state of the economy, is there no projection or expectation of greater need in this area or the likelihood that more households may be faced with housing insecurity, thereby requiring more funding in this specific area?

Ms Hoffman: The wait-list has been growing, and that certainly isn't the desired outcome. The desired outcome is to make sure people have safe places to live. While we weren't able to reverse all of the cuts and impacts that we saw in the previous budgets that we received, we've really worked at trying to triage around some of the areas of greatest need. The government worked to reverse some of the cuts in Health, Education, Human Services, postsecondary immediately.

We have added \$2 million to the rent supplement program to ensure that Albertans who are currently in the program can remain in the program until their circumstances allow them to find other accommodations. Of course, initiatives get mixed reviews in this room, but for people who would be eligible for these types of supplements, the minimum wage increase is certainly going to put more money in their pockets to help them need less of a supplement in the long term to be able to have rents that they can afford.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. I think it's a concern for all of us if there are two-income families that become one-income families, et cetera. I hope that you have some contingency plans in place to assist those people, where possible, from another latitude in your budget.

Capital maintenance and renewal for seniors, which is on page 45 of the capital plan: \$37 million this year, \$144 million in total funding. Is this funding for maintenance of all provincially owned housing? [A timer sounded] Saved by the bell here.

The Chair: Yeah. Round 2.

Mr. Gotfried: Round 2. Thank you. I appreciate that.

The Chair: You snuck it in.

Because we are at the halfway point, I will just say that we'll take a five-minute break. We will come back at 5:12, please, and I will be right on time.

Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 5:07 p.m. to 5:12 p.m.]

The Chair: Everybody, if we could call the meeting back to order, please.

We will now move into our 20 minutes for the member of the opposition Liberal Party, Dr. Swann.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Would you like to go back and forth?

Dr. Swann: Back and forth if the minister is comfortable with that. Thank you.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Dr. Swann: Thank you to the minister and to the staff for this important opportunity around a very critical issue in Alberta today, one that I'm sure the minister is hearing lots about from the public and the various agencies that are trying to support people in poverty across the province on mental health and addictions issues. It is

certainly an ongoing challenge that we all need to share responsibility for. The minister has certainly alluded to the need for a tripartite approach – federal, provincial, and municipal – somehow. The cities tell me that they feel the most pressure and the most focus because they're closest to where the problems arise due to lack of housing.

I had to step out for 15 or 20 minutes, so some of these may have already been answered. I apologize if that's the case, but I haven't heard the answers yet.

The Progressive Conservative government eliminated the seniors' school property tax assistance program in 2014, replacing it with the property tax deferral scheme. It was a popular program that provided rebates to seniors on the school portion of their property taxes. Many people found it useful. By contrast, reports suggest that fewer than 2,000 households, less than 1 per cent of eligible Albertans, signed up for this deferral program.

To the minister: how many senior citizen households are currently signed up for the seniors' property tax deferral program? In contrast, British Columbia's property tax deferral program has been quite successful, having many thousands of signatories. Why do you think Alberta's seniors have been so reluctant to embrace such a program? Does the government have plans to change eligibility requirements or interest rates to make it more attractive? When it comes to offering property tax rebate versus property tax deferral, which does the government favour? Does the government have an intention of reintroducing the seniors' school property tax assistance program?

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much for the question and for the leadership in helping us tackle some of those issues that you mentioned at the beginning, including addictions and mental health.

The seniors' property tax deferral program does allow eligible seniors who are homeowners to defer all or part of their property taxes through that low-interest home equity loan program with the Alberta government. The seniors' property tax deferral program was implemented in 2013, as was mentioned, and has issued to date approximately 3,100 loans for just under \$10 million in total cost. An additional 1,750 loans are expected to be provided in 2015. The average loan amount is \$3,175, and the interest rate is based on the prime lending rate and is reviewed twice a year, in April and October. As of October the interest rate was only 2.7 per cent. It certainly is a way for seniors, if their desire is to stay in their homes longer, to leverage that equity.

In terms of why seniors might be more reluctant here, I would say that it's probably twofold. One may be lack of awareness of the program. That would be step one. We're certainly working on expanding awareness of that opportunity existing. Two, speaking of my mother, I know that the idea of borrowing against what she would like to be able to pass along one day without having any reductions in the equity of the asset is certainly something that she is keeping top of mind. I'll tell her that it's her money, it's her equity, it's her asset, and I think that if she needs to leverage it to be able to live the quality of life that she deserves, she shouldn't feel guilty about using that to have the right quality of life. I'll just tell you that about my own mom.

Dr. Swann: And your preference around the consideration of reintroducing the property tax assistance program?

Ms Hoffman: Having a grant as opposed to the loan piece? Well, I'll tell you my preference, moving forward, in looking at the home renovation piece. There was a proposal initially around moving from a grant program to exclusively a loan program. My preference is to have equity as one of those driving values when we're making

decisions. In terms of the home renovation piece we're going to continue to have a portion that's grants, and we're going to have a portion that's loans to be able to expand the access to the program. But I think that it's important to look at what individuals need and not just treat everyone the same.

If you have some data from your constituency office that you want to share with us around people who feel that they aren't able to take on the very reasonable interest rate, I'd be happy to receive that and recommendations from yourself and other members moving forward. Certainly, the budget is tight overall. We're working to maximize other people's equity as much as possible as well. We want to return to balanced budgets, so looking at increased investment in this area isn't my top priority right now. Making sure that people can stay in their homes and leverage equity is a big piece of making sure that we can have a balanced budget down the road.

Dr. Swann: Thank you.

In September 2015 the Human Services ministry quietly released a progress report on housing and homelessness that had been prepared by the Alberta Interagency Council on Homelessness. The report covered the period April 1, 2013, to 2014. Kept under wraps by the PC government for obvious reasons, it showed that for fiscal years 2012-13, '13-14, and '14-15 there was zero investment in homelessness and housing. Commenting on the report, the NDP said that it was now looking at ways to get Alberta's original 10-year plan to end homelessness back on track. Clearly, it is a critical piece, a costly piece if we aren't able to provide the most vulnerable people housing and security. Why is this government allowing another year to pass without providing new money to build affordable housing units?

Ms Hoffman: Thank you for the question. Certainly, working with the \$4.4 billion that we have in the budget for unallocated capital projects, I would love all \$4.4 billion. Between the two ministries I'm sure we could use it, to be honest, between Health and housing. We need to find ways that we can continue to invest in driving down those social determinants of health, and making sure that people have a safe place to live is a piece of that.

5:20

In terms of how we're going to be bringing more affordable housing spaces online, the province has provided \$1.4 billion in the past years, as mentioned, and currently there are 2,023 and 1,947 units scheduled for completion in the next 12 to 24 months under existing grant agreements and the affordable housing program. While there wasn't additional funding in the capital line items for this year, it certainly is something that I have been working toward with my department, working around demonstrating the need. We know that it continues to grow, and we want to make sure that we're working in collaboration to house those who are homeless but also those who are struggling to keep their homes.

I look forward to being able to share some more updates around future progress in this area, hopefully before the next fiscal year. But, for sure, know that I'm advocating for investment to make sure that the wait-lists go down and that they don't continue to grow.

Dr. Swann: Thank you.

In the previous PC government there was a commitment to 12,000 affordable units. Roughly 6,000 were built, but some developers were not always following the rules regarding tenant eligibility for social housing. Where are we now in terms of the standards and holding developers accountable for providing both the new stock and engaging those most in need?

Ms Hoffman: Sorry. Does it relate to a line item? I'm just trying to get my brain focused on budget stuff and how we can tie these together.

Dr. Swann: No. It doesn't specifically.

Ms Hoffman: I think it's a fair question.

Dr. Swann: It's a policy question.

Ms Hoffman: Okay.

Dr. Swann: You can answer it or not.

Ms Hoffman: Can we talk about it in either question period or offline?

Dr. Swann: Yes.

During his tenure as Municipal Affairs minister Deron Bilous declared that his government will work with municipalities to help increase the number of affordable rental units across the province. Is there a commitment to rental units in the current budget?

Ms Hoffman: Rent supplement, for example?

Dr. Swann: Yes. New funding for rent supplements or new units.

Ms Hoffman: We have increased the rent supplement this year by \$2 million to try to ensure that people who are currently on that plan can continue to be on it. Of course, the desire is to have people regain their independence and be able to move into affordable housing without needing to be long-term dependent on government assistance. So that's certainly a priority for us. There are about 73,000 provincially owned or supported housing units in Alberta right now, and those house 115,000 individuals.

It's interesting. In a boom housing prices are really high and people need affordable housing, and when the economy is taking a downturn, people are making less money and need affordable housing, right? So it seems like in Alberta we haven't really found a nice, stable point yet. To be completely frank, it's frustrating, and I'm sure it's frustrating for people who are worried about their own housing situations, too. So we're open to working collaboratively on this one. It's not an easy problem to solve, unfortunately.

Dr. Swann: So there's no new money for rental units?

Ms Hoffman: For building new capital units, I don't believe we have this year a line item.

I'm going to ask the deputy to comment on a few line items that might be relevant, though.

Mr. Marchand: I think that as the minister has identified, there was an increase in the rent supplement line, so in terms of the supplementation to individuals. In the overall expenditures of the Social Housing Corporation this year, about \$375 million, \$151 million of that is capital investment in seniors housing. There is another \$17 million in investment in the social housing portfolio, primarily, though, in maintenance and renewal and, as the minister has indicated, an intent to try to grow that investment in the coming years.

Dr. Swann: In new units?

Mr. Marchand: Yes. We would like to have more investment in new units going forward.

Ms Hoffman: I think part of that responsibility, of course, we will take, but I also need to ensure that we're working with our other elected official counterparts, both federally and municipally, to try to make sure that we can support our constituents, that we all share.

Dr. Swann: It's my understanding that the government is renegeing on its obligation to pay for a grant in lieu of tax on publicly owned and supported social housing. How is that going to increase our capacity to provide housing?

Ms Hoffman: As the legislation stands currently across Canada, one order of government that's created by another order of government doesn't have the authority to tax it. These would be municipalities, that would look to the provincial government to give them revenue to help offset what, if those were not public assets operated by the province of Alberta, they would be able to tax. I realize the decision does have an impact on municipalities. However, we made the choice to ensure that we could stabilize and maintain the programs and services that we have as more than half of our budget, which is the Alberta seniors' benefit, which individuals count on. Ensuring that we have programs like tenant support to maintain the housing projects is certainly a priority for us.

I would love to be able to reverse all of the cuts that we saw made by the last government, but some of these, given the fiscal situation, we just weren't in a position this year to be able to reverse. Over the next five years municipalities will be getting money in other areas, including \$10 billion in funding for key infrastructure projects and \$750 million more than what was planned to be invested in those projects last March, when the budget was tabled. We're certainly looking at supporting municipalities in other areas, but the grants in place of taxes is one that we just weren't able to fulfill within this year's budget.

Dr. Swann: In Calgary the Resolve campaign combines nine nonprofits and the private sector in a novel approach to improving affordable housing. Its goal is \$120 million from the private sector to build affordable rental housing for 3,000 vulnerable and homeless Calgarians, with the goal of pushing Calgary's 10-year plan to end homelessness over the finish line. Does the minister acknowledge that this commendable initiative is at least partly driven out of frustration with the inability to get the funding from other levels of government?

Ms Hoffman: I think one thing that Albertans have in common, for the most part, is that when something needs to get done, we roll up our sleeves and do it. I can understand frustration with other orders of government. I feel that myself from day to day. But when something needs to get done, we step up. I think of examples of what our hospital foundations do throughout the province as well as the various organizations that work to support housing throughout the province.

I've met with individuals around Resolve. I think it's a great project, and I really commend them for their work in that area. Again, I feel like part of my job is to make sure that the three orders of government that are responsible to Calgarians are on the same page when they talk about affordable housing for Albertans. You're talking specifically about Calgary. I agree with that. I don't want to say that we don't appreciate their collaboration, because we certainly do, and the fact that they're stepping up to make sure that we increase the ability to match some of that funding with generous sponsorship from the community.

Dr. Swann: Thank you.

Your government is investing an additional \$25.3 million in the Alberta Social Housing Corporation to renovate and renew 800 affordable housing units. How exactly will that money be divided, and what are the criteria for priorities across the province?

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much. I'm going to ask the assistant deputy minister responsible for housing.

Mr. Leathwood: The \$25 million actually is a carry-forward. If you look at the full five-year capital plan, it's over \$500 million that's being invested in life safety upgrading, capital maintenance, and housing renewal. Under the housing renewal initiative, predominantly lodges, seniors' housing, what we are doing is replacing approximately 1,900 units, but at the same time we're actually leveraging the land and increasing density and adding 800 new ones. While the \$25 million is not specific, it's part of the full \$500 million plan over the next five years to improve safety in the seniors' facilities, to put capital maintenance into existing housing, and to renew and replace facilities. While you're replacing, you can increase density and add new units.

Dr. Swann: Okay. Very good. That includes the sprinkler system, I think.

Mr. Leathwood: Yeah. Again, the full five-year capital plan for the housing group is \$144 million, which includes \$80 million for the fire safety upgrades, including sprinklers in 97 facilities, including lodges and government-supported continuing care. We're spending \$62 million on capital maintenance, replacement of worn-out building components in social housing and seniors' lodges and seniors' apartments, and then we are spending \$387 million on renewal, which, again, is replacing old stock. At the same time that we replace, where we can we're adding new stock. In Calgary Gilchrist Manor we're replacing but also adding new at the same time.

Dr. Swann: This relates to the ASLI grant changes. Could the minister be more clear about any new direction for the ASLI grant?
5:30

Ms Hoffman: We're working with the 25 proponents. There were 31 announced originally, six that we've determined that we're not going to be moving forward with under ASLI and then 25 that we're working collaboratively with to ensure that as many beds as possible become long-term care and supportive living dementia beds, the highest two levels of care. Again, that's because those are the Albertans who have the most acute needs, and this really is about equity and focusing our efforts on those who need them the most in terms of our capital investment. That's how we're proceeding with the ASLI project, as was announced under the previous government, making sure that we can align it with the commitments that we have made to Albertans.

In terms of future approaches around whether ASLI will continue in its current form, whether there'll be a new form, or whether we'll have a different model for procurement and building the remaining long-term care beds that we want to provide to all Albertans, that they so desperately need, we're going to be making sure that we announce those details in due course. But at this point whether ASLI continues is still to be determined.

Dr. Swann: Okay. I guess that in the future we'll hear more about the preference for publicly funded capital expenditures versus P3s versus . . .

Ms Hoffman: Well, I think that under ASLI, as I understand it, there was a desire to have sort of a third, a third, a third, so a third

public, a third private, and a third not-for-profit. Of course, we want to make sure that Albertans get the right care in the right place, and we want to maximize investment for taxpayers as well. Specifics around who and how we'll be working moving forward are still to be determined, and we'll be happy to roll those out at a future date. But people who've stepped up in the past really value the spaces that we have created for seniors throughout the years.

Dr. Swann: Thank you.

One final policy question, which you may or may not want to talk about. Calgary continues to be a barrier to inclusionary zoning for secondary suites, and if there were legislation from the province on inclusionary zoning, we would see much more progress on secondary suites in the big cities. Has the minister considered that, to help deal with the tremendous pressure to get more people into housing?

Ms Hoffman: Affordable housing: I was trying to think of how this connected to Seniors, but it's back to the stock on the market, I would assume. [A timer sounded] The short answer is: I think it's part of the MGA review.

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

We will now be moving into our last 20-minute segment, for the government caucus. Mr. Hinkley, I believe you will be going first. Would you like to go back and forth?

Mr. Hinkley: Yes. Thank you, Chair. I will start, but I'm going to share with two of my colleagues, one from Strathcona-Sherwood Park and one from Red Deer-North. Also, if the minister will continue to go back and forth, that would be great.

Ms Hoffman: Happy to.

Mr. Hinkley: I want to first of all thank you for this opportunity to ask questions. Secondly, I do have a couple of compliments. I want to compliment you on being able to go from a hectic question period to three hours of being on the hot seat. Very impressive. Very good.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you. It's a warm seat today.

Mr. Hinkley: The second compliment I want to give, just from watching and being so close to your staff, is how ably and competently they've been answering your questions and helping out with that. I think it's very impressive. It's good to know that. You're very busy with another department as well, but there's a strong staff supporting you. Compliments to them as well.

I'm grateful to ask the questions because during the campaign and whatnot my constituents did ask a lot of questions, and mainly because I'm more of a senior candidate, they really wanted to know what's happening with seniors. The creation of the Seniors ministry was really important. Also, the fact that the budget reflects an investment, regardless of the debt that we may go into, resonates really well with the seniors in my area.

I have about four to five questions, and we have about 30 minutes, so if you want to expound, go right ahead. It's actually quite all right.

I'm going to start with housing and low-income housing because across Alberta affordable housing continues to be a challenge for everybody, for many families, but particularly for low-income seniors. We're glad to see that there was a jump over the previous budget for that. I know that the answer was internal reorganization and alignment, but can you go a bit deeper on how you're helping seniors with housing, low-income housing, and what we can expect from this budget?

Ms Hoffman: Right. I'd say that some of the highest level points are around ensuring that for seniors who are in homes right now that want to stay there, if they're homeowners, we help them leverage the equity in those homes to be able to make them meet their needs long term and, if they're renters, that we try to make sure that we have the right supports in place to keep their homes affordable. That certainly would be, at some of the high level, what we're looking at.

There are a variety of different housing programs throughout Alberta. Of course, the lodge renewal program is fundamental. I'd say that when I've travelled around Alberta visiting some different facilities, the acuity levels in some of the lodges are more significant than what they were when they were built originally. One lady said: when I moved in here 20 years ago, there were only a couple of walkers and no wheelchairs, and now there are all these old people in wheelchairs. And she was in a wheelchair – right? – because the goal is to keep people living in places where they're safe and supported and to have as few transitions as possible. I think that some of the work around the lodge renewal program is certainly going to help with that.

I'm going to ask the assistant deputy minister responsible for housing to talk a little bit about lodge renewal and some of the different projects if you don't mind. The hon. member's riding is Wetaskiwin-Camrose. I imagine that there are some happening in that very area.

Mr. Leathwood: Yes, there are. Actually, in Camrose, as you may know full well, we're doing the addition to the one lodge there, you know, the new 44-unit addition, which is actually freeing up the other lodge, which can be used for alternate purposes. So that's good work. In Wetaskiwin, just recently completed, is an apartment addition that is connected to supportive living there, and I know that that's recently opened, and I look forward to seeing it. Of course, there is an existing infrastructure, predominantly operated by the Bethany Group out of Camrose, that runs seniors' lodges, continuing care, seniors' apartments, and actually provides administrative support to a number of other management bodies in the region to help them with their ongoing project development and operations needs.

Mr. Hinkley: Well, those have both been received very well, and the support has been great. I guess, going forward, we're still not finished with the shortage for low-income seniors even though they've been a great help. I want to ask the ministry: what are you going to do for – I mean, there's more that we're asking for. Could you be more specific?

Ms Hoffman: Around new projects?

Mr. Hinkley: Yeah.

Ms Hoffman: At this point we're really focused on making sure that we replace the stock that's served its full lifespan, making sure that we're working with the other two orders of government to continue to expand opportunities for reinvestment as well as affordable housing. Specific announcements for today I won't be able to make, unfortunately, but it is around making sure that we continue to offer stable investment. When I talk about those sorts of key priorities around what the budget stands for, returning to balanced budgets is one piece. Of course, we're trying to balance that with not just the desire but the need to make sure that we have these stable front-line services. I would say that it's a balance of those two.

Mr. Hinkley: Okay. I'm sure you anticipate that there's going to be a need for more low-income seniors' and family housing in the future. Will the budget show or reflect that growth?

Ms Hoffman: Sorry. Would you mind repeating that?

Mr. Hinkley: Will the budget, will your lines show and account for the growth that's going to happen in the demographics as we get old? Are you taking that into account, or will that come into future budgets?

Ms Hoffman: I'm hoping that it comes into future budgets, to be frank. I know that we really focused around ensuring that we restored cuts to health care, Education, Human Services, and Advanced Education. This is another area where we continue to see growth. We're working at finding efficiencies within the current budget allocations to try to address continued demand, and we will continue to do that. But, of course, more than half of our allocation right now is the Alberta seniors' benefit, and that's an area that is not shrinking either in terms of the population. Having a flatline budget means that we need to be innovative. I'd like to say that we're always looking to cut fat, but eventually you hit muscle, and we need to make sure that we protect the essential services that the department runs so that we can get those resources into the hands of individuals who need them. Of course, we're looking internally to find ways to streamline and be efficient every day, but ultimately the demand is also growing in our communities.

Mr. Hinkley: Yeah. Thank you very much.

5:40

Cortes-Vargas: Thank you. I'm excited because this is my first time actually asking questions in estimates. I know that for the constituents of Strathcona-Sherwood Park seniors' issues have been a hot topic, especially from working with the councillors. They have a task force on affordable housing that focuses on seniors. I know that at various times you visited the constituency, and it was really helpful to have them be able to ask questions and take that step towards actually building dignity and worth, not just in the accommodations but in the consultation practices. I really appreciate that, and thank you.

Ms Hoffman: Thanks for your hospitality.

Cortes-Vargas: Any time. We'll welcome you whenever.

My question is actually towards the maintenance and funding for government properties. It's been asked previously quite a few times, but one of the main questions is: as these buildings age, what do we need to be maintaining them? I'm wondering how we're going to control the maintenance funding for the facilities that the ministry is responsible for.

Ms Hoffman: Part of that is making sure that we have consistent, predictable funding for operations and maintenance, right? I think that in the past, if I put on my last hat, when we would be seeing a drop in oil prices, we'd be laying off electricians and scaffolders and those types of people who work to maintain our school buildings, and when the price goes back up, it's hard to find those workers because you've lost them in the downturn. That really is what we're looking at, providing stable funding and not being as reactionary. Maintenance is certainly an area that has been deferred for far too long. The deferred maintenance in our affordable housing stock, I want to say, is about a billion dollars. I don't remember where I heard that number.

I will ask my assistant deputy responsible for housing to provide that clarity, please. Mike.

Mr. Leathwood: Yeah. The reports we have from Alberta Infrastructure, who does facilitate the inspection of all government-owned and -supported social housing, do show approximately a billion dollars in deferred maintenance and functional obsolescence. That said, it does not reflect some of the investments we've made in the last number of years. But suffice it to say that there is certainly a backlog in maintenance that needs to be addressed because these buildings were built in the '60s, '70s, and '80s. We do have some money, but as the minister has mentioned, it is certainly her intention to have us go after more money in the capital plan that will be available to do more investment.

Cortes-Vargas: That's good to hear. I think the organizations that are trying to meet those needs and are coming up with creative ways to meet those needs will be happy to hear that.

I think the second question would be: how would you rate the conditions of these facilities? That's kind of what you're talking about, I think, a little bit more in depth, where that goes.

Ms Hoffman: Around the good, fair, poor piece?

Cortes-Vargas: Yes, the portion of that.

Ms Hoffman: Okay. Please, teach us housing 101. I've been through this a few times.

Mr. Leathwood: Again, these properties were built in the '60s and '70s and '80s, and I will say that they were well built. Many of them still have remaining useful life. I mean, the lodge in Camrose is an example that's come free, has an alternate use.

That said, you have buildings where, number one, you do need to replace a window or a door or a roof or a boiler system, but you also have, in the lodges in particular, functional obsolescence. They were built in the '60s and '70s, with small rooms, shared bathrooms, so you need to address not only the deferred maintenance but the functionality of buildings. That's why in a lot of cases the renewal program that we have and the work we're doing with our management bodies is to in many cases add on and then come back. We add on, move the people over, come back, and demolish and rebuild and redevelop a site. It's all encompassing to renew those buildings that it makes sense to renew and that have remaining useful life, but for those that are too old and/or not worth the investment, then you would just do a staged redevelopment and create a modern product.

Cortes-Vargas: Thank you for that answer.

I know that the diverse needs of the seniors population always change, depending on what level they're aging towards, right? So the maintenance of it is important in order to maintain that standard.

Thank you.

Mr. Hinkley: The 2014 Auditor General's report recommended that a minimum disposable income be set for seniors' lodge residents to ensure that the vulnerable, low-income people have enough to meet their needs and live comfortably. My question is: how do the estimates account for this important recommendation?

Ms Hoffman: Thanks for the question. The office of the Auditor General's recommendation is being followed up on. The minimum disposable income level for setting lodge rents was increased by \$50 to \$315 per month starting back in July 2014. So we've budgeted for that increase in this allocation. Funding for minimum disposable income comes from the Alberta seniors' benefit program. Low-income seniors living in long-term care and designated supportive living receive an additional benefit under the

program to ensure that they have at least that \$315 in disposable income. So it would be under those line items, the Alberta seniors' benefit program, in the budget. Again, it's consuming more than half of our budget, and that's one of the big reasons why we're moving on that recommendation from the office of the Auditor General.

Mr. Hinkley: Okay. Thank you.

What action is your ministry taking to ensure low-income seniors have a high quality of life?

Ms Hoffman: Part of it is around making sure that they have that piece of disposable income to be able to continue on with some of the luxuries that shouldn't be luxuries. Well, maybe they should. I can tell you that when my grandmother was in her 80s, if she would have had to change hairdressers because she didn't have enough disposable income, that would have been life-altering to her. So, really, having that \$315 was important to her, to have that sense of self-fulfillment. I can tell you that when she came back from the salon, she always looked 10 years younger, and she felt it. So reducing challenges that low-income seniors face by making sure that we have the benefit is important. The primary source is through the federal government, though, through old age security and GIS as well, and the new federal government announced that they were going to be increasing these program areas. So we're going to work them to make sure that that money gets into the pockets of Alberta seniors so that they can continue to have those pieces that bring them fulfillment in their lives in the years to come.

Thank you.

Mr. Hinkley: I don't know if you have the number, but I'm curious. How many of today's seniors would be considered low income? What percentage is that of the population?

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. Low income is defined in variety of different ways. Alberta seniors' benefit is the standard. It's 150,000 seniors that we have, and this is a little less than 30 per cent of the total overall seniors. One of those reasons is that Albertans have a higher than average income when it comes to the Canadian national average. So less than 30 per cent of the total number of seniors in Alberta.

Mr. Hinkley: Well, that's quite a big number.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. It is still big.

Mr. Hinkley: Yeah. So this leads me to the next one. It might be hypothetical, and you may not want to answer it, but how are you working to reduce that number of low-income seniors in the province? Is that maybe too . . .

Ms Hoffman: Well, I can't do it alone. I will have to say that. So it really is about working with other ministries and other orders of government in collaboration. While there are number of different policy initiatives, I'd say, in other ministries that will help address that, I think I'm going to leave that policy discussion for a time where we can have a cup of coffee.

Mr. Hinkley: Yeah. I see that that's more policy than budget.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, though.

Mr. Hinkley: Okay. Estefania.

Cortes-Vargas: Thank you, Bruce. The Alberta seniors' program, which we've also been discussing a little bit more thoroughly,

provides a monthly income supplement for seniors, and I've met multiple constituents that have really benefited from the supplement, and I'm really grateful for its existence because it really allows them to receive the support of – especially since they were the ones that built this province. So it's important to give that back. My question is: the grant is around \$343 million, and it's an increase of about \$13 million over the actual spending. I want to know the reason for the increase.

Ms Hoffman: Because it's an eligibility-based criteria, the amount that they're eligible for, and the eligibility levels are consistent with what they were last year. There is an increase over what was the actual last year, and it's because there are more people who are eligible. So there are more people who've moved into that category or who have moved into, for example, a type of housing that was maybe more expensive. If they've moved into a long-term care bed, for example, it costs more to live in a long-term care bed than what it might cost to live independently. So they have a higher degree of their funding that would be required to afford their housing, so they would need the seniors' benefit so that they can still have that \$315 flex to be able to afford a few additional pieces rather than just basic housing.

Cortes-Vargas: Thank you. Just to quantify this, about how many Albertans will be benefiting from the increase?

5:50

Ms Hoffman: How many more applicants do we have this year than last year? That would be the question that I would look to my deputy for a response on, please.

Cortes-Vargas: I guess it also addresses the changing needs, which you kind of said. So if the need increases, the funding would increase. But just to get a number on the number.

Ms Hoffman: Please.

Mr. Marchand: Sure. We anticipate that that is probably about a 1,200-person increase in the caseload. So 150,000 households are assisted through the grant program every month. About 1,200 of it will be caseload. We think it's probably about another 500 or so that is attached to long-term care beds coming online, and we're going to have low-income seniors who are eligible for the supplemental accommodation benefit as part of the grant program as well as with increases in the rates, the accommodation rates of the long-term care and DSL beds. We actually think that that probably has an impact on about 12,000 individuals, and that impacts part of it as well. So in total about 13 and a half thousand, 14,000 people.

Cortes-Vargas: Okay. Thank you. Just a last question on this one. What would be the real-life impact of increasing the funding? I mean, you've answered this to some extent. How will it make their lives easier?

Ms Hoffman: By allowing people to have that little bit of dignity that comes with having a few bucks in your wallet at the end of the day, to be able to continue on with the quality of life that you once lived, maintaining those connections with people in your community.

We talked a little bit about the volunteerism, the generosity in contributing to charitable causes in their own communities, too. Having that \$315 dollars to be able to choose to support, you know, the Food Bank or the Christmas Bureau or your grandchild's fundraiser at the school: you know, these are certainly pieces that everyone wants to be able to afford at any point in their life. It's not

a significant contribution in terms of the overall provincial treasury but, man, the contribution to individual lives and this year about 14,000 more lives is something that I think we can all be proud of.

Cortes-Vargas: Absolutely. I think my grandparents would still give me \$10, and I don't need it but would not dare to not take it, you know.

Ms Hoffman: Absolutely.

Cortes-Vargas: Thank you.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you.

Mr. Hinkley: Also, under the Alberta seniors' benefit, though, how does this government's funding for seniors' benefits programs compare to supports provided by other provinces? Are we ahead or behind?

Ms Hoffman: I think I'll ask my deputy to talk about the other provincial jurisdictions comparison if he has it at the top of his head. If not, we can provide something in writing.

Mr. Marchand: Generally speaking, we are ahead. We have one of the most generous benefit programs.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister and members.

We'll be now returning to the Official Opposition for the 10-minute rotation. Mr. Yao, are you continuing to go back and forth?

Mr. Yao: Absolutely. But, first, I'd like to cede my questions to the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka before going to the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon, and then I'll take over.

The Chair: Okay. Sounds good. Thank you.

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Chair and Minister. I know a number of independent seniors groups, some of the older ones, have found that their operating funding has not kept up with costs. Two examples. In a meeting with the county of Wetaskiwin – they own a couple of seniors' facilities – they said that they have been having to subsidize the funding in order to keep pace with their operational costs and are wondering about that difficulty. Second example would be that there is a fairly large seniors' complex owned by a nonprofit on the edge of Calgary. They say to me that for the same reasons, because funding has not kept up with operating, they are actually teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. I'm just wondering if you can comment on that and if there's opportunity to review some of those older contracts about funding and the increase in costs to go with it.

Ms Hoffman: Just to clarify, am I hearing a desire for increased allocations to the Seniors ministry from the hon. member?

Mr. Orr: What I'm asking about are issues that have been passed on to me about the older contracts that have not kept pace with real costs. I just think that it would be counterproductive for some of those units to actually close down and not exist any longer rather than keep them alive through reasonable funding that actually meets the real costs. So yes.

Ms Hoffman: Great. In terms of this budget, of course, we're doing a flat-line budget, trying to really focus the resources on the health care, education, human services pieces, but we are absolutely hoping to find ways to be able to increase funding to those providers that provide that essential service to Albertans. I think that another piece that could be very beneficial to some of these individual service providers – I know of some in your own riding. Lacombe

lodge, for example, is getting fire and safety funding as well as Golden Leisure Lodge in Ponoka. Those investments and the capital certainly are important to the individuals living in the facilities but also to the community as an asset.

There might not be an increase in operating funding, but certainly we're looking at ways to get capital resources. Capital is a one-time investment, which, of course, makes it a little bit easier on our provincial pocketbooks, when you're able to make those one-time investments in a way that can address some of the acutities.

Thank you for the question.

Mr. Orr: I recognize the constraints and the willingness to try and constrain them where necessary, but they are real issues.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. I know.

Mr. Orr: My only other question, for me personally, would be that you mentioned earlier the work that Habitat for Humanity has done. They used to be funded through the provincial budget for some of the projects that they did to build houses. I think it was \$10 million a year. That was cut about a year ago. Has that funding been restored and, if so, which line item would I look to?

Ms Hoffman: We're certainly in constant conversation with department officials, and I had the pleasure of meeting with some of the leadership of Habitat. The difference that they make to the lives of the families that they serve – more than 60 per cent of the adults go back to schooling in some way and further their own education, so the dividends are huge. In terms of specific announcements that have been made to date, there aren't specific announcements that have been made, but I'd be happy to share information if we're in a position where we're able to do so in the months to come. I know that they're planning a big project for Alberta in the next 18 months, and I think it's going to be seeing people volunteering hours from all over the world.

Did you want to add anything, Assistant Deputy Leathwood?

6:00

Mr. Leathwood: Yeah. Just to add that Habitat was, again, an example of a partnership model under the affordable housing grant program for five years, where they were successful and brought in good proposals. It was some \$50 million over five years that was invested in them with their wonderful partnership that created housing all across Alberta. And, as the minister said, I certainly know that as we look at capital plan 2016, it's a partnership that makes a lot of sense to continue to support.

Mr. Orr: So, to be clear, in this budget it has not been restored, but it might be future-wise?

Ms Hoffman: There's no new money.

Mr. Orr: Might.

Ms Hoffman: Might.

Mr. Orr: Thank you.
I'll cede it back to Tany.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you.

Mr. Yao: To Drayton Valley-Devon, please.

Mr. Smith: Thank you for being willing to share some of your time, Tany, and Minister, for being willing to answer some questions for us. You know, I find this, on a very personal note, an amazing exercise in democracy. I have talked with my kids for

years and years and years about how you can't judge our democratic system solely on question period and that a lot of good work gets done in committee. This has been an amazing time.

Anyhow, being a rookie MLA and listening to you speak here tonight – and you're talking about lodge renewals and capital investments and stuff like that – I don't know if I can get down into the micro, and if I'm going too local and too constituency based, then just let me know, and maybe we can have a conversation outside of this room, then, at some point in time.

I was talking to an 80-year-old gentleman in my constituency just last week, who came in and was talking about his wife, who has Parkinson's and is in a lodge in Breton, Alberta. He stressed that he doesn't mind travelling the 30 minutes every day or every couple of days to go see his wife. He says that that's not the issue. And his praise: he was just effusive in his praise for the staff that was taking care of his wife. He said that she's just getting excellent care. His concern was that she had to share a room. She's got Parkinson's, and she had to share a room with a second lady that had Parkinson's as well. Now, this facility, from the way he was explaining it to me, was a former hospital. On the two concerns that he had, I said: well, if I ever get the chance to talk with the minister, I'll see if I can ask her your two questions.

Ms Hoffman: And today it's in *Hansard*.

Mr. Smith: And today it's in *Hansard*. Today I get the chance to ask these two questions on his behalf. Okay? So here we go. He was wondering if you have plans to upgrade the facility so that maybe she could have a private room at some point in time, and would it be possible for him to contact your office and to maybe share his concerns and provide either you or someone in your office with his insights into the care that his wife is receiving?

Ms Hoffman: Absolutely. We'd love to hear from him, hear about the good and hear about his recommendations for improvement, too.

In terms of the facility, what was the community again?

Mr. Smith: Breton, Alberta.

Ms Hoffman: Breton.

Mike, do you want to talk about Breton, the physical structure there and the building itself, please.

Mr. Leathwood: Actually, the Breton facility is a continuing care facility, so it is administered through Alberta Health, but it is identified as one of a number of older facilities with shared rooms that do need to be part of the renewal. Under the ASLI program, or continuing care, you not only need to add new supply, but you also need to, just like the lodges, renew and replace. There are a number of those across Alberta that need to be done over the coming years as well.

Mr. Smith: Have you got some kind of a timeline or any idea that I could pass on to him?

Ms Hoffman: I don't have a timeline today, but if you yourself want to either write or call or have your constituent do so, we'd be happy to dig into the issue a little bit deeper. Of course, the goal is to make sure that the people who have built this province can feel supported in the communities that they live in. Thank you for that.

Mr. Smith: I'd really appreciate it, and I know that he would, too. We'll work together with him to see if we can contact your office and see if we can get some information.

Ms Hoffman: Great.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Great.

Do I have time, Tany, for a second question? Do you want to pass it on?

Mr. Yao: Go ahead.

Mr. Smith: Secondly, I've met several times with the directors of the Leduc Foundation regarding not only the seniors' care that they provide for my constituents but also on the low-income housing that they provide for my constituents. I know that they've focused on lodge renewal, and I know that you provided just recently some upgrades with regard to fire and fire suppression, you know, and that's been very good. I guess my question is that I was wondering if on their behalf you could update me on any initiatives or monies that you're going to be directing towards that organization for low-income housing.

Ms Hoffman: Specifically in the municipality of Leduc?

Mr. Smith: Yeah.

Ms Hoffman: I actually was there for a tour of a lodge not that long ago and met with them individually. I'm pretty sure I know of the specific facility that you're referring to, and I've been working with their local MLA to make sure that we can provide them with updates.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Smith: It straddles into mine as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

We are now moving on to the third-party opposition. Mr. McIver, I believe you're going to take the lead?

Mr. McIver: Yes, I am.

The Chair: Will you be going back and forth?

Mr. McIver: We'll go back and forth if it's okay with the good minister.

Ms Hoffman: Keep it up.

Mr. McIver: Thanks for being here, Minister. I appreciate that. I'll try to go fast and be polite at the same time.

Ms Hoffman: You don't need to go fast.

Mr. McIver: We'll see how we do.

Okay. Minister, at what age do Albertans become seniors as far as your ministry is concerned?

Ms Hoffman: Sixty-five.

Mr. McIver: Okay. So at 64 years and 11 months you're not interested in helping them – well, you're interested, but you can't help them – but at 65 years you can.

Ms Hoffman: Well, there are different responsibilities with different ministries; Human Services, for example.

Mr. McIver: I'm talking about the Seniors ministry specifically.

Ms Hoffman: Well, Seniors has sort of three different components. One is for people over 65, income supports and other eligibility programs. The others would be around affordable housing and

supports for people with developmental disabilities, too. We have some line items in that. But Seniors specifically, consistent with other jurisdictions, is 65.

Mr. McIver: All right. I'm pretty passionate about some of this because, as you may or may not know, I chaired the Calgary Housing Company for three years along the way, which was at the time and probably still is the largest residential landlord in the province. So this is all pretty interesting to me.

You talked earlier in your comments about fire and safety system upgrades to keep people safe, and that's obviously a good thing. Now, how many of the people that you house in the Seniors ministry are in private homes as opposed to lodges or nursing homes or that type of thing? Do you do any housing in homes that are group homes and things for seniors?

Ms Hoffman: Well, we would certainly have supports for seniors who are living independently, mostly in their own homes.

In terms of group homes I'll just look to my deputy for some feedback on that. I don't think that we do.

Mr. Marchand: I don't think we do either, unless Mike wants to tell me otherwise.

Mr. Leathwood: There are some group homes in some of the portfolios but not as a real focus.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Let me come to the point, then, if you don't mind.

Ms Hoffman: Sure.

Mr. McIver: Listen, I agree. If you've got people with bad mobility, you've got to have a sprinkler system. No argument. I agree a hundred per cent. Where I've gotten complaints from some people operating group homes – and I don't know how many are seniors – is that when they've got people in the group homes, like a residential-type home, that have excellent mobility, they say: well, the sprinkler system actually makes it harder for people to afford to be there because the cost of putting a sprinkler system in a residential home is proportionately very expensive per bed. Of course, if they're in a wheelchair, then you've got to put the sprinkler system in because they can't get out. Are you considering a difference for those situations where there's excellent mobility?

Ms Hoffman: I think that that would probably apply more to Human Services. I'm just thinking about some of the individuals that would fit under standard 8, for example. I think that might be one of the initiatives that you're referring to.

Mr. McIver: I thank you for that answer.

Moving right along, if you don't mind, to I think you call it leveraging assets. I call it reprofiling. How much of that do you do, to be clear? I think Mr. Leathwood talked about it. It's probably easier to do in large cities because you can sell a building with, say, 20 units in it on really expensive land downtown and maybe move it half a mile or half a kilometre out of the downtown but still on a transit line and get 30 units for the same price and newer, too. How much effort are you putting into that so that we can get good value?

Ms Hoffman: Into leveraging the – what did you call it?

Mr. McIver: You call it leveraging. I call it reprofiling. But we're not disagreeing here.

Ms Hoffman: Exactly. Specifically, how much is in our budget towards that initiative this year?

Mr. McIver: Yes.

Ms Hoffman: I will ask the deputy to find the line item.

Mr. Marchand: It would be within our capital line item, I think, within the major renewal.

But to give a sense of where the focus is, Mr. Leathwood can give a specific answer.

Mr. Leathwood: A couple of things. One is that we are clearly working with our partners, be it the city, the municipalities, the housing providers, and the province, to leverage the assets around clearly increasing density. We do look to the providers once a year to submit business plans, and we encourage them to submit proposals like that. In other words, if they feel that if you sell this and build there, then that's something that we will consider under their business plan submission.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Thank you.

Moving right along, you talked, Minister, in one of your answers about the special assistance program to pay for hot water tanks and for things like that, upkeep. Is it income tested? I know it's age tested because you've got to be a senior, but is it also income tested?

Ms Hoffman: Yes, it is.

Mr. McIver: What's the cut-off?

Ms Hoffman: I can certainly send you that policy piece at a later date if that's okay.

Mr. McIver: I'd be happy to get that later.

Ms Hoffman: Never mind. Let's not reply in writing. Look at this. If you're single, from zero to \$22,000 would be the annual income for your primary and secondary items. If you only need a primary item, \$21,001 to \$26,400. If you're a couple, it would be from zero to \$34,800 for primary and secondary items; \$34,801 to \$43,000 for primary items only.

Mr. McIver: Outstanding and fast, too. Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that.

Ms Hoffman: Well, thank you, team.

Mr. McIver: Now, you've talked in your answers about moving some people out of the PAB into your ministry, and that's why the dollar amount in your ministry went up. Do you know if the PAB went down by the same amount?

Ms Hoffman: It went down. Also, the other piece is that it's a full year that we have the ministry operating this year. It was a ministry that was created halfway through the year previously. But there were significant reductions to the PAB line item, and that would be under Executive Council in the estimates.

Mr. McIver: Okay. How much money do you have in your budget to deal with elder abuse?

Ms Hoffman: A million dollars a year for three years. We're investing \$1 million this year.

Mr. McIver: Just a million per year.

How closely are you working with the police on that particular issue?

Ms Hoffman: In terms of the way it's been rolling out, we've got grants that we're giving to local community leaders throughout the province. A lot of the time it'll be organizations that were supported through other community projects, and they might have a city police component in terms of supporting them. We certainly are working with them to some degree, but most of that would be happening in the local municipalities through collaboration on the ground.

Mr. McIver: Okay. So you're not working directly with the police, but you hope that the municipalities are. Is that what I'm hearing?

Ms Hoffman: Well, I'm not working with the police, but we're giving the money to the individuals that are doing the programs in the communities, and certainly a component is special training for police to be able to identify . . .

Mr. McIver: Training for police is part of your budget?

Ms Hoffman: Training for the police around elder abuse. We mentioned under the line item how many elder abuse individuals we've trained: 145 trainers have been trained.

Mr. McIver: It's police, though, that you're training, is it?

6:10

Ms Hoffman: There are 145 trainers, and then they'll be working with individuals throughout the community. They could be working with police, they could be working with dental hygienists, they could be working with people who are in regular contact with seniors to make sure that they have the information to be able to identify the abuse.

Mr. McIver: I appreciate the answer. Thank you.

Now, in the seniors services division where does it articulate funding for the Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta?

Ms Hoffman: SACA?

Mr. McIver: Yeah. How much funding do you anticipate they'll receive this fiscal year?

Ms Hoffman: Each individual grant recipient isn't listed in the estimates document, but we can . . .

Mr. McIver: Okay. So it's in there. If it's there, I will find it myself. Okay. I'll move on if it's in there in black and white, Minister. Thank you. It must be an oversight on my part.

Ms Hoffman: Here we go: line 2.2, \$364,000.

Mr. McIver: Okay. You've reached out to your new federal minister. I was happy to hear that. What changes can you expect to your budget as a result of the meetings?

Ms Hoffman: Well, he's busy; he's learning. We had an initial conversation over the phone about a week ago. He has been reaching out or vice versa – we've been talking. He told me that he was going to be connecting with the other leaders throughout Canada as well and that, of course, right off the top – he's responsible for more than just housing, but I certainly mentioned it.

Mr. McIver: So you don't know.

Ms Hoffman: No. He hasn't made any commitments yet.

Mr. McIver: "I don't know" is a legitimate answer, and I thank you for it.

You said somewhere in your comments that 10 per cent of seniors are receiving elder abuse. Where does that number come from?

Ms Hoffman: That's a department estimate based on . . .

Mr. McIver: It's an estimate?

Ms Hoffman: Yeah.

Mr. McIver: And where does the department get the numbers from?

Ms Hoffman: The projection that it's anticipated at about 10 per cent? Because this is budget, I hadn't anticipated that being a specific question for today, but if you're interested in doing a follow-up offline, we can find out information around how that number was generated. I imagine it was in collaboration with local law enforcement. [interjection] Sorry. It was a federal study that was done.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Thank you.

The Seniors' Advocate has to deal with issues in a timely fashion, you said. I'm wondering: how are you keeping track? What activities are being measured?

Ms Hoffman: Tracking the calls is certainly one of the pieces, and as we mentioned, there have been over 600 calls since the office was initiated and files opened. The advocate herself right now is certainly in dialogue with the department. As I also mentioned, the former Seniors' Advocate is actually a department employee now. What better way of integrating that knowledge from being a person working with seniors on the front lines than actually having an individual employee in the department responsible for seniors' services and certainly combating some of those challenges?

Mr. McIver: ASLI, you said, is not the silver bullet. So what are the shortfalls, if you don't mind, in the ASLI program?

Ms Hoffman: From some of the communities that I've talked to – and everybody might have a different perception – one of my concerns was that sometimes applications were created to meet the criteria, so having the one-third/one-third/one-third. There may not be a time where the right proponent is one of those pieces that's been missing. [A timer sounded] So making sure that we have the right projects, not just the right spin of percentages of operators, would be one of the pieces.

Thank you, Madam Chair. Sorry that I went over there.

The Chair: No. It's okay. Thank you, Minister.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: We will now move on to the government caucus. My understanding, Mrs. Schreiner, is that you'll be asking questions first, and then Mr. Hinkley will follow up.

Mrs. Schreiner: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister, for the opportunity to ask a couple of questions. I've heard that a city right here in our province, Medicine Hat, was proclaimed the first city in Canada to eliminate homelessness. I know that very often individuals who struggle with homelessness are low-income seniors, individuals suffering with mental illness, or individuals struggling with addictions. I'd like to know if your ministry has been in contact with communities such as Medicine Hat and whether your ministry has provided any funding to programs and services that could adopt a model such as Medicine Hat's model?

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much for the question. I actually visited Medicine Hat this summer. Meeting with the housing management body was one of the pieces. One of the things that Medicine Hat has that's unique is that in so many municipalities homelessness is run by one hand and affordable housing is run by another hand. Even in our own government we've got affordable housing in this ministry, and homelessness, the shelters, are under Human Services. What they've done in Medicine Hat is actually completely integrate the two. Of course, we know that when you have somebody who's almost homeless, you need to invest in making sure that that is not the outcome. Certainly, they did have some increased allocations at the local level, but a lot of it was around aligning the operator and aligning the systems.

I'd be happy to ask Assistant Deputy Leathwood to expand on that if he would like to.

Mr. Leathwood: Yes. Mike Leathwood, assistant deputy minister. As the minister said, the Medicine Hat Community Housing Society is unique to Alberta in that it's both the community-based organization on contract with Human Services and a housing management body, so they are able to integrate both the housing and the support services. Under our ministry they receive funding under rent supplement programming and supports to their social housing file. Then they also receive funding from Human Services under the community-based initiative, and they're able to work with people holistically and have been very successful.

Mrs. Schreiner: Okay. Thank you.

Minister, does your ministry feel that the approach in Medicine Hat is a good approach, and do you feel that it could be adopted across Alberta? If so, is this reflected in the budget, and where is it reflected?

Ms Hoffman: I think the outcome of having people housed is the desirable outcome. In looking at organizations like the Calgary Housing Company, that was mentioned by the last hon. member, looking at initiatives that are happening through the Greater Edmonton Foundation, for example, for seniors' housing in Edmonton, I think having local municipalities have access to resources to address their local needs is really important. I think there are probably components of Medicine Hat that could be adapted in other municipalities, but I really want to ensure that we also allow some of that autonomy to the municipalities themselves to help address. Some of the challenges are different in different communities for a variety of reasons. The socioeconomics of the community would certainly be one of them.

Mrs. Schreiner: Okay. Thank you.

My last question before I pass it along: Minister, does your ministry feel that the housing first approach will yield greater savings in the long run by providing the necessary services to those who need them?

Ms Hoffman: Again, in the way that the different components have been aligned, affordable housing is under this ministry and homelessness is under Human Services. The housing first strategy would actually be part of the Human Services ministry, and I think that there's important work that we can do under the current structure to try to align resources.

Certainly, we've supported through ASLI grants in the past some initiatives that have become housing first projects. For example, Ambrose Place is one that I visited in the riding of Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. We certainly worked closely with Human Services on this file. When you walk into Ambrose Place, for example, everyone I met had been homeless for at least

10 years before they ended up being housed there. One woman I talked to said that she had been living on the streets for 15 years and how proud she was of her home. She showed me around, and it was modest. It was probably the size of maybe the smallest hotel room you've ever stayed in in your life. She was safe. She talked about how she was wet when she moved in. She drank a lot, and she said she's still pretty damp, but she's not wet anymore, right?

Once you have the safety and security of a home and a place that you feel secure in, that you feel proud to live in, it has enabled so many individuals to make decisions and empower themselves to take care of themselves. In a way that's really, I think, the desired outcome for everyone, to be able to live with self-respect, dignity, and security. While this doesn't fall under my mandate as a minister responsible for affordable housing, I'm certainly proud of the work that's being done in the communities to address this.

Mrs. Schreiner: Thank you, Minister.

I'll pass this on.

6:20

Cortes-Vargas: I'm just kind of following up on the question that the other MLA was asking about, how we compare to other jurisdictions in Canada, the specific question being: how does the government of Alberta's seniors benefit program compare to other supports in other jurisdictions, other provinces?

Ms Hoffman: In terms of the types of benefits I'm informed that we have the most comprehensive suite of benefits. There are a variety of different components rather than just one or two different models.

I'll ask my deputy to expand on that, please.

Mr. Marchand: Sure. With that comprehensive suite of programs it's over \$2 billion on seniors' programs overall across the government. That would include programming within this ministry as well as probably primarily in Health with the seniors' drug programs and other benefits that are available.

Cortes-Vargas: The last one on this one is: compared to other provinces, how much of the benefits do you provide per capita? Is it higher or lower than other provinces?

Ms Hoffman: Our average per capita benefit? We'll have to reply to that one in writing, I think.

Cortes-Vargas: Okay.

Mr. Hinkley: I'd like to talk about a different program. The previous government introduced a home repair loan program, and that was intended to replace the special-needs assistance program, 2.3 on the government estimates. The program is not listed. The home repair loan is not listed in the ministry's estimates. Has it been scrapped?

Ms Hoffman: What we've done is that we have a grant component, certainly, that's still moving forward. It relates to item 2.3 in the estimates. As is the case with any program aimed at supporting vulnerable seniors, we'll be taking our time to review the proposed home loan program to see if it fits within our government's goals and values. We want to ensure that whatever program we put in place benefits Albertans and helps our seniors live independent lives. There may need to be a grant component. There may need to be a loan component. It might be a combination of the two. I am happy to say that the special-needs assistance program will remain

intact with the necessary funding required to help Alberta seniors. It's under 2.3.

Mr. Hinkley: The reason for asking is that lots of seniors may want to stay in their own homes. They may want to be safe and in their own community.

Ms Hoffman: Sure. Absolutely.

Mr. Hinkley: So long as they can go to that line, I guess, for home repairs.

Ms Hoffman: I'm going to ask the deputy. If MLAs – I'm sure they do – hear from seniors in their communities who would like to have increased information about the home repair loan program, how would they go about accessing that information? Is there a specific avenue that would be most easily available to everyone?

Mr. Marchand: As yet on the home loan we continue to have the grant program. The grant program remains in place. That's what the funding is available for on the budget line.

I think the best source of information would be the Alberta Supports contact line, which is a phone line that is operated by Human Services. It provides comprehensive information to Albertans on the whole range of social support programs that are available, including those offered by the Ministry of Seniors. That would be sort of the first point of information for many Albertans.

Ms Hoffman: If you have the number memorized, I'll be extra impressed.

Mr. Marchand: I do not.

Ms Hoffman: Oh. So I'm just moderately impressed.

Mr. Hinkley: But I'm happy that it's still possible.

Ms Hoffman: Absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you, members, and thank you, Minister.

We have seven minutes remaining on the clock for the Official Opposition to ask questions. Mr. Yao.

Mr. Yao: Thank you very much. Minister Hoffman, this line of questioning – you have to understand, and I think you do, that the relationship between Seniors and Health is a very blurred line and that seniors are basically a demographic that requires a lot more Health attention. I also recognize that you may not have the expertise around you here to answer some of these questions. If possible, I'd like to ask them. They are very much related to Seniors and seniors' issues. They are mentioned in your plans.

Ms Hoffman: In the Seniors plans?

Mr. Yao: Again, they might verge on Health. May I ask these questions?

Ms Hoffman: If they relate to the Seniors estimates, the Seniors business plan, I would say that they're in order, but I look to the chair for further clarification.

The Chair: The questions that can be asked today in this committee need to be specific to the estimates for Seniors and the business plan for Seniors. Any other questions I would say to refer back to the House during question period or members' statements, please.

Mr. Yao: I'll ask them anyway, and you could decide because, again, they are in your plans. They are referred to a little bit.

Ms Hoffman: In the Seniors plans?

The Chair: Member, I will caution you because I will rule you out of order if you go too far down the line. Please stay within the estimates and the business plan of Seniors.

Mr. Yao: All right.

Seniors are taking up a majority of the long-term care beds in hospitals. Can you confirm that this government is looking at options to relocate these into less cost-intensive facilities?

Ms Hoffman: Oh, that's totally, I think, appropriate for this discussion because we're talking about the commitment to build 2,000 long-term care beds. Of course, part of the affordable housing falls under this piece, and the ASLI grants, for example, in past have as well. Certainly, we're committed to building the 2,000 long-term care and dementia care beds that we committed to in the election, and that will certainly help the overall fiscal picture for the province.

Mr. Yao: Recognizing that you do identify 2,000 beds, you must have some sort of plan. Can you tell me more if these are going to be government institutions, or are you going to promote private options, trying to promote private industry to provide these housing requirements?

Ms Hoffman: I think it's about the third different way this question has been asked today. I respect that, but in terms of the comprehensive plan I will be happy to update all members, including yourself, at a future date. This is certainly one of the key pillars under my responsibility as a cabinet minister.

Mr. Yao: This unfortunate allocation of space is also a reflection of other hospital-based services that seniors use. Many of the services provided in primary care facilities that they require could potentially be housed in less cost-intensive structures. Can you tell me what percentage of space in hospitals is utilized for these services and departments?

Ms Hoffman: That definitely is my other ministry. I could talk to you about that on another day, but it certainly, I would hazard to say, does not fit the parameters of today's discussion.

Mr. Yao: All right. We have many seniors who live in rural areas, and they're very concerned about their ability to get transport to these acute-care facilities. Ground EMS in rural areas is common . . .

Ms Hoffman: Acute-care health care facilities?

Mr. Yao: Yes. Ground EMS in rural areas are commonly absorbed on a daily basis to service the urban service areas of Alberta. Again, this increases the risks of our seniors who live in these areas. Is this government taking any steps to alleviate these issues? Right now many of these seniors are being forced to move to the urban areas – I can speak to that myself, and I know other people that can – to access not only acute-care facilities but also other basic services and tests that they require. Are you doing anything from that perspective to assist these people?

Ms Hoffman: I'm trying to find a way to bring your question back to the estimates.

Mr. Yao: Is there a budget line for transportation of these seniors?

Ms Hoffman: Ground transportation like EMS would be under the Health budget.

Mr. Yao: Again, that is a costly venture for EMS and also takes away from EMS's prime mandate, of providing emergency response. They're being used for . . .

Ms Hoffman: This ministry does not have a responsibility for EMS transportation services. That would be the Ministry of Health.

Mr. Yao: Yes. That's what I'm saying. Do you have a line item to alleviate this pressure on EMS that would be specific for these kinds of things?

Ms Hoffman: I'll talk about alternate transportation for seniors.

Mr. Yao: Yes, please.

Ms Hoffman: Okay. We understand that at any age there might be barriers to being able to drive, and, of course, in your later years of life we should all be so lucky to live long enough that we get macular degeneration or cataracts because those are certainly a guarantee at some point with people living as long as possible. I know it seems crazy to say "lucky to have those" because nobody aspires to them, but they are illnesses that are almost certain with a certain age.

Government is working with partners like the AUMA, Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, and the University of Alberta and other stakeholders to promote age-friendly initiatives that boost transportation options in communities, and there are certainly a number of leaders in their own communities. I know that the hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville has a senior in her riding who was just recognized for the work that he's doing through a volunteer organization to help transport seniors to and from a variety of appointments. Those would be some of the areas that I think would probably align with this ministry as opposed to ground transportation for acute-care hospitals or other types of health care settings.

Mr. Yao: In your 2014-2015 annual report you mention the Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta Act. From my understanding the council is a government-appointed body, and it is tasked with consulting with stakeholders and reporting back to government. Can you tell me where in the budget we can find the cost of this board?

6:30

Ms Hoffman: We're certainly doing an agencies, boards, and commissions review right now. SACA would fall under seniors strategies, which is line item 2.2 on page 208.

Mr. Yao: And you have a specific number related directly to this board?

Ms Hoffman: I have an approximate number of – oh, more specifically, \$364,000 in this year's budget.

Mr. Yao: Yeah. To that effect, the entire budget that you've provided to us is very generic and general. Do you think you can provide us with more breakdowns for the entire thing?

Ms Hoffman: No.

Mr. Yao: All right. That's unfortunate because many of your members keep on asking us for a shadow budget, but it's very hard to provide such a thing without accurate numbers.

The Chair: Thank you, Member. Your time is now up, but that was a great way to end the day.

Minister, I'll just ask that any commitments that you've made to table information can be done in the future.

Ms Hoffman: Before the estimates are voted on?

The Chair: Yeah.

Ms Hoffman: Okay.

The Chair: I'd just like to remind the committee members before you leave that we are scheduled to meet again tomorrow, Thursday – you guys aren't even listening to me – November 19, from 9 a.m. to noon in the Grassland Room for the estimates of Human Services.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is now adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 6:31 p.m.]

