



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Seniors and Housing
Consideration of Main Estimates

Monday, March 2, 2020
7 p.m.

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

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Goodridge, Laila, Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche (UCP), Chair
Sigurdson, Lori, Edmonton-Riverview (NDP), Deputy Chair

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* substitution for Nathan Neudorf

** substitution for Michaela Glasgo

*** substitution for Jeremy Nixon

Also in Attendance

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participants

Ministry of Seniors and Housing

Hon. Josephine Pon, Minister

Evan Romanow, Assistant Deputy Minister, Seniors Services

John Thomson, Assistant Deputy Minister, Housing

7 p.m.

Monday, March 2, 2020

[Ms Goodridge in the chair]

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

The Chair: Welcome, everybody. I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors and Housing for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2021.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have all MLAs introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce all the officials that are joining you at the table. My name is Laila Goodridge, MLA for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche and chair of this committee. I look to my right to continue introductions.

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

Mr. Rutherford: Brad Rutherford, MLA, Leduc-Beaumont.

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

Ms Lovely: Jackie Lovely, MLA, Camrose.

Mr. Walker: Jordan Walker, MLA, Sherwood Park.

Mr. Amery: Mickey Amery, MLA for Calgary-Cross.

Mr. Guthrie: Peter Guthrie, Airdrie-Cochrane.

Ms Pon: Good evening, everyone, Madam Chair, and members of committee. I would like to please introduce my ministry staff with me today. Susan Taylor, my deputy, is on my right. John Thomson is the ADM of the housing division, and on my left there's Evan Romanow, who is the ADM of the seniors division, and also Suzanne Anselmo, the ADM of strategic services. Also on my left here is Darren Baptista, senior financial officer.

Ms Sigurdson: Lori Sigurdson, MLA for Edmonton-Riverview.

Member Irwin: Janis Irwin, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Carson: Jon Carson, MLA for Edmonton-West Henday.

The Chair: I'd like to note the following substitutions for the record: Mr. Gotfried is substituting for Mr. Neudorf, Ms Lovely is substituting for Ms Glasgo, and Mr. Walker is substituting for Mr. Nixon.

Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* and that the committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. Please set your cellphones and any other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for the consideration of the main estimates. Standing Order 59.01(6) establishes the speaking rotation while the speaking time limits are set out in Standing Order 59.02(1). In brief, the minister or member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of these comments we begin a 60-minute speaking block for the Official Opposition, followed by a 20-minute speaking block for the government caucus.

The rotation of speaking time will then alternate between the Official Opposition and the government caucus, with individual speaking times set to five minutes each, which, if combined with the minister's time, make a 10-minute block. All discussion should

flow through the chair at all times regardless as to whether or not the speaking time is combined. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their rotation 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 e-mail to either the chair or the committee clerk.

A total of three hours has been scheduled to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. The scheduled end time of tonight's meeting is 10 p.m. With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having this break?

Ministry officials may be present and at the direction of the minister may address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphone that's in the gallery area, just over there. Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allocated in the schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and the clock will continue to run; however, the speaking block time will be paused.

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 and any amendments will occur in Committee of Supply on March 19, 2020. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. The original amendment is to be deposited with the committee clerk, and 20 copies of the amendment must be provided at the meeting for committee members and staff.

I now invite the Minister of Seniors and Housing to begin her opening remarks. Minister, you have 10 minutes.

Ms Pon: Thank you so much, Madam Chair. I'm so pleased to be here to present the 2020-21 estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. It reminds me of the great privilege to serve as a minister.

Our government continues to address the difficult fiscal conditions in our province. Budget 2020 contains our commitment to maintain the critical services for those most in need while still living within our means and spending to eliminate the deficit. We are making decisions to ensure that support for seniors and vulnerable Albertans is sustainable for future generations.

Our ministry's 2020-21 operating expenses budget is \$637 million. We have about 250 staff. Our broad range of programs and services support the safety and well-being of Alberta's 630,000 seniors. We also ensure Albertans in need have access to affordable housing options. We are maintaining the seniors' benefit for those most in need. Our seniors population is growing rapidly; nearly 4,000 Albertans turn 65 every month. We must manage the increasing caseloads in a way that still supports our most vulnerable seniors. We must ensure that our seniors' programs are sustainable. On our housing side we continue to work with housing providers to make our system more efficient and effective and to ensure we are supporting the most vulnerable Albertans.

I will now take a few moments to discuss the specifics of my ministry estimates. Seniors and Housing will spend about \$436 million to provide financial benefits to seniors. We are allocating more money, about \$11 million, or 2.6 per cent more, than in

Budget 2019 to seniors' financial benefits to address the growing demand. The Alberta seniors' benefit budget is \$321.5 million, a 3.8 per cent increase mainly due to the caseload growth. Our seniors' benefit supplements the monthly income of more than 167,000 seniors, or 27 per cent of the current seniors population.

Our population is aging. Over the next 10 years Alberta's seniors population will increase to 900,000 seniors. As a result, we face caseload cost pressures of \$190 million for our financial assistance program over the next 10 years if not addressed. We must ensure our programs are sustainable.

As outlined in the fiscal plan, beginning in 2021, we will adjust the benefit calculation for new Alberta seniors' benefit applicants. We will retain the seniors' benefit for all current recipients. They will see no change. After this change, the seniors with the lowest income will continue to receive the current maximum benefit. The calculation of benefits for new applicants will better align with other provinces in Canada. Alberta will still have among the highest benefit maximums in the country.

7:10

In our special needs assistance program, which is where we lead the nation, we continue to make funding available to seniors who may need help with essential needs. In Budget 2020 we are making changes to the special needs assistance program to maintain the coverage for seniors with low income and ensure coverage for the most essential items. We will reduce or eliminate coverage for less essential items. These changes will save \$8.2 million in 2020-21. These changes will help ensure that the program is sustainable for those who need it the most and to help meet the caseload demand for the Alberta seniors' benefit.

Our government will continue to provide stable funding for two of our loan programs, the seniors' home adaptation and repair program and the seniors' property tax deferral program, as well as maintain the grant portions of the seniors' home adaptation and repair program. This program helps seniors to remain in their homes and communities. We are also working to make it easier for seniors and their families to access our programs and services. My ministry has taken the steps to eliminate unnecessary red tape and continues to work with the stakeholders to identify more red tape reduction initiatives.

Now I will take a few moments to talk about how we provide affordable housing to Albertans, including seniors. About 11 per cent of all households in Alberta are in what we call core housing need. That means that they pay more than 30 per cent of their household income to keep a roof over their heads. Our housing program serves more than 110,000 people in more than 60,900 housing units owned or supported by the Alberta government. Our government is working closely with other levels of government, housing providers, nonprofit organizations, and the private organization sector to transform the affordable housing system and provide housing for Albertans in need. We must ensure the sustainability of the affordable housing system and our seniors' program for both current and future Albertans.

In Budget '20-21 we are allocating \$215.7 million for both capital investment and grants. We will reduce our rental assistance budget by \$11 million in 2021. Our government is redesigning the rental assistance program to meet the needs of Albertans with low income. Details will be finalized this spring.

No household has had their benefits reduced or eliminated as a result of this review. We closed the program in October 2019 to allow us to meet the budget reductions with as little impact on households as possible. To make the most effective use of available federal funding, we are also working with the federal government to integrate our program with the new Canada housing benefit. We

are making prudent decisions that strike a balance between addressing our financial situation and supporting the most vulnerable with sustainable programs. Operating grants for housing management bodies were reduced by \$4.6 million in 2020-21.

The reductions I have outlined are a necessary step to control our spending and reduce Alberta's debt. Capital plan 2020 allocates \$417 million over three years to provide over 2,000 new and regenerated affordable housing units, 3,440 jobs, and maintain the 26,700 units in the provincially owned portfolio. Capital plan 2020 reduces overall funding by \$53 million compared with the same three years in capital plan 2019. This is a reduction to the capital maintenance and renewal program. In a time of fiscal restraint our government will prioritize capital maintenance and renewal funding in the areas of greatest need. We are working with our housing partners to ensure safe and maintained housing units are available for Albertans with low income.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. As you heard, the majority of my ministry's budget provides financial and housing support for seniors and low-income Albertans. We will continue to support those most in need of seniors' programs and services and affordable housing. We know that our seniors population is growing rapidly. We are making decisions now to ensure our seniors' programs are sustainable for those most in need.

Now I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. The timer will be set for three 20-minute intervals so that members are aware. Are you guys planning on sharing time, going back and forth, or block time?

Ms Sigurdson: I'd appreciate sharing if the minister is okay with that.

Ms Pon: Of course. Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Thank you.

Well, I appreciate the opportunity to go over the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. Before I get into the questions, I just want to give some context, I guess. We know that the general population of Alberta is increasing by about 2 per cent annual growth, but for seniors it's a bit different, and you identified that in your remarks, that about 5 per cent is actually how much it goes up annually. Obviously, seniors are living longer lives, and that means something for government programming. Of course, we know the cost of living went up also, by 1.6 per cent. If you think about the seniors and the cost of living, that's actually a 6.6 per cent increase just to be flat, just to continue with the same programs of the previous fiscal year because of the increase in both the cost of living and the population. I just wanted to make that point.

Like we were just saying, seniors live, on average, to about 84 right now. But as the population grows and, you know, there are advances in health, seniors are living longer and healthier lives. Actually, they say that by 2046 seniors in Alberta will live to 87 years of age. Our population of seniors will have about doubled at that time. We'll have more than a million. You said that already there are 630,000 seniors in our province currently.

We also have an unemployment rate in Alberta that's 7 per cent. I know that this government certainly in their fiscal plan and certainly in the remarks of the Minister of Finance talked a lot about jobs. It was almost like jobs are a panacea, that they fix everything. But that's not true, especially in this ministry, because in this

ministry, you know, seniors are retired. Oftentimes seniors cannot work. Seniors still do work, but a lot of them can't, so I think we just need to keep that in mind as we're going through these estimates, because we know that we do need strong and comprehensive public programs for a really healthy society. Despite some of the comments of many members of the government, the government does have choices. They make decisions based on their value system, on their views. So this UCP government does have choices, and they're not really forced to do anything. They're choosing to do anything. Again, I just want to make that point.

With that, I just want to look at page 183 of the government estimates and start with seniors' services there. We know that for 2.1, program delivery, the budget is down slightly. It's not significant, but it is down. So some of the things that your ministry does to provide, you know, strategic direction, support for seniors' programs is going to be sort of on the shoulders of fewer people, I would think, and that's a bit less.

But the next one is the point that really concerns me, Minister. It's 2.2, special needs assistance grants. That is down by over \$8 million. I mean, that's a significant decrease. Of course, this is a program, as you well know, that supports very vulnerable seniors in a myriad of ways. I'm just actually kind of shocked by that significant cut in this area, so I'd just like to give you some time to sort of explain why you've cut that by \$8 million.

7:20

Ms Pon: Thank you for the questions. Regarding that special needs assistance, I would first of all like to clarify that we have not cut the program; we are maintaining the program. We just have to make some adjustments. I agree with you that seniors have to be looked after, and we're focused on providing essential support in this program that keeps the low-income seniors living in their homes and their chosen communities. The number of seniors is growing in our province, as you say. Every month 4,000 Albertans turn 65, and we need to ensure that this special-needs program for seniors is meeting the increased demand.

For instance, we made adjustments like making program changes to cover essential items like diabetes supplies, CPAP machines, and bed bug treatment. The medical trips are maintained, but coverage for less essential items is reduced or eliminated. I remind you that Alberta is the only province that has a program like this, and we want this to continue. The change of \$8.2 million will be used to help offset the caseload pressure, so that \$8.2 million is just helping to reduce the demand and the pressures of the growing seniors population on the Alberta seniors' benefit. As you mentioned, this is a growing problem. We have to make sure that the benefit will be sustainable and can continue for future generations.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I just want to clarify a bit about what you just shared with us. I mean, in your argument to me just now it seems like you think that because the seniors population is increasing, we need to actually cut the programs so that they're sustainable. Actually, the opposite is true. You actually should increase the programs and make sure that Alberta seniors have the supports they need. So I'm confused by that, and I'm just wanting to know, Minister, if you could please clarify: what is a nonessential item? I mean, I have the list here of the special needs assistance program. What's nonessential? These seem like pretty fundamental things, you know, that people need.

Ms Pon: Well, the essential items, as I mentioned before, would be diabetes supplies, CPAP machines, bed bug treatment, and also medical trips. You mention nonessential items, which are lift chairs,

foot orthotics, laundry costs, and funeral expenses. Funeral expenses are also covered by the federal government, so this is a nonessential item for which we will make adjustment.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. You know, oftentimes as we age, we do have more challenges. Mobility is one of them, and lift chairs are one of those things that really help people to need, I think, probably less assistance. They can get up out of their chair themselves. It could be that they have trouble with their knees or some other kind of problem. I don't know. I guess I'm challenging your assessment of that being a nonessential item.

Certainly, orthotics: I mean, our feet are so important. Again, as we age, we have different challenges. I think that one of the things that does concern me is that previously for orthotics you would get a maximum of \$409 a pair, and you'd get one pair funded every five years. Now with the cuts, according to this booklet, the orthotics maximum is \$300, and you only get two pairs in a lifetime. Again, because our population is aging and, you know, we will be living on average to 87, that means we'll be getting actually less, but the need is there. It's confusing to me, your decision that this is not essential.

I guess I just want to make another point about costs deferred. We know that when people are well supported to live in the communities that they call home, are connected to their families, and have the supports that they need in the community, it means that they don't end up in emergency or need other high-cost health things. So this is a way that we can actually prevent costs, defer costs.

I guess I'm just challenging your thinking on this, and I'd be happy to hear any of your comments regarding the same.

Ms Pon: For these items, actually, my team has been doing some studying, doing some research, and working together and making these decisions as to why we want to eliminate. The lift chairs and the foot orthotics: there are some lower cost alternatives that exist. That's why we have to make some adjustments. We remind you that because, as you mentioned, seniors are aging and the population is growing rapidly, we have to make some tough decisions. When we make these decisions, we're looking at the items that are most in need and also making sure that all those adjusted programs are sustainable for the future seniors and also, of course, controlling spending to make sure that we balance the budget within the next three years. This is how we make decisions.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, on the backs, on the feet of seniors, it seems. That's what troubles me. It was easy for this government to give a \$4.7 billion corporate handout immediately when they were elected. I mean, I think that the priorities are skewed, and it's kind of very concerning, what is going on.

Another item that is, I guess, a secondary-funded item – you have the primary- and the secondary-funded items – is respite care. That's, you know, giving caregivers some support and that. I just want to draw your attention to the business plan, page 138. Your outcome 1 is: "Make life better for Alberta seniors and their caregivers." I think we talked about this last estimates. The word "caregiver" is sort of a new introduction into the business plan. Respite care is something that could be very helpful to caregivers. I'm just wondering. Like, I sort of fail to see anything that is in support of caregivers, but there is this one small piece in the secondary expenses. I'm just wondering if you want to elaborate on that. I mean, outcome 1 in your business plan is about how important it is to support caregivers, so just anything you want to say about that.

Ms Pon: I'm pleased to advise you that there's no change to respite care. There's no change.

Ms Sigurdson: There's no change to respite care?

Ms Pon: There's no change, no.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Do you know how much on average, you know, is funded through that program for respite care?

Ms Pon: Let me look into it. Evan is my ADM.

Would you please assist us and just share the calculations and numbers you have, please.

Mr. Romanow: Yeah. Last year – and this is based on seniors who do make claims for these types of supports – there were just around 70 seniors who provided submissions for this type of support. I would highlight also a number of additional areas. Medical trips and transportation supports: there's quite high utilization for those areas. Personal response supports as well: nearly 6,000, 7,000 seniors, and that directly is targeted at supporting seniors through supports with their caregivers. So there are a number of items within the special needs assistance program which are intended to be able to support seniors and, indirectly, their caregivers as well.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Thank you.

Minister, I'd just like you to go back again to outcome 1 and just what you have there, "Make life better for Alberta seniors and their caregivers." I mean, it's your outcome 1. It's quite substantial, so I would think it would be something that's very important to you. I just want you to sort of elaborate on, like, what exactly beyond this you're doing to support caregivers.

Ms Pon: We do provide a community program and grant for aging well in the community. So we have been doing that.

Ms Sigurdson: Anything more you can say about that?

7:30

Ms Pon: Of course, this is – as you know, there were no changes. We will continue working with the caretakers that provide the support that they provide to our seniors.

Ms Sigurdson: All right. Okay. Thank you.

Let's move on. Let me see. If we continue down on the same page in the government estimates, page 183, and we go to the seniors' home adaptation and repair program, we actually see there's an increase there from '19-20 to '20-21. I just want to acknowledge, you know, you and your ministry for continuing that program. That's an excellent program, and it certainly supports seniors to stay in their communities. I just want to commend the ministry for that good work and how it continues and is expanding. I think it makes a big difference because seniors can age in their communities, and we know that that's really – as we talked about earlier, that does defer costs, and it is a good investment, and it's a good investment of this ministry.

The next line is 2.4, seniors' community grants. This one is a little confusing. I mean, in 2018-19 we see the actual is almost \$2 million, and then budget 2019-20 is down to \$900,000. Then the forecast for this year is quite substantially lower again. It's only \$400,000. I guess I just would like to understand that a little bit. How come there's such a dramatic decrease from what you did budget to what actually looks like is forecast to be spent?

Ms Pon: The reason why this is a substantial change is because the program is decreasing by \$0.5 million from the 2019-20 forecast to meet the 2019-20 in-year savings target. That's why you see the changes. However, this is only a temporary measure because something might change it next year, too.

Ms Sigurdson: So this is about balancing the budget. Is that what you're saying to me?

Ms Pon: It is about a change of contract and when you're going to use the funding. That's why you see the changes. I'm going to remind you that this is a grant.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. I'm not sure that I quite understand.

Ms Pon: We reinstated another \$900,000 for 2020-21.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes, I see that. But I'm just wondering why the full budget was not spent in this fiscal year. It was budgeted, but the forecast was only \$400,000.

Ms Pon: Like I mentioned, the program is decreasing by \$0.5 million from 2019-20 in the forecast to mid-2019 in-year savings target. This is a one-time thing.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. It is about balancing the budget, then. That's what it is.

Ms Pon: It's just a one-time thing.

Ms Sigurdson: It's on the backs of seniors again. Okay. That's clear. Thank you for, you know, being straight about that.

This seniors' community grants program – I guess you just referred to it – would include aging well in community grants. Is that correct?

Ms Pon: Yes.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Even though you've just identified that through that caregivers are supported, can you identify some of the other programs that would be funded through this?

Ms Pon: Well, there are a number, a few more, a couple more programs would be funded, which is that funding would continue, like, as support for the ministry's priorities, including elderly abuse prevention, aging in communities, ageism, and social isolation. Also, we are supporting the community for the provincial launch of Seniors' Week in Alberta and then to promote that and encourage an event that recognizes and celebrates our seniors. Also, an example for 2019-20: community grants also included key support of service for seniors offered by the Sage Seniors Association in Edmonton and the Kerby Centre in Calgary, including the information, assistance, and referrals on provincial programs and services for seniors. Talking about aging well, we also honoured the existing commitment to the aging well in community grant program.

Ms Sigurdson: Right. Okay. That's a lot of different areas. You know, you talked about social isolation, which is a key concern in the seniors population, for sure, and there's been lots work done on that, certainly some nationally and with PEGASIS here in Edmonton. We also know that 9, 10 per cent of Albertans experience elder abuse – right? – so that is also a serious concern with the seniors population. We know also about transportation. People who are . . .

The Chair: All right. That's the end of the first block. You guys can keep going, Ms Sigurdson, if you are the next one to be speaking.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. I'll continue. Thank you, Chair. Transportation: we know that that's vital, certainly, working with the University of Alberta, the medically at-risk drivers group there

– we have previously done work with them. Ageism: you mentioned that also. I guess I feel even more concerned now, as we go through all of the different kinds of programs these seniors' community grants do support, that there was a reduction and it was only \$400,000. I just have no doubt that many of the, you know, civil society, nonprofit groups that do this work are not receiving those grants from your ministry. So many must not be able to serve, and the issues around elder abuse aren't addressed. I just wondered what you have to say about that.

Ms Pon: Well, as you see in the estimates, we have estimated about \$900,000 in the seniors' community grants. We are addressing and we are continuing to work with the stakeholders and our nonprofit organizations who serve seniors and are continuing to look for different programs to address those items that we are supporting and continue to serve seniors with whatever service that they're looking for under these seniors' community grants.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, Minister, there's no doubt that 2018-19 actuals were almost \$2 million, and this forecast fiscal year is only \$400,000, and next year is \$900,000. I mean, there are a whole bunch of programs that aren't going to be receiving the support that they did previously and did this year, so that means there are more vulnerable seniors having perhaps nowhere to go, you know, if they're experiencing elder abuse, no one to support them in the community.

In terms of Sage, I mean, Sage is so challenged at the very moment because this government is not supporting their health clinic. That's continuing. I understand that your ministry staff have done some advocacy, and hopefully that can be saved, but letters have gone out to people that have gone to that clinic. It's been transformational for people's lives. It's really disturbing.

Yet I know that you want, you know, to save money, be fiscally responsible, and investing in the nonprofit sector to take care of many of these challenges would be a smart move here. It doesn't make any sense to me because it's going to be costing more. Those deferred costs are going to go up. If seniors don't have the supports in community programs, guess what? They're more likely to end up in emergency and really high-cost things. They maybe won't have affordable housing, and they may become homeless. We know that that costs a lot for managing people when they are precariously housed. So it flies in the face of logic. It doesn't make any sense. I mean, just also the dignity of our seniors population – it's disturbing. It's disturbing what I see.

Ms Pon: You know, we've got these decisions that come from a review and discussion with my seniors community team. I have formed a community team since I got appointed last year. This community team is the senior stakeholders who are helping seniors and the other stakeholders. So we have been able to have a number of meetings, asking to address all of these issues. That's why. The input and decisions come from the discussions, and that is something that we'll continue to manage and then work with our leaders in the community and make sure that we will look after the seniors.

When we refer to Sage funding, that will be under Alberta Health, their decision. Also, Seniors and Housing has two-year grants in place of Sage and for a different purpose than in Health, and I am planning to honour this existing grant commitment as well.

7:40

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

Well, I think, you know, as you know and I certainly know from my time as the Minister of Seniors and Housing, Health and Seniors and Housing overlap, same with Community and Social Services,

sometimes with mental health, which is in Health. So working collaboratively out of our silos as government is important, and anything that you can do, any influence that you can have with Health – I just really commend you to speak very highly of the Sage program. I'm glad that Seniors and Housing is honouring their grant with them, but I think that we know that Health is impacted by the social determinants of health, and that is what your ministry is more responsible for than Health directly. We need to sort of have a bigger view, so I just encourage that bigger view.

Okay. Let's move down to 3. It's the Alberta seniors' benefit. As we can see, it's just sort of flat. It hasn't changed from 2019-20 to '20-21. We know that by the comments I made previously just about – you know, it's a 6.6 increase because it's 1.6 for cost of living and 5 per cent for the population growth. I know that you are ensuring that all seniors will have that support without it being indexed anymore – that was taken in the last budget, in the 2019 budget – so seniors are getting less than that. But I know also that because it's a greater number of seniors who will receive the benefit, of course, it has gone up. That does make sense, but individual seniors aren't getting any more, and actually they're getting less, certainly, than when our government was there. Do you concur with my assessment of that?

Ms Pon: I just want to make it clear that the indexing: we are just pausing for right now. We are still reviewing, so we'll look into it.

In terms of supporting the seniors, we have budgeted an \$11.7 million increase for the Alberta seniors' benefit, reflecting and anticipating the caseloads, of course – that population is growing rapidly – and enabling eligible seniors to continue receiving this monthly income supplement. Again, we will focus on the seniors being most in need and make sure to sustain the program.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. You mentioned that you're pausing the indexing. Can you let us know when you'll have a decision on what's going to happen with the indexing?

Ms Pon: My team is reviewing right now, and when this is ready, we'll share it in the Legislature.

Ms Sigurdson: All right. We also know that Albertans turning 65 after July 2021 – this is in the future, but it's already been spoken about in the documents – may no longer be eligible for the Alberta seniors' benefit. No one is going to get kicked off it that are on currently, I understand, but there may be eligibility requirements that are different in the future, through you sort of telegraphing that. Can you explain that?

Ms Pon: Well, changes to Alberta seniors' benefit program for future seniors will ensure that those that are most in need also continue to receive the financial supports that they need. That's so no seniors will receive changes at all for those current seniors. The Alberta seniors' benefit will be maintained at current levels for the seniors currently receiving the financial assistance. I want to emphasize that the seniors' benefit will be maintained for all – for all – current recipients. In 2021, for all the changes, the benefit will be eligible for new applicants. We change to support the future sustainability of the program. Again, this is something that we want to ensure that we provide those benefits to the most in-need seniors and further, of course, the sustainability of the program. That's why we do that.

I remind you: for the people, for the seniors with the lowest income, they will receive the highest benefit. They will continue to receive the highest benefit in this program.

Ms Sigurdson: You didn't really tell me anything about, you know, the eligibility criteria. What's going to change?

Ms Pon: We are still working on it.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Got it.

I'm going to move to housing, which is sort of the next one on the general estimates. I just want to make a few comments about Albertans who are in need of core housing. That means when they're spending more than 30 per cent of their income on housing. That's who that is. Just to give some context, on a per capita basis Alberta has far fewer subsidized housing units than the rest of Canada. According to the most recent census subsidized housing represents just 2.9 per cent of Alberta's housing units. For Canada as a whole it's 4.2 per cent.

Certainly, both the big-city mayors have been very loud after the budget, very concerned about the lack of investment in affordable housing in our province. Mayor Nenshi talks about Calgary needing, you know, 15,000 units of affordable housing, yet there is really nothing in the capital plan regarding the same. What do you have to say to Mayor Nenshi and Calgarians and Albertans about that?

Ms Pon: Well, let's break it into two, okay? Let's address the city of Edmonton first and the mayor. I just want to share with you that I committed to affordable housing for those most in need, including providing adequate housing for Edmonton. Capital plan 2020 in Edmonton: we are continuing funding for the \$8 million budget to develop the Herb Jamieson Centre with 350 shelter spaces. Also, we will continue the full capital development project with \$67 million, which is 338 more housing units for Edmontonians in need of affordable housing, and also \$16.6 million in 2020-21 for capital maintenance and renewal of social housing. Capital Region Housing will receive almost \$10 million of this in 2020-21 for the social housing it operates. Mayor Iveson, actually, we have been meeting a few times already, and, in fact, we already have booked a meeting with him and his team to look and discuss some way hopefully we can work together and create some innovative funding or ideas to address this issue. That is for Edmonton.

For Calgary and Mayor Nenshi: also, again, I fully understand the importance to provide affordable housing. For Calgary capital plan 2020 contains the continued funding of \$62 million toward the construction of 448 housing units for Albertans in need, nearly \$14.5 million in 2020-21 in capital maintenance and renewal of social housing buildings, and the Calgary Housing Company will receive almost another \$10 million besides Edmonton in 2020-21 for the social housing operation. Again, I have been in meetings and discussed this topic with Mayor Nenshi a couple of times, and my team and his team will be meeting together sometime next month to address this issue. We are definitely looking at working together into finding some creative solutions to meet those needs for Albertans.

7:50

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Okay. I hear what you have to say. I guess your government was elected back in April of last year. You quickly decided that the city charters with the big-city mayors would no longer go ahead sort of arbitrarily, and now when you make your comments, you're just discussing how you're going to meet with them or you have met with them a few times. I mean, you're well into your mandate. You're well into your mandate. It should be much beyond this by now. There should be a much more robust plan. You know, affordable housing is a key issue in the large, major centres, and I certainly I know it is in rural Alberta also.

I just want to draw your attention now to page 217 of the fiscal plan. You have kind of referred to it already. It is about the maintenance and renewal dollars. There is \$53 million less over

three years. This is capital maintenance and renewal. Certainly, I remember when I was in your chair, I was told that there's a billion dollars in deferred maintenance that's outstanding because of years of neglect by previous Conservative governments. Certainly, I heard loud and clearly from the housing sector how much, you know, investment was needed. We developed a really robust plan to deal with all that maintenance. I'm wondering what that number is for you now. What's the deferred maintenance number that you're hearing from your ministry staff? Yeah. We'll just start with that.

Ms Pon: Okay. Budget 2020 capital plan includes \$150 million over the next three years for capital maintenance and renewal of social housing across Alberta. We are focusing capital maintenance and renewal funding on the areas most needed to ensure safe and maintained housing units are available to the most vulnerable Albertans. This year we also allocated funding of about \$52.3 million, and the work has continued over 2019 and 2020 for critical projects. We will work closely with our housing partners to ensure safe and maintained housing units are available for Albertans with low income.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Certainly, the maintenance and renewal funding is \$53 million less over the next three years in the fiscal plan, page 217. Mayor Nenshi has certainly gone on record, you know, and expressed his concern that these structures, these facilities, are not brand new. Many of them are 30 years old, and that means that in order to maintain them, there needs to be some investment. Of course, when a tenant moves out, they have to refurbish that with a suite renewal, so this capital maintenance and renewal funding is needed for that. Without that funding – and your government is clearly cutting that substantially – suites will close. Guess what that means? That means that vulnerable Albertans will not have access to those suites. You're falling further and further behind. As I articulated earlier, Alberta is already behind. We already are in a big hole. How are you going to deal with this? What are you going to say to people who need this housing and who qualify?

Ms Pon: Yeah. This is a concern and was a critical concern, too, when I took over this ministry. The long waiting lists and all this maintenance is a problem. It didn't come overnight. It has been here a long time and before my time. The previous government hadn't addressed that, so now we are looking into it and are working on better solutions and are working with the mayor to address this, the maintenance and the repair.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, it's pretty black and white, Minister, to be frank. You know, you can look into it all you want, but you're cutting funding even more substantially. Certainly, our government invested significantly in this area. It had been years of neglect. You're right. You're inheriting a problem that isn't yours alone, but you're making it worse; \$53 million over the three years is being cut. Calgary units will be closed, and people won't have access to affordable housing. The same may happen in Edmonton. We know that even despite that, even despite units that maybe won't happen, there already is a significant wait-list. There's a huge wait-list in Calgary. The Calgary Housing Company alone says that they have about 4,300 people waiting.

I don't know if you've seen the Edmonton Social Planning Council's report, but they have The High Cost of Waiting. It was just a recent report by John Kolkman. They say there are 10,000 people on wait-lists in the greater Edmonton area, so there is such a significant need. Again, I just want to remind the minister about costs deferred, that when people are well housed, you know, they

can oftentimes be able to get a better job because of the stability that gives them, their children can be more stable in the school system, health outcomes are so much better. There are so many things that just come together synergistically.

The Chair: Wonderful. That concludes the second of the three time slots. On to the last one and Member Carson.

Mr. Carson: Thank you very much to the minister and the ministry for being here today. Some of my beginning questions will potentially be close to repeats of some of the questions that were just asked but potentially some clarification as well.

The first question I want to start off with is: how many staff has your department planned to let go or potentially not rehire after they've left in Budget 2020?

Ms Pon: We are currently maintaining our same staff numbers, about 250 staff.

Mr. Carson: So 250 staff is what you currently have, and you have no plan to reduce that number by any?

Ms Pon: Yes, we do. The ministry staff levels will be adjusted by five full-time employees to 257 full-time employees for 2020-21.

Mr. Carson: Okay. Your answer changed within seconds there.

Can you, by chance, tell me how many staff you had in your department in the 2018-2019 budget and if this reduction is on top of what has already happened under your watch?

Ms Pon: For 2018-2019 we have about 269 staff and then 2019-20 we have 267 and then 2020-2021, 257.

Mr. Carson: And down to 247 was the last number?

Ms Pon: Two hundred fifty-seven.

Mr. Carson: Two hundred fifty-seven is as low as it will go by the end of 2020. You have no plan to reduce that any further?

Ms Pon: That's what we know right now, and that's what we plan right now.

Mr. Carson: Okay. Can you tell me primarily where those changes or adjustments to staffing, as you might call it, have happened? Let's just start with the five people from this year. The number has changed a few times, but I think you said five.

Ms Pon: I did say five.

Mr. Carson: Can you tell me what positions those are?

Ms Pon: Okay. What we did for the five full-time employees: from Seniors and Housing to Health, which is for the Seniors Advocate's office in consultations with the Health Advocate's office, and also that reduction of five full-time employees in the housing capital planning branch to align with the reductions in the capital plan requirement.

Mr. Carson: Okay. There was a reduction because you're no longer going to be investing as much in our seniors and affordable housing is what you've just told me.

Ms Pon: No. That's incorrect. There are a couple of things I said. Because of capital projects and then sometimes we need the full-time employees to support the capital plan project. When a project is finished, then we don't require that many employees.

Mr. Carson: Sure. Could you tell me what that specific project or projects were that you no longer need those employees for?

Ms Pon: Oh, I have to refer to our ADM. Do you remember those sorts of employees, with those specific projects that we have, that are no longer required?

Mr. Thomson: There are capital projects that are completing over the next few years, and we have staff who are assigned to manage those projects. When the projects are complete, if those staff are still employees with the ministry, then their temporary position will end on its scheduled date, and they won't be renewed.

Mr. Carson: Those five positions that will disappear this year, as you just said, are happening because there are no longer those capital projects that need planning, but you just told me that those capital projects potentially will be another couple of years.

8:00

Mr. Thomson: The completion date of those projects is when the completion date happens. We have scheduled completion dates. The exact, precise date is never known until we get closer to the end of the project date.

Mr. Carson: Okay. So at this time none of those five staff have been let go, and that's a plan for the future?

Mr. Thomson: No staff have been let go for the capital projects. And we'll just have to see about the completion dates in terms of how they align with their current terms and the load required for the projects.

Mr. Carson: Okay. Let me just take a second here. So you're saying that there'll be no effect to your ministry with the loss of those potential future staff, if that happens, when the projects wind down. Fair enough.

On page 141 of your ministry business plan both 2(a) and 2(b) reference targets for the physical condition of housing units across our province, so I'm hoping that you can tell me how many units, not as a percentage but an actual number, are considered in poor condition?

Ms Pon: Currently we don't have the actual number; we have a percentage. As you can see, it's 5 per cent.

Mr. Carson: Okay. So that should be, I think, something that is important to you.

But I would appreciate it if you could potentially table that number. I imagine it's a simple calculation. If you're talking about percentages, I imagine you can find the total amount and figure that one out. Would you be willing to present that number to me at a future date in writing?

Ms Pon: Yes, we would.

Mr. Carson: Perfect. Thank you very much.

Now, those graphs show that you will bring the current percentage of 5 per cent that are in poor condition down to 4 per cent. But, at the same time, once again, as has been stated here today, you've cut \$53 million for affordable housing stock over the next three years. I'm hoping to find out how you plan to actually lower the percentage of poor condition units while actually reducing the budget, not even taking into consideration population growth.

Ms Pon: Yes, we are working to improve the renewal of aging buildings. The facilities condition indexing is used to help take on

and make investment decisions and prioritize a lot of these projects. We all saw Budget 2020, and also that's including \$150 million over the next three years for capital maintenance and renewal of social housing across Alberta.

Assessments are done on a five-year cycle, meaning that the entire housing stock require five years to have been assessed.

Mr. Carson: Okay. Perfect. Thank you.

Looking at, once again, performance measure 2(b) on page 141 of your business plan, it states that in 2018-19 790 new and regenerated units were completed. Can you tell me how you plan to hit your goal of 1,000 units regenerated in '21-22 at the same time, once again, that your ministry is cutting \$53 million from this, how you plan to actually, well, bring it up by quite a few units? I'd say that there are 200 units more than previously by cutting the budget. How did you get to those numbers?

Ms Pon: Okay. The way we are working and have continued is with development and reselling of the 2,000 new and regenerated units for seniors and families and 500 shelter spaces. This government is committed to being open and transparent. And we remind you that we just have to continue to control our spending and also that it provides housing to those most in need. The target number of new development units is reflecting the projects approved in the capital plan and the projects approved in the previous budget.

Mr. Carson: Just quickly before – I would like to share a bit of my time with MLA Irwin. But just a question: do you plan to hit that number at the same time? I'm not understanding how this math adds up. Do you plan on hitting this number by primarily moving away from government funding for these and trying to push this into a P3 model? Is that something that you're planning to move forward with?

Ms Pon: Yes. P3 models are always a mixed income. It's important to this ministry and will continue to build more affordable housing for Albertans.

I would like to refer to our ADM, John Thomson, to provide you with a little more detail of our plan.

Mr. Thomson: The reductions that you referred to are in the capital maintenance renewal budget. That pays for the maintenance and renewal of units that exist. The development units that you mentioned relate to the development envelopes within our capital plan, and those have not been reduced, and those projects continue. Yes, we're confident about the targets in the business plan.

Mr. Carson: Fair enough.

Wonderful. Once again, I'd like to just pass it off for a moment.

Member Irwin: Yeah. I just want to build on the conversation about affordable housing. The lack of affordable housing is stark across our city, and in my riding of Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood I see it every day. I see it in the folks who are on the streets. I hear it from people who write my office nearly daily.

You mentioned the Herb Jamieson expansion earlier. That's a project in my riding, but that will help just men, and that's a homeless shelter. That's not an investment in affordable housing. There's a need for families, for single mothers, for so many in our city, and you really have the opportunity to be visionary and to build so much more affordable housing, yet, as has been mentioned, you've cut \$53 million.

I again refer to page 141, where your targets show huge drops in the future in the number of new affordable housing units. You're projecting 300 in 2022-23. I guess my question is simple. Why are

your targets so low? Are you not advocating, Minister, for more affordable housing?

Ms Pon: For the affordable housing capital plan 2020, again, we allocate \$417 million over three years to provide 2,000 new and regenerated affordable housing units and will create 3,000 jobs and maintain the 26,700 units in the provincially owned portfolio. We continue to invest over three years, and then we have a two-budget envelope and five capital programs on the plan. For new development and also for capital maintenance renewal, we invested \$115 million for family social support and housing. We budgeted \$302 million.

Member Irwin: Okay. Just one quick follow-up: is there a breakdown at all of where those units are projected to be? Do we have access to that, like, where the 700 will be across the province? Obviously, we know that the need for affordable housing varies.

Ms Pon: Actually, if I may, can I give you just the high level on the projects that we are working on for the development of \$302 million, which is the family and community housing development renewal? It's about \$41 million. Seniors' housing development and renewal is \$185 million, affordable and specialized housing is \$38.2 million, the indigenous housing capital program is \$32 million, and planning for affordable housing is at \$4.5 million. That is the development.

For CMR, which is maintenance and repair, we are investing \$150 million, which is to focus on the areas most needed to ensure the safe maintenance of those other projects and units available to the most vulnerable Albertans. If you would like more detail, I can get my team, the ADM, to provide you more details.

Member Irwin: I guess that in this I'll play the new card although I'm not sure how much longer I can play that. Is there, like, a geographical breakdown at all? I understand that's kind of the pots, but do we know kind of where those future projects are going to be across the province?

Ms Pon: My team and ADM John Thomson will send you the details.

Member Irwin: Thank you.

Back to you.

Mr. Carson: Thank you very much, Chair.

I just want to touch on the special needs assistance grants one more time here. In your opening remarks you mentioned – and we had some clarification – removing benefits for less essential items. Now, you mentioned a few items that you are considering nonessential, so I'm hoping that one more time for the record you could read what you're now deeming to be nonessential and if you can clarify that this is the entire list of items or if this is something that is a working list that you might continue growing as the budgetary restraints continue under your government.

8:10

Ms Pon: I just want to maybe emphasize again that when I say essential items and less essential items, the less essential items that will no longer be funded or less funded – it will be the funeral expenses. We chose this because the federal government also has a fund available. Lift chairs, foot orthotics, and laundry costs: those are all of the less essential items that are under this program.

Mr. Carson: You can make a commitment today that that list won't grow over the next year?

Ms Pon: All of these programs are going to be effective July 1, and for the less essential items . . .

Mr. Carson: Can you confirm for me and my constituents today that that list of nonessential items will not grow over the next year?

Ms Pon: I cannot make that commitment, just because . . .

Mr. Carson: Because it might grow. Okay.

Ms Pon: No. Because Alberta is the only province that has a program like this. None of the other provinces have a special program like this. Our government would like to continue for our seniors who are in need of these items. These changes will save \$8.2 million and will help make sure that the program is sustainable for those who need it most.

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that. Unfortunately, if you start getting rid of pieces of the program, then it's not really sustainable if you're cutting the important parts of this program. So I will take that back to my community, that you don't necessarily think that chair lifts are essential. We talk a lot about aging in place in the Legislature, and it's unfortunate that you don't see how that is part of that.

Just looking at the targets that you have on page 139, graph 1(d), you show there that you're expecting a drop in targets from 91 per cent satisfaction for those accessing special needs assistance programs down to 90 per cent in 2021-22. Now, are you making that lower target because you're literally taking the socks off some people's feet and you think maybe they'll be upset about that and that's why that number is dropping?

Ms Pon: I'm not quite clear about your question. Would you mind repeating that, please?

Mr. Carson: Yes, of course. From what I could tell on page 139, in the graph under 1(d) it shows that there was a target of 91 per cent satisfaction with the special needs assistance program, dropping to 90 per cent. So there's a 1 per cent drop in 2021-22. I'm just hoping to find out why you made that change when you should in fact be going the opposite way. We shouldn't be going downwards, in my opinion.

Ms Pon: Well, this is just a target. In 2018 the actual was 91 per cent – you're right – and I believe that achieving the consistent kind of response is achieving the target. So 91 per cent is the actual.

Mr. Carson: What is it about the next year or two years that you think it's actually going down in satisfaction?

Ms Pon: We will continue to target this at about 90 per cent, and then what you're looking at is only a 1 per cent difference.

Mr. Carson: Yeah. Well, 1 per cent is important to me, especially when we're talking about satisfaction of people accessing government services. Fair enough. We can move along. I just found it interesting when you as the minister and the ministry should be trying to see upward trajectories, not the opposite of that. I wasn't sure if there was a special reason for that, but either way.

The graph under 2(c) on page 142 shows a steady increase of core housing need for senior-led rental households. I'm just hoping that you could tell me how your budget addresses the needs of those seniors who are currently looking for adequate housing options.

Ms Pon: Sorry. Can you repeat the question?

Mr. Carson: That's okay. I'm going to move on from that. That was too easy a question.

Ms Pon: Thank you.

Mr. Carson: In your 2018-19 ministry annual report you stated that the projected population – and we've talked about this – of seniors will nearly double, to reach almost 18 per cent of Alberta's population in 2035. I'm hoping that you can tell me how specifically you believe that the budget that you've put forward – this is another easy one for you; I don't know what's going on here – is actually addressing these growing constraints or the growth of the population of seniors in our province, how you think keeping a budget steady compared to what it was last year is addressing the population growth that we're seeing.

Ms Pon: That's exactly right. By 2035 we will have seniors populations that are growing, up to 1 million seniors. That's why we are working right now and creating a budget that makes sure that we are offering those benefits and a program for those seniors and vulnerable Albertans, the most in need.

The second thing is that we make sure that those programs and benefits are sustainable. If we are going to continue to spend money uncontrolled, we are not going to be able to sustain those programs after we reach 2035. This government is working very hard to make sure that it sustains all these programs.

Mr. Carson: Well, I appreciate that you've – oh, out of time.

The Chair: All right. Next we will move on to the government caucus, but before we do that, I just wanted to let everybody know that after this round of questioning we will take our quick break.

On to Mr. Walker.

Mr. Walker: Thank you so much, Chair. Thank you, Minister, for being here and for your officials being here as well, and – you probably remember – thank you for coming out to Sherwood Park when we had that opening of the wing of Silver Birch Place. It was wonderful to see you there. I'm just so happy that Seniors and Housing will be maintaining funding at \$637 million. That's excellent.

My first question. Minister, we'll turn to page 140 of the business plan. You discuss public-private partnerships. What approaches has your ministry used in housing initiatives before, and what initiatives are you looking to explore going forward?

Ms Pon: Thank you for your question. Yes, I had such a wonderful time visiting your constituency. It was so pleasant. Thank you so much.

To answer your question, we are committed to making housing affordable and accessible for Albertans, definitely, and the P3 approach will only be used if it creates more value for Albertans than the government delivering these projects itself. Our government has established an office within Alberta Infrastructure to explore the use of a P3 approach to deliver the public infrastructure programs and projects. In co-operation with this office we are exploring the circumstances under which the P3 projects create value and manage the risks of the government. My department is working with this office to ensure that we consider the learnings of our peers with P3 programs across our country as well as the experience of industry.

We are exploring mixed-income social housing development in Alberta to create a more financially sustainable system, and mixed-income housing will be a key for partnering with developers who can create the opportunity to expand on the market options, which

will result in more housing availability and create more jobs for Albertans. Our approach, in partnership with the private sector in affordable housing, will be focused on bringing private capital to support the development of new affordable housing, which is for Albertans with low income as well as including seniors. Getting the private capital to supplement government investments means that more affordable housing can be built for the same government spending, which means that our government will be getting more value for Albertans.

Mr. Walker: Thank you for that very thorough answer, Minister. I'm really glad to hear that we'll be harnessing the power of P3 relationships. I know that in my area of Sherwood Park they have been utilized to great success. We have so many talented entrepreneurs who want to contribute to social good in this area of P3 partnerships for affordable housing. Thank you again.

Staying on page 140, Minister, reviewing the income verification process, it says that we are making applying for affordable housing easier and more efficient for housing providers. What prompted this review?

8:20

Ms Pon: Well, of course, we have as one of our commitments to reduce government red tape by one-third, which will save time, money, and resources and make it easier for Albertans to access the Seniors and Housing services. Our government is also committed to making housing affordable and accessible for Albertans with low income. We have listened to tenants, applicants, and housing providers, who all say that there is too much paperwork in the process to apply for housing. It's time consuming and expensive for tenants to collect all the documents required to complete an application. As you can imagine, it is also complicated and time consuming for the operator to review them. So we reduced the administrative burden on tenants to place an application, and housing will make the income verification process easier or more efficient for Albertans who apply for affordable housing. Those initiatives include assessing the source of information used to calculate income, reviewing the income definitions, any opportunity for alignment, clarifying income definitions and calculations practice in our regulations, and streamlining the rent adjustment process.

Mr. Walker: Thank you very much, Minister.

Staying again on page 140, we're going to focus on objective 2.1 of the business plan, where it says that you want to develop relationships that explore partnerships between orders of government, housing providers, and the private sector. What progress has been made in developing these relationships so far, and how has this impacted the supply of affordable housing for seniors?

Ms Pon: Well, I am committed to working with communities, nonprofits, and business partners to ensure that Albertans have access to the programs and the services they need. All the orders of government can bring something to the table to support the development of new affordable housing, and the key is to understand the priorities of each partner so that we can maximize our collective assets and spending. To that end, I met with my federal counterpart, the minister, to build a relationship with the federal government in communicating Alberta's goals for affordable housing. In March 2019 Alberta reached an agreement with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to share the cost of affordable housing in Alberta with the federal government. Under this agreement Alberta will see \$339 million of federal money come to Alberta to support affordable housing and, lastly, about \$55.6 million of government funding in five new capital

development projects that benefit from funding under this agreement. These projects will create 350 shelter spaces and 215 affordable housing units across the province.

I will continue to meet with the mayors of Edmonton as well as Calgary to ensure that I understand how I and my team can support their priorities during a time of fiscal restraint. Edmonton and the city of Calgary, Seniors and Housing, Community and Social Services, Health, Municipal Affairs, and CMHC are joining to participate in the big-city housing co-operative, to enable joint discussions on planning and capital development, asset management, funding, housing support services, and regulations and governance. I also met with mayors and councillors during the meetings of the provincial municipal associations to hear about affordable housing and goals for their communities. Seniors and Housing also collaborates with Health to incorporate continuing care services in seniors' lodges, a priority community, primarily in rural areas.

Finally, I have also established two advisory committees, one focused on housing and one focused on seniors, that are helping me to discuss any issues and provide me feedback. These committees are an opportunity for our government to get insight and advice from the individuals and stakeholder organizations that provide service directly to seniors with low income in Alberta. Together we are working to make the work of Seniors and Housing more innovative and more efficient. We will continue to work closely with our federal, municipal, and nonprofit organizations and with private partners to ensure that we get the most out of every dollar contributed by taxpayers. Our government is investing \$389 million to build, operate, and maintain housing for low- to moderate-income seniors, ensuring that seniors can continue to age in their chosen community.

Mr. Walker: Well, thank you so much, Minister. It's so exciting to hear about all the collaboration that's happening at various levels of government and with civil society. Very interesting to hear, as well, about what's going on in the urban centres.

Another question. Page 134 of the fiscal plan: "The list of approved personal and health supports covered by the Special Needs Assistance . . . for Seniors program will focus on the most essential supports." How did you determine what the most essential supports are, and what didn't qualify?

Thank you.

Ms Pon: I just want to mention that nearly 4,000 Albertans turn 65 every month, and we must ensure that our seniors' programs are sustainable into the future for those most in need. Alberta, we remind you, is the only province to have this special assistance program, and we want it to continue. In order to manage the growth in caseloads while still living within our means, we are focusing the SNA, which is the special needs assistance program, on the most needed supports.

Budget 2020 will maintain the SNA program's coverage for essential health items such as diabetes supplies, CPAP machines, bed bug treatment, and medical trips, but coverage for less essential items is reduced and eliminated, as I previously mentioned. We are focusing on providing essential supports that will keep seniors with low income living in their home and their chosen community.

One more thing to remember is that effective January 1, 2020, the benefit for laundry costs was eliminated for the person in long-term care. For the monthly disposable income, we make sure that through the supplemental accommodations benefit it should already cover this cost. So it is covered.

Mr. Walker: Well, thank you so much, Minister, for clarifying all that and being so thorough. I really enjoyed that back and forth.

Chair, I now cede my time to another member of the government side.

The Chair: Let's take Mr. Yao.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much. Ms Pon, thank you and your team so much for all your hard work. It's a difficult situation to be in to ensure that we are fiscally responsible and that we're not incurring a lot of debt for future generations.

Minister, you helped me with something very recently, and it deals with red tape. My experience in an office: I have seen people come off social housing, as an example, to go and live with their family, and it didn't turn out well. They came back to try to get the supports, and it was a difficult, arduous task. I believe you did help me with one such situation in my community, and I want to thank you for that.

That said, the application process can be a difficult thing, you know, and it is to the point where, if people do want to try and wean themselves off the assistance that you so graciously provide, they have hesitancy in leaving that. So sometimes it can be discouraging them from leaving a support that really helps with the most vulnerable.

That said, it is about red tape. I saw a picture of you on the front page of the newspaper there, in the media – on the Internet, anyways – on your red tape reduction. I did notice that on page 137 of the business plan you talk about as much, reducing the regulatory burden. Can you give us an update on the work that you've done so far in this particular regard as to the administration and paperwork involved in a lot of these supports that your department provides, please?

8:30

Ms Pon: Thank you so much for the kind words. Identifying opportunities, of course, for red tape reduction and cost-effectiveness across Seniors and Housing programs is outlined as a key objective, so 1.2 and 2.4 in the ministry business plan. Seniors and senior groups and our affordable housing partners are helping me to identify those weaknesses of red tape in my ministry. Already we have cut red tape by three different items, one of which is automatically enrolling AISH recipients in Alberta seniors' financial assistance programs. Once they turn 65, we reduce the affordable housing operating reporting requirement, which is better reduced as it's a waste of paper, and they can spend more time with the senior. I work also to ensure uninterrupted benefits and less stressful paperwork for seniors. These are the red tape reduction initiatives that we have been doing and focusing on.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much, Minister. You know, in the last few months we've been discussing a fair deal in Alberta. One advantage that we do have is the fact that we do have an overall young population, but that seniors population is growing. I see now that by 2035 they anticipate it will be a quarter of our population, and with this increased population, again, we're going to continue to deal with these issues of red tape. I believe this is a never-ending task of trying to reduce this bureaucracy, this administration. Does the ministry have plans to continue the work to reduce that red tape, and how will it make life better for all these folks, which are our most vulnerable, that are applying to you for some of these supports?

Ms Pon: I am very pleased and very proud to share with you that our government is on a path to reduce red tape to increase the effectiveness and efficiency for our ministry. Work is under way on a number of red tape reduction ideas, initiatives that will be implemented in the coming years, including the following: develop

online programs, applications that leverage MyAlberta digital identity accounts, and also review the income verifications process to make applying for affordable housing easier and more efficient for applicants and the housing provider, which are two items that we are currently working on.

Mr. Yao: Okay. The programming and services that you do provide for seniors and Albertans with low incomes: I guess I want to know what percentage – I know a few years ago it was around that 7 per cent mark of seniors that were considered to be most vulnerable, like, folks that truly had no supports available to them to the point where they are self-sufficient. I think that in an ideal world we want people, by the time they reach the age of being a senior, you know, 65-plus, that throughout their life have worked and saved and worked towards being independent and being established in order to live and age gracefully. Unfortunately, we don't necessarily have that in place for everybody. Not everyone is fortunate to have succeeded as much in life, and we do need to provide them with such supports. So can I ask: what are the priorities for your ministry in regard to these folks that are our most vulnerable, those with the lowest incomes?

Ms Pon: Yes. We definitely need to look after all of the most vulnerable Albertans, and my ministry promotes well-being for seniors and quality of life for Alberta seniors and those in need of affordable housing. My ministry also develops and delivers programs and services that assist seniors and promote safety and well-being for Alberta's aged populations. The ministry also fosters the development of affordable housing and supports assessments of housing options for Albertans most in need. We also have to ensure that all the previous housing capital commitments will be honoured. Then our government will decide the rental assistance program to meet the needs of Albertans with low incomes. We are making pertinent decisions that strike a balance between addressing our financial situation and supporting those most in need with sustainable programs.

Mr. Yao: Thank you, Minister. When you were elected in 2019, as we all were, Albertans tasked you with demonstrating some fiscal restraint. Most Albertans understand that we can't live off borrowed money, that accumulation of debt ultimately leads to situations where we can't afford to provide a lot of those services. To that effect, how are you able to provide the key programs and services in these times of fiscal restraint? I mean, can you explain, like, the Alberta seniors' benefit and the seniors' property tax deferral program? Are these going to continue? Are you going to continue to support these? Were they addressing what the programs were designed for? You know, if you could expand on this, I would greatly appreciate that.

Ms Pon: Well, thank you so much. As is in our platform . . .

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt, but the time is now up.

We will go on our five-minute break. I would just ask that everyone be back in this room in five minutes so we can continue, and we will go back to the opposition.

[The committee adjourned from 8:36 p.m. to 8:43 p.m.]

The Chair: Thank you, everybody, especially those that were prompt in coming back after the five minutes.

With that, I will open it up. We are on to our next section, which is 10-minute blocks split five minutes each way. We are on to the NDP Official Opposition for their next block of questioning. Is that to you, Ms Sigurdson?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes, it is. Thank you.

The Chair: All right.

Ms Sigurdson: I'd like to talk about something that . . .

The Chair: Oh. Apologies. Are you guys still wanting to go back and forth?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes, I would like to.

I'm going to be talking about a program that would normally be in section 3 on page 183 in the government estimates, but instead it's on page 118 in the government estimates under Health, and that's the Seniors Advocate. Of course, this government eliminated the office of the Seniors Advocate and rolled it into the Health Advocate. You know, it was about a million dollars for that office, so that's disappeared, that funding. Actually, on page 118 of the government estimates it does say that 1.6, the Health Advocate's office, is down about half a million. So here this office, the Health Advocate office, is going to be taking over the Seniors Advocate role, yet it's cut by half a million dollars. I'm just wondering, Minister, how can that be? How can that work?

Ms Pon: Well, we are here to make this government more efficient for seniors and their families. Regarding these questions, I believe that you should be directing them to the Minister of Health.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, the Seniors Advocate was certainly a program that was terminated under your watch. A lot of assurances were made that the Health Advocate will be able to manage that program. As I said, half a million dollars were cut from it.

Another point that I'd like to make is that only 28 per cent of the cases that the Seniors Advocate did work on were health related. Twenty-five per cent were housing; 26 per cent were social supports; housing was 21 per cent; income and financial supports were 25 per cent. Will the advocate be able to address these concerns?

Ms Pon: Again, I would like to ask the member to refer this question to Health. Now this advocate is under the Ministry of Health.

Ms Sigurdson: It is about how, you know, your government, your ministry directed the Seniors Advocate to go be amalgamated with Health, so this is still something that I would think as the minister of seniors you would be concerned about. I just want to also identify that what's really most disturbing about this amalgamation for the Seniors Advocate, who had their own office within your ministry collapsed into Health, is that the process to choose the next advocate was only by appointment. Janice Harrington, the executive director of the UCP and before that the Progressive Conservative Party, was appointed as the Health Advocate and certainly had no credentials, I understand, to qualify her for that position. Why was she chosen?

Ms Pon: As I mentioned before, please direct all your questions to the Ministry of Health.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I'm just kind of shocked by your lack of response, Minister, because this is about the Seniors Advocate, and it is about you assuring Albertans, when this office was terminated, that Health would also be responsible for seniors. Certainly, Dr. Kwong See, who was the previous Seniors Advocate, you know, expressed tremendous concerns about this and just felt that the Health Advocate didn't have the capacity or the willingness, because of the mandate, to actually address issues. With the

appointment of Janice Harrington it's moving from someone who's supposed to be a watchdog of the ministry more to being a lapdog of the ministry. This is really quite appalling.

I also just want to again talk about something that I think really impacts seniors – it's also a line item on page 118 – and that's the seniors' drug plan. Although it's in Health, there's been a \$72 million cut, and then you're imposing deductibles as well as the dependants of seniors being eliminated in that program. I'm just wondering what you've done to advocate for seniors and their dependants around the cabinet table, talking directly with the Minister of Health yourself, as seniors really, obviously, are receiving fewer and fewer services. This is a significant cut.

Ms Pon: I believe that the Minister of Health has already provided some details of this program. I would again ask the member to refer all these questions to the Ministry of Health.

Ms Sigurdson: I'm sure that that will happen, too, but as the minister of seniors I would think that you would want to be on the record regarding this. I mean, it is a concern. I'm, you know, sort of actually kind of surprised. When the Seniors Advocate was eliminated, there were assurances that there would be support for seniors' issues. There's just no accountability in this move.

Moving on, then, I just want to talk a little bit more about the P3s. You already mentioned those, and one of your members had also asked you a question about that. Let's see. In the ministry business plan on page 140 it talks about: "The ministry is also working to expand the use of mixed-income housing and explore the use of public-private partnerships (P3s)" in affordable housing.

8:50

Then again in the fiscal plan – let's see if I can find the page here – on page 156, talking about sort of public-private partnerships in general, it kind of, you know, talks a lot about why this is a good idea. Of course, your business plans are also identified. Then it talks about: "The types of projects currently under P3 consideration include schools, highways and hospitals. The Capital Plan projects being assessed under the P3 model are . . ." and then it specifies them. Schools, highways, hospitals: I don't see any affordable housing. Can you help me understand how P3s are going to be used if your fiscal plan isn't even identifying them?

Ms Pon: Well, of course, we will continue working constantly with the housing providers, nonprofit organizations, and private companies to improve the sustainability of our system and find efficiency and deliver quality affordable housing for Albertans in need. Agreements between the government of Alberta and the government of Canada, the federal government, include \$339 million in federal funding over nine years. That's the funding that the government of Alberta will match the cost on and assist in the program. That is a program we are currently working on.

We are committed to make the most efficient use of the funding. We will work closely with the federal government to identify future opportunities for cost matching. We cannot continue spending money that we don't have. My ministry continues to engage our important stakeholders such as the city of Calgary and city of Edmonton, the Calgary Housing Company, the Capital Region Housing.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Minister, you're not really answering my question. All you're doing is sort of reiterating some of the, you know, general comments.

We're talking specifically about P3s. I'm looking at the fiscal plan on page 156, once again, and there's nothing about affordable housing. You need to actually develop a plan so that people in

private industry – the developers, the builders, whoever you're going to partner with; as you said, it could be municipalities. I mean, this is your fiscal plan. I'm referring to that. It says, very clearly, that affordable housing isn't even being considered.

Your business plan on page 148 also refers to it, but then the fiscal plan doesn't identify it. You know, maybe that's something that you need to talk to the Minister of Finance about, but somehow affordable housing is not on the radar. I mean, it's clear that it's not on the radar because there's no capital investment right now when this panacea of P3s is being put forward. Yet the document that you say is supposed to be articulating that indicates there's nothing on affordable housing.

Ms Pon: We're really exploring the mixed-income model and the P3s since I took over this ministry. We partnered with private partnership on some of the projects. We have continued to work with the private sector and the organizations.

The Chair: All right. With that, we are on to our next block, government.

Mr. Yao: Thank you very much, Chair. Minister Pon, I didn't quite get the answer for the last question I had, and that was just regarding the fiscal shrink that you have to demonstrate. Some of the programs, like the Alberta seniors' benefit and the seniors property tax deferral program, some might consider to be decent and valuable. Are you maintaining these, and how are you achieving that goal? Page 138, key objective 1.3, of the business plan is the information I was referring to there.

Ms Pon: Thank you. How to maintain this important service to low-income Albertans, right?

Mr. Yao: Yes.

Ms Pon: We are taking action now to get spending under control so that we can achieve better results for Albertans now and into the future as well as for the Seniors and Housing budget, focusing on ensuring that our programs are financially sustainable into the future and will support the rapid growth of our seniors population and ensuring that Albertans most in need have access to housing options. Difficult times call for difficult decisions, and we are working with the housing partners to ensure that those most in need continue to have access to affordable housing.

By exploring the mixed-income model for housing in partnership with the private providers, we will ensure that Albertans are getting the most value for their tax dollars. By working closely with the housing providers, we will find efficiencies in our affordable housing program that improve access for housing while saving Alberta tax dollar money in the government right now, currently, transforming the affordable housing system to support the most vulnerable Albertans while ensuring the system is sustainable. The housing management body had no reductions in 2019-2020, and Alberta Social Housing Corporation saved about \$1.2 million in operational funding by requiring the housing management body to spend accumulated surplus.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much for that. Minister, you know, when I first got elected in 2015, the military liaison role: I was perplexed by that because from my understanding the military is a federal jurisdiction, a federal responsibility, yet we do seem to have a military liaison which is a part of your ministry. I'm wondering if you can educate me more on this role, what it has set to achieve, and, for that matter, why is it in your ministry, please?

Ms Pon: Thank you for this question. As a veteran it's very important. My colleague, your colleague, sitting right beside you, MLA for Leduc-Beaumont, Brad Rutherford, was appointed by our government of Alberta as liaison to the military and veterans to act as a provincial assistant officer representing and building relationships with military personnel and the families and the veterans. Of course, our government is honoured both of military – and is working to support and sustain our program relationships to the Canadian Armed Forces. Those are the key relationships that help further our collaborative and crossministry work like improving our service, our lines between jurisdictions, and sharing information through our military family and website and also provide funding for veterans as housing supports and services. Our liaison, MLA Rutherford, has done a fantastic job and has built a very strong relationship in between our Armed Forces, military, and the families. I'm looking forward to working with him in my ministry to continue to support this important community.

Mr. Yao: Thank you very much for that explanation. You know, again, when I'm speaking about the fair deal, it's certainly another example of a position that the province is inheriting, something that they have the responsibility for but perhaps the federal government doesn't support enough locally here in Alberta. But I digress.

A big key with a lot of veterans I know up in Fort McMurray is gaining access to information and data and whatnot. Certainly, with the advent of the Internet and that technology, we finally have some stable infrastructure up in my community as an example for that. Is this government keeping pace with the technology? Are you providing a lot of the information that these vets, as an example – and seniors, for that matter – need in order to access a lot of the programming or to understand information specific to their needs and being sure that they have the ability to understand and access a lot of this programming that your ministry provides? Can you explain the web-based resources that are available for our current military members and Alberta veterans, please?

Ms Pon: Yes. I'm pleased to share with you that we have a website for the military families on alberta.ca, which has helped the transition for those families by providing the information such as getting drivers' licences and finding child care and physicians, all the other day-to-day information that may be required. Also, this site is regularly updated to expand the information available for Albertans' resource, including information in French. We are pleased to continue this high technology to provide convenient and valuable information to our military and veterans.

9:00

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much for that.

I'm curious. You've pointed out that the Member for Leduc-Beaumont is our military liaison. I mean, I was wondering if you could tell me exactly: what has he done for our military members? What has he done for their families? What is he doing for our veterans? Is he just sliding by on his good looks and charm, or is he actually providing some real results for these folks?

Ms Pon: Well, I can't even catch up with him. He's just been so busy, that MLA just sitting beside you. He actually is a sitting member of the federal government's Canadian initiative to support military members and the families who are posted to Alberta as part of their service. The liaisons have been connected, and we believe that that relationship makes sure to provide the services and information they require as newcomers to Alberta.

MLA Rutherford also continues to make connections with the base commander, the staff, the military family resource centre, to better understand the needs of the military members and of their

families and to bring forward the concerns to the ministry of defence. Our liaison, MLA Rutherford, has done a very good job in connecting that information, establishing a very solid relationship with our federal government's ministry of defence.

I'm also pleased that MLA Rutherford is supporting the important work of the Veterans Service Centre in Edmonton, which provides a one-stop location for any veterans seeking social support, housing, financial assistance, or even job hunting. He's also an advocate to the federal government on behalf of the veterans and veterans services organizations.

Mr. Yao: Well, thank you so much for that. It certainly makes me respect that position so much more. I did notice that he was very busy, and you were always sending him out across the province. It's certainly really good to see that we are supporting our military veterans, so I commend you and the Member for Leduc-Beaumont for that.

With that, Chair, I think I'm done my questioning, and I'd like to cede to MLA Amery, please.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister and the officials for being here this evening. Minister, I represent, as you know, the riding of Calgary-Cross, and that's where I'm going to focus my questioning. Calgary-Cross is a riding which I've spoken to you about at length at times. It's filled with hard-working Albertans. Generally I call them good, hard-working, salt-of-the-earth type people who work very, very hard. But, of course, like every other riding in the province, it presents its own unique challenges, especially in the areas of your ministry. By that I mean that we have a fairly large seniors population in Calgary-Cross, and we certainly have those who depend on affordable housing to meet their basic needs.

Thank you.

The Chair: Fantastic.

Now we're on to our next block. Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. I just want to continue with the P3 conversation that we're having. Again, I'll just direct the minister to pages 156 and 157 of their own fiscal plan. The types of projects currently under P3 consideration include schools, highways, and hospitals. That's what it says. It says nothing about affordable housing, yet this government is indicating that that's what they want to do. It's very clear in the business plan, but affordable housing is off the radar.

On the next page at the very top it just says:

Alberta Infrastructure Criteria for P3 Consideration
Projects need to be evaluated for their suitability to be delivered as a P3 project. Alberta Infrastructure has outlined the following criteria that identify those capital projects that are good P3 candidates.

The first bullet point says:

- Project is sufficiently large; usually \$100 million or more.

How many projects are you doing that are a hundred million dollars, Minister?

Ms Pon: This is for Infrastructure. The P3 approach for my ministry is that we only would use it if it creates more value for Albertans than the government delivering this program itself. In co-operating with this office, we are exploring the circumstances under which P3 projects create value and manage the risk for the government. My department is working with this office to ensure that we consider the leveraging and the learning from the previous

P3 programs across the country as well as the experience of industry.

Ms Sigurdson: So you're working with the Infrastructure office? When you say, "We're working with this office," which office do you mean?

Ms Pon: Infrastructure.

Ms Sigurdson: You do mean Infrastructure. Of course, the criteria that they're identifying don't fit for Seniors and Housing. That's a significant concern.

Ms Pon: A decision that you should understand: how that's sort of crossministry. Infrastructure, the department, usually carries the bigger ticket items. Currently they set it at \$100 million as a project. We're continuously working with Infrastructure for their expertise and experience and how to continue to build a more solid relationship with the P3 program. We are going to continue to work with Infrastructure and see what we can do to be partners and are looking for input from Infrastructure.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, it seems that, you know, these documents that have been put before us today aren't taking into consideration the uniqueness of Seniors and Housing. I know that there is a capital area delivery system within Seniors and Housing, but still it's silent. It's just sort of these nebulous ideas about: we're going to work with P3s. I mean, is there going to be a plan that's going to be available that'll be transparent so that we understand? Obviously, Infrastructure has put forward their plan. It's not relevant to your ministry. Are you going to put forward a plan, Minister?

Ms Pon: We are working on different plans in partnership with the different private organizations and public organizations, and we are committed to . . .

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. I know that, but are you going to have some criteria, too, for how you structure your program? Are we going to know that? Are you going to make that transparent?

Ms Pon: We are reviewing it, and also over the last few years my ministry has learned how to transform the affordable housing system. This included determinations of what sort of income model can officially – affordable housing, rent, and all the different housing properties – attract that private capital. We believe that the P3 partnership will increase the additional capital for the different projects and then utilize and maximize our capital. That is complex work, and also it's very involved, and it has sort of provided an important development, so we continue to work on it.

You know, we want to make sure that we're responsible and also make sure that whenever we invest any money in any projects, we're going to maximize our taxpayer dollars. Currently we also have a housing committee, that I created last year, with all the stakeholders and the major leaders in the housing industry in Alberta, and I ask them to provide feedback.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Thanks, Minister. Obviously, there's, you know, nothing in the capital plan, and there's not really an understanding of what the P3 structure will be, so it sounds like there's a lot of work that you need to do on this issue.

I want to move now to the rental supplement program. We know that in 2019 that program was cut by your government by 24 per cent, so that was a significant cut not very long ago. Actually, I think the words that are used are: it's temporarily closed. We're not sure when it's going to open again, but people in core housing need – and I talked about that earlier in my comments. There's a

significant amount, and Alberta has not even the Canadian average of what's needed in terms of housing.

9:10

In addition to that – I think it's supposed to happen April 1 – we are supposed to be working with our federal partners, and the Canada housing benefit is to be available at that time. Again, there has sort of not been very much talk about it. If they're still working on it, we don't know. But April 1 is just around the corner, and we want to maximize Alberta's ability to access that funding as much as possible. Certainly, we know that with this 24 per cent cut, that meant, you know, significant hardship for a lot of people.

You know, the report that I referred to earlier by John Kolkman of the Edmonton Social Planning Council, *The High Cost of Waiting*: I commend you to look at it. It talks about some of the significant hardships of people who actually qualify – they qualify. They're in core housing need, but there are just no services for them. This cutting, this program temporarily closed – 24 per cent, that's a significant hit – is really disturbing, and so many Albertans don't have that support. Who are those Albertans? Women, lone-parent families usually headed by women, oftentimes seniors, seniors that are women. I mean, a lot of these cuts are a gender attack, actually, on women. I just want you to keep that in mind also.

I'll just ask you generally, then: with the federal government's, you know, April 1 access to the Canada housing benefit, how is Alberta going to be in a position to maximize their use of the federal dollars?

Ms Pon: Well, first of all, I would like to be clear that no household has had the benefit reduced or eliminated as a result of this review of the rental assistance. We closed the program on October 29. This has allowed us to omit the budget's reductions, and it has the least impact as possible on households that currently receive the benefit. We are currently under review and have a working group with all the housing management bodies and all the leaders in the community to redesign that new program to become more efficient and user friendly for the most vulnerable Albertans.

Referring to the federal government agreement, we are also negotiating with the federal government to ensure that Alberta is eligible for CHB, which is the Canada housing benefit, which includes \$22 million between 2020-28 to provide rent supplements directly to households. My team is currently working very hard to review the program to benefit our most vulnerable and also trying to get additional funding.

Ms Sigurdson: I didn't really hear a response to my question about how we in Alberta will be able to maximize what we have eligible for us from the Canada housing benefit, the federal dollars. Certainly, there's speculation in the community. Certainly, there's some cynicism about what's going on and that the reduction in Alberta's program, the 24 per cent, may be used to match the federal dollars, because we know that it's a matching program. So all of a sudden, magically, there may be some funding for that so that we can maximize that, but then it doesn't take us any further ahead.

The Chair: Wonderful.

We're now on to the next. I believe it's Mr. Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you again, Madam Chair. Minister, I was talking to you a little bit about the riding of Calgary-Cross. I want to put on the record how strongly I wish to advocate for that and bring to your attention the unique challenges of that particular riding during these estimates.

Having said that, Minister, the people who fall under your ministry depend on the programs that you offer for their very basic needs. Having said that, one of the things that I'm particularly proud of is this government's engagement with stakeholders and civil society organizations. Your plan, having reviewed it, seems to reaffirm this.

Specifically, Minister, I refer you to page 138 of your business plan. In going down the list here, outcome 1, you have paragraph 1.4. Your plan promises to engage "with civil society organizations to improve cross-sector collaboration in the planning and delivery of programs and services." It continues by saying that it includes "programs focused on prevention and healthy aging." Having said that, I would like you to give us your input and comment on some of this collaboration with these organizations and, to the extent that you can provide it, on who you've collaborated with in the year that's past and on how, specifically, your ministry plans to engage with Seniors and Housing stakeholders this year. What is the plan, and what do you hope to achieve by engaging with these stakeholders?

Ms Pon: One of the main things is that as minister I believe that to engage and talk and reach out to our constituents and Albertans is very important. The government of Alberta is committed to listening to key stakeholders to ensure that Albertans have access to the programs and services they need while making the most of their hard-earned tax dollars. As you know, since I took over 10 months ago, I already have done three road trips and visited over 50, 60 communities in my 10 months in the ministry. I learned so much in listening to all Albertans in the different corners of Alberta. I really worked hard, and I travelled around the province meeting and listening to stakeholders and seniors. From Lethbridge to Grande Prairie and in the many, many different smaller towns that I visited, I held meetings and also toured the lodges and the facilities. Nothing is more important than to have a first-hand visit at those lodges and see them and meet with them. Sometimes I sing with them and dance with them as well when I'm visiting. It's such an enjoyable visit.

I will continue to meet with the stakeholders one on one and host round-table conversations and engage with the seniors through the year such as during Seniors' Week. I have a passion for it and the minister's seniors service award, which recognizes those helping seniors and also the International Day of Older Persons in Alberta.

In addition, I will attend key conferences such as the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association and all the different associations that are involved and that focus on seniors and housing particularly. I believe that attending those events will then help me to meet and explore more with different groups to obtain some more feedback and ideas for Seniors and Housing.

I have also developed a strong relationship with stakeholders such as the Alberta Seniors Communities and Housing Association, who are known to us as advocates for seniors that have a housing issue. I also continue to work with the two minister's advisory committees that I established last year. As I mentioned before, there is one advisory committee on seniors and one on affordable housing. That is valuable information, and those are things that improve and make my ministry more efficient. I discuss, and I listen to those committees. They provide such valuable feedback.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Minister, for that answer.

Going on to page 140 of your business plan, one of the goals is described there, where you say that you want to partner with the private and civil sectors. What is the takeaway for your ministry from those types of partnerships, and what value do these groups bring to the table? What are some of the takeaways from these

partnerships, and what do you hope to achieve going forward by doing so?

Ms Pon: Well, the nonprofit groups and sectors are part of the community they serve. Government must ensure that we are making full use of these groups, their knowledge and expertise. We also must put Alberta's financial house in order. So one way to protect the services in Alberta is by empowering the local groups to help pull out a solution to the community problems. It is important that we work closely with our private sector as partners to ensure that every dollar that is contributed by Alberta taxpayers to capital investments is fully leveraged. That is why we are partnering with the community and the groups that deliver the programs and the services effectively and efficiently.

9:20

We will continue to work closely with other levels of government, housing providers, nonprofits, and private companies to improve the system, find efficiencies, and deliver quality, affordable housing for Albertans in need. Our new project, Hope Mission, is a collaborative project with Seniors and Housing, Community and Social Services, and Infrastructure. Hope Mission will be the operator for 300 shelter spaces. We also work with the federal government to make this \$8 million project happen.

Mr. Amery: Thank you.

Once again I want to turn your attention, on that same note, to your budget estimates, page 183, line 2.1. Here we see what appears to be a slight decrease in the program planning and delivery. It's a small decrease, but in any event I'm curious to find out how your ministry plans to operate within the means of this budget while maintaining the relationships with stakeholders. Given that decrease, how do you intend to balance and deliver those services properly?

Ms Pon: I'm pleased to share with you that for capital 2020, it allocates about \$417 million over three years to provide 2,000 new and regenerated affordable housing units and also create more than 3,000 jobs and maintain the 26,700 units in the provincially owned portfolio. We are staying true to our word, and we honour all previous capital funding commitments. For 2020-21 the Alberta Social Housing Corporation will spend \$260 million to support the development and maintenance of a sustainable affordable housing system. We will continue to look for public-private partnership opportunities to expand affordable housing, accessible housing. In capital 2020 36 projects will continue to progress through construction. In addition, my ministry has provided funding for the construction of a new integrated shelter in Red Deer.

Mr. Amery: Okay. Thank you.

Finally, I do have one more question. I want to turn your attention to page 186, change in capital assets, Alberta Social Housing Corporation. Minister, I have a particular interest in this because of my background. More than 50 families are suing Habitat for Humanity over changes to their mortgage agreements, as you already know. Can you provide some insight into that? Does Seniors and Housing provide funding for Habitat for Humanity Edmonton? Are you aware of the situation? What is this government doing, what is your ministry doing, and what can you provide to the members by way of background on the status of this lawsuit?

Ms Pon: Well, thank you so much, Member, for bringing this to my attention. I am aware of this concern. However, because this is an internal matter between Habitat for Humanity and their partner

families, I will just kind of leave it like this. Just to give you additional information, there are active grant funding agreements between the Alberta Social Housing Corporation and H and H.

The Chair: With that, we are back to the Official Opposition, and that's Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Thank you. I just want to continue on the rent supplement program. Of course, that program is temporarily closed; we know that. I'm just wondering, with this program closed, what the minister says today to Albertans who are in need of housing.

Ms Pon: This program for rent supplement is not closed; it is just currently paused. It is under review right now. I mentioned before that no household has had their benefit reduced or eliminated as a result of this review. We closed the program in October 2019, allowing us to meet the budget reduction as well as having as little impact as possible on households currently receiving the benefit. Our government currently is redesigning the rental assistance program to meet the needs of Albertans with low income.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Minister, it's kind of interesting because you said that, no, it's not closed; it's paused. Then in your comments you said that it was closed in October. That's confusing to me. All right. Obviously, Albertans now are out of luck, and your ministry is not serving them.

I want you to go to page 186 of the government estimates. At the top it talks a little bit about revenue, the transfers from the government of Canada and the contrast between 2019-20 and 2020-21. There's about a 6 and a half million dollars or so difference, I think it is. That's going down, and I'm just wondering how come that is.

Ms Pon: That is based on the existing funding model, so there you can see that the numbers are different.

I'm going to defer to the ADM. Do you have any additional information to add to that question?

Mr. Thomson: The revenue that is reflected there is the revenue that we expect to receive from the federal government. It will not correlate directly to the numbers in the funding agreements because of how the revenue is reflected based on expenditures and capital spending. These figures in here are created by the revenue we expect to receive from them, but they won't correlate with the funding amounts in our funding agreements.

Ms Sigurdson: So that makes it kind of confusing.

Mr. Thomson: It's not as straightforward as looking at the agreements and seeing the revenue line. That's correct. It's not that straightforward, no.

Ms Sigurdson: All right. Okay. With the national housing strategy, I mean, obviously the federal government has committed to investing. Certainly, you know, there's a question of if it is enough, but it is additional compared to what had been invested previously. I guess I'm just going to go back to the Canada housing benefit. It's supposed to be available to Alberta April 1. Have the details been worked out on that? Will we be having access to that? Will the paused/closed program open up? What's happening April 1?

Ms Pon: As I mentioned to you before – this is the second time I will have mentioned it – we are still negotiating with the federal government to ensure that Alberta is eligible for the Canada housing benefit, which includes \$220 million between 2020-28 in

order to provide rent supplements directly to a household. It is still under review right now, and we are working on it.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I certainly, you know, do encourage the minister to work diligently because April 1 is very soon.

Something the minister has said repeatedly throughout our discussions here today is that you want to make sure the programs are available for those most in need. Most in need. You know, I wonder if she's got a definition for that.

Ms Pon: Most in need means a senior with the lowest income.

Ms Sigurdson: What line? I mean, we have poverty line measures in our country. We have the market-basket measure, the low-income cut-off. We have core housing need. There are so many different ways of measuring it. It needs to be sort of a more specific thing, not just most in need. What does that mean?

Ms Pon: To answer your question about affordable housing, for instance, most in need is defined in legislation for Seniors and Housing programs. This is regulated, and the regulations determine those most in need.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I don't know if they're called the HIL or something like that for each geographical area. Anyway, I understand what you're talking about.

The trouble, of course, is that it's not like other programs, like an income support program or Alberta seniors' benefit. Like, it doesn't matter; you get that program if you qualify. You may qualify for affordable housing, but you don't get the program because you're way down the list because of the scoring thing, you know. It's not just qualifying, so that's my concern. My concern is that this program, certainly with rents up, is paused, closed. We're not sure which.

9:30

People right now – you know, we have 7 per cent unemployment in our province. That's a significant issue. People don't need help when you decide to open to the program; they need help now. I'm just wanting to stress to the minister that this pausing, this closing, not having many people who are eligible have these services, the cuts that we've talked about all through this estimates discussion today are having a significant impact on Albertans and not in a good way.

Ms Pon: Well, as I mentioned before, that when we decided to pause or what you refer to as close – it's the same to me, this terminology. We are holding it, pausing it, closing it last October, and we are under review right now for that program. We are involving the housing management body and the stakeholders and the experts in housing to just redesign this program. I'll remind you that the applications for the rental assistance program were closed in October, that 9,326 householders will receive a subsidy for their rent. As of December 31, 2019, 91 households were still receiving benefits, and 226 of the households that weren't really left the program and are no longer eligible for the program.

Ms Sigurdson: I just want to talk about some of the stakeholders. Certainly, the housing management bodies, who do amazing work to support Albertans: in the fall, of course, their budgets were cut 3.5 per cent, \$17 million. Maintenance and renewal has been cut in this budget and will continue to be cut. As we said before, many of these facilities of the housing management bodies are quite aged. They could 30 years old, and certainly in rural Alberta they have a unique – we've talked mostly about the big cities, but rural Alberta

and also the seven other major cities have significant affordable housing issues.

On Friday I attended the Alberta Seniors Communities and Housing Association, ASCHA, meeting in Stony Plain, which is one of the stakeholders that you've already identified. Certainly, you know, they're in tough times, and they're doing what they can, but with the limited supports, the significant decrease in funding – and they already were running pretty lean operations, I would say. What did they talk about? They talked about: "Well, what else can we cut? Maybe we won't be maintaining our lawns anymore. You know, we have to cut maintenance on the facility." But what does that mean, then? People don't want to live there. Does seniors' housing, affordable housing become like a ghetto? It feels like you're forcing these housing management bodies to make these untenable decisions so that that will be: "Oh, that's the social housing. No one wants to live there anymore." So you're creating a bigger problem.

I really was moved by some of the stories that they shared on Friday afternoon when I was talking with them: on the backs of their staff, you know, who are not well paid, many of them making maybe minimum wage.

The Chair: All right. Our next one is back to the government caucus, and that will be Mr. Rutherford.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Chair. Appreciate it. Thank you, Minister and your staff, for being here this evening. Also, as the military liaison position was brought up earlier by my colleague, I do appreciate all the support out of your ministry and from the staff as well in helping facilitate that. To explain that a little bit further, of course, we work within the jurisdiction that we have within the province, and it's an honour for me and, I know, for you as well, being the minister, to be able to make it easier for these families when they're transitioning to Alberta and to make sure that we're looking after veterans where we can. Obviously, that's a collaboration with the federal government, but we can do our part, so I appreciate that.

Some of the questions that I have. The first one will be on page 138 of the business plan, key objective 1.4. The ministry's business plan indicates that policies and programs will continue to be developed in response to an aging population. Can you, Minister, explain how this rapid growth may affect programs in the future?

Ms Pon: Well, thank you very much for the question. Yes. Alberta's senior population is growing rapidly, and it will grow up to 700,000 seniors by 2023 and will be more than 1 million by 2035, so that is quite substantial. For my ministry, we must ensure that our programs are sustainable. As of January 1, 2020, there are more than 630,000 seniors in Alberta, and over the next 10 years the senior population will increase to 900,000. So this rapidly growing seniors population: we saw that in the Alberta seniors' benefit caseload pressure, so that's why we have to do work on it and take action to make sure that we are working on sustainable program benefits for our seniors and for the future seniors.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Minister. Obviously, as you cited in the numbers, the senior population is going to grow rapidly over the next five years and a decade, and I do believe that the working population supporting that, that ratio, is going to be dropping as well. Well, it seems to me that you're taking the approach about the longevity of these programs and thinking beyond just four years and into the future, making sure that the programs that are necessary for seniors are available in the future as well and that they are sustainable.

I just wanted a quick follow-up. What is the ministry doing to ensure the future sustainability of these important programs for Alberta's seniors?

Ms Pon: Well, starting on January 1, 2021, the benefit calculations will be adjusted for the new applicants, and the seniors' benefit will be maintained for all – we want to emphasize that: for all – current recipients, and they will see no change. The seniors with lowest income will continue to receive the current maximum benefit, and those with more income from private income will receive the lower benefit level, which would be more in line with other provinces. Alberta will continue to have the highest income threshold in Canada. All of the current and future seniors with low income, those most in need, will continue to receive the highest level of financial assistance in Canada.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Minister. What becomes more apparent is that you, not just the government but your ministry, inherited a lot of fiscal mess from the previous administration, and you have to look at the longevity of these programs. We can't continue to borrow and rack up debt-servicing costs because there's an eventuality that we're going to hit a wall and you can't just continue these programs. So the efforts made today, you know, I think, are really going to sustain these programs in the long run.

My next question. There is a reduction to the special needs assistance grants program for seniors. What services or supports are provided by the program, and what is being reduced?

Ms Pon: Well, we are focusing the special needs assistance program for seniors on essential support dedicated to seniors with low income living in their homes and chosen community. The number of seniors is growing in our province. Every month 4,000 seniors turn 65, so we need to ensure that this program, special needs assistance program for seniors, can meet the increasing demand.

As I mentioned before, this is a really special program that we would like to continue to maintain in this province. We are making program changes so that the coverage is maintained for essential items only, particularly health-related items. That will keep the seniors with low incomes living in their homes and chosen community, as I mentioned. These include essential items such as diabetes supplies, CPAP machines, bug treatment, and medical trips. We need to ensure that the special-needs program for seniors can meet the increased demands. These changes will save us \$8.2 million and will also be used to help offset the caseload, the pressures of the growing senior population on the Alberta seniors' benefit.

9:40

Mr. Rutherford: Can you describe to me how that compares to other jurisdictions?

Ms Pon: Yes, we could. Alberta, as I mentioned, is the only province that has this program, and we want it continued. Also, these changes we'll see – as I mentioned, \$8.2 million – help to make sure that this program is sustainable for those who need it the most. Our actions continue to make sure that we are protecting the most essential support for those most in need.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you.

Page 183 in budget estimates, line item 3.3: there is a significant increase to the supplementary accommodations benefit program for seniors. Can you explain why this is a priority for your ministry, please?

Ms Pon: It is a priority because it's administrated through the Alberta's seniors' benefit program. The supplementary accommodations benefit is income based and provides monthly income supplements to support affordable accommodation costs for the residents for long-term care and designated supportive living. The supplementary accommodations benefit has increased by \$6.6 million from 2019-20. This increase provides seniors with a low income access to long-term care and designated supportive living by offsetting the costs of the current accommodations rate.

Mr. Rutherford: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

On page 138 of the business plan, for outcome 1, if just want to go over – and it might be reiterating a little bit here. How does the benefit support seniors, and what reassurances does this give to seniors in Alberta that this government is working hard for them?

Ms Pon: Well, as I mentioned, the supplementary accommodations benefit is income based and provides a monthly income that supplements to support affordable housing accommodation costs of residents of long-term care and also designated supportive living. Eligible seniors living in long-term care and designated supportive living might be eligible to receive the benefit to ensure that they have at least \$322 of disposable income every month after they are paying their accommodations with change. The maximum benefit amount is actually \$695 per month.

The program partners with Alberta Health Services and facility operators to ensure that seniors with low incomes entering long-term care and designated supportive living receive the benefits in a timely manner through real-time information, sharing the use of designated supportive living and the information of the website as well. As of December 2019 approximately 13,240 seniors, residents in long-term care and designated supportive living units, received the supplementary accommodations benefit. I'll just remind you that the average for the seniors receiving this program benefit is 85 years old.

Mr. Rutherford: Okay. Thank you, Minister.
Chair, how much time is left?

The Chair: Thirty-five seconds.

Mr. Rutherford: Thirty-five seconds.

Minister, I appreciate again you being here this evening. I'm on the seniors and housing advisory committee, which I appreciate being on with MLA Lovely as well and for the work that we get to do on that committee and for allowing me to chair one of the subcommittees as well to come up with recommendations to support our seniors moving forward and to really look for creative ways of ensuring that we're doing the best we can for our seniors today and in the future as well.

The Chair: Wonderful.

Now back to Ms Sigurdson with the Official Opposition.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I would like to direct the minister to page 164 of the – what do I have here? – fiscal plan. Of course, under family, social supports, and housing it talks about the capital plan dollars, and it does have a line item for indigenous housing capital program. We know that indigenous Albertans oftentimes have, you know, very significant housing needs, and a lot of indigenous people are living in urban centres now. I don't know if we've become the most highly populated indigenous city in Canada, superseding Winnipeg. I'm not sure if that's happened yet, but I understand it's supposed to happen fairly soon, and, you know, indigenous people need housing.

When we were government, we did an extensive consultation process, worked with indigenous people to get some important direction on what was best for their community. You know, there's that phrase: Nothing about Us without Us. I mean, that just is a fundamental part of good policy development, that people who have the lived experience, people who are the population that's going to be served by whatever that program is, they need to be developing that program along with experts in other areas. That was something we took great pride in. We developed this program, and it did have a \$120 million investment.

I'm looking at this line item, and I see that there are obviously some funds in that program, but they are greatly reduced. We knew that in 2019. You had already identified that that program had been cut substantially. I mean, the need is much more significant than what is indicated by the numbers here, but, you know, I've said that repeatedly throughout these estimates, and this minister doesn't seem to understand that. It doesn't matter. I'm going to ask about just that program, that capital investment. Are you using that document that was created? Are you working very closely with indigenous groups to allocate those funds to the proper kind of housing for indigenous people? What is the direction in that program?

Ms Pon: Indigenous communities are so important, and I'm proud to share with you that our government has built such a strong relationship with indigenous communities and indigenous groups. We also have Minister Wilson, the minister of indigenous, continuously building that relationship, getting feedback, meeting with them to make sure that we are working with them to provide services and benefits or even affordable housing, how we can make life better for these indigenous communities.

Referring to how we're going to deal with this capital program for indigenous housing, we have the capital budgets of 2019. We allocated about \$35 million over four years for the indigenous housing capital program to help to improve accessible, affordable housing for indigenous peoples in need. We also honoured nearly about \$11 million in a previous commitment and created jobs by providing \$9.9 million to construct 20 units in Edmonton and also 10 units on the Elizabeth Métis settlement, and a modest \$700,000 was provided in 2018-19 to support the plan. These programs are being reviewed to better serve the indigenous community and organizations, and we will engage with all program applicants to give us input. Also, more detail will be available in spring.

Ms Sigurdson: Are you using P3s with this capital spend?

Ms Pon: Currently we are just discussing, and we are working on it.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. One of the things – I don't know what I'm saying here; it's getting late, 10 o'clock almost – the fiscal plan refers to quite a bit is the MacKinnon report. We all know about the MacKinnon report. The MacKinnon report was a report, you know, where people had one hand tied behind their back. They couldn't actually do a full report. They had to only do it – they couldn't look at the revenue side; it was only the expenditure side. So it's not the full picture, but of course the government constructed this so that there are no choices but we have to cut.

9:50

In the fiscal plan, page 145, it talks about the program reviews, and I think you've been referring to that quite a bit. It says:

Government is working to implement a comprehensive program review process that formalizes the recommendations of the MacKinnon Panel. This process will focus on ensuring services

are in the public interest, eliminating waste and duplication, and ensuring programs are effective and efficient. Identifying efficiencies or cost-containment could produce significant savings.

Blah, blah, blah. It's really all about cutting. That's basically it. You don't even have to read it. You just know it's about cutting, and we're already seeing that from the budget in 2019 and the budget today.

It does say at the end of the second paragraph, "The first round of program reviews will incorporate and leverage existing ministry . . . reviews." It says that seniors' programs are part of that. Advanced Ed, postsecondary [not recorded]. Well, I asked the question. I'm waiting for her to answer. Okay. Well, just seniors' programs. I'm wondering, you know: can you tell me a bit more about the review? Will we see the review? Will that be something that's made public?

Ms Pon: Well, the MacKinnon report identifies that compared to B.C., Ontario, and other provinces, the seniors' financial assistance programs help to ensure that seniors in Alberta stay above the poverty line. If you refer to page 7 of KPMG's research analysis, they use the MacKinnon report on Alberta's financials. The MacKinnon report highlighted that Alberta has some of the highest seniors' financial assistance benefits relative to the two other jurisdictions.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, Minister, that's not the question, though. The question was – you know, I'm referring to page 145 of the fiscal plan. It says that there is a review currently under way for seniors' programs, and I'm just asking you about that. I'm not asking you about the whole MacKinnon report; I'm asking you about the seniors' program review. It sounds like an internal review, and I'm asking if that indeed will be made public, when that will be done. That's what I'm asking.

Ms Pon: The reason I mentioned it is because all the reviews and the feedback we are relating refer to the MacKinnon report and their feedback as well. That's why it's so very important. After we review all programs, which is what we are currently doing, and as soon as we are finished, we are going to share.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. So that is a commitment to share publicly. Okay. Thank you.

Ms Pon: I'm saying that we'll share.

Ms Sigurdson: We'll share. What does that mean, then, Minister? Do you want to clarify?

Ms Pon: We'll share that internally first and see what's necessary, and then that will give us our key messages and highlights to share with the members.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. So not quite public is what I'm getting from that answer.

Seniors and Housing is two parts, seniors and housing, so what about housing? You know, this is something that is also under review, it sounds like. It's going to be something that every ministry will experience. Where are you at in that process?

Ms Pon: I'm sorry. Would you please repeat the question?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, it says seniors' programs, so it's very specific. It's not saying seniors and housing, so I'm just asking about housing. What's going on with housing?

Ms Pon: About housing, we are continuing to review. The housing reviews will be done. We'll continue to work with our stakeholders, with our nonprofit organizations, and also with the housing committees. It's under review right now.

Ms Sigurdson: It is under review currently? Is that what you mean? Is that what you're saying to me?

Ms Pon: Yes.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. So it's synonymous, then. It just is not in the fiscal plan.

The Chair: All right. With that, we will move on to our last block of questions, which will come from our government and MLA Guthrie. Before I say that, I just want to clarify that it'll be about five minutes because the meeting will be coming to a close.

Mr. Guthrie: Thank you, Minister. We have five minutes remaining . . .

Ms Pon: Let's be fast.

Mr. Guthrie: . . . so I'll just jump right in here, I guess. As MLA Sigurdson had pointed out earlier, your ministry has maintained the budget for the seniors' home adaptation and repair program. Can you just elaborate a little bit about that program and how it helps and benefits seniors in both rural and urban communities?

Ms Pon: Well, this is important. The seniors' home adaptation and repair program covers a wide range of home adaptations and repairs, including the most requested expenses as the following: roof repair or replacement, window upgrades, furnace replacements or repair, the following replacements, and also bathroom repairs, all these items. The program's grant components are available to help eligible seniors with low income who do not qualify for a loan but who require financial support for critical home repairs. This can help seniors to age in their own communities, where they feel most comfortable and are close to family and friends.

Mr. Guthrie: Okay. I guess in the same vein, then, can you sort of explain the seniors' property tax deferral loan program, and how does that support seniors?

Ms Pon: Well, this property tax deferral program is a low-interest rate program available for the seniors who are interested in deferring their property tax and payments until they sell their house and pay back the loan. When the senior is approved for a loan, then the province will pay the property tax directly to the municipality on behalf of the senior, and the senior will repay the loan with interest when they sell their home or sooner if they choose.

Mr. Guthrie: Okay. The Alberta seniors' benefit program is over \$320 million of your budget, and that does not include all the various other programs designed for seniors. Can the minister discuss the ASB program outcomes and how, you know, this significant investment supports key objectives? The key objectives, I guess, in outcome 1 of the business plan.

Ms Pon: Okay. Well, I just want to let you know that we added \$19 million in total to the Alberta seniors' benefit program, which includes \$12 million to the ASB and grants that go directly to seniors. Also, starting July 1, 2021, then the benefit calculations will be adjusted for new applicants. The seniors' benefit, to remind you, will be remaining for all current recipients, and there will be no change for the current recipients. Also, seniors with the lowest income will continue to receive the current maximum of benefits and those with income will receive a lower benefit level, which will be more in line with other provinces. Alberta will continue to have the highest income thresholds in Canada, and all the current and future seniors with low income and those most in need will continue to receive the highest level of financial assistance in Canada.

Mr. Guthrie: Well, we're going through this pretty quickly. Let's see if we can get this last one. Now, how does the ministry, you know, work with other levels of government to make lives better for Albertans? I guess specifically federally but also municipally.

Ms Pon: Well, we are working closely with the three levels of government, which is something we believe is very important. One of the exciting news I want to share is that as of January 2020 I have taken on the co-chair role along with the federal Minister of Seniors for the federal-provincial-territorial ministers responsible for seniors forum. This role will afford Alberta a new relationship with other provinces as well as the territories as well as the federal government on the issues related to seniors. The ministry and the minister will host the next FPT ministers meeting in Alberta, currently proposed for spring 2021. And the deputy minister and the ADM for the senior . . .

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for this item of business has now concluded.

I would like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet next tomorrow, March 3, 2020, at 9 a.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is now adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10 p.m.]

