

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, April 19, 2005** **8:00 p.m.**

Date: 05/04/19

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

The Chair: Hon. members, I'll call the Committee of Supply to order.

Before we do that, may we revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Innovation and Science.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have several special introductions to make to you tonight, and I practised these names with my guests, but I'm sure that I'm going to get them wrong. It's a group that comes to us from the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, and they are learning English and taking a tour of the Legislature tonight. I'm going to introduce to you Kyaw Myint – and he's from Syria, so we'll get him to rise – and Nobumasa Nakajima and Mayumi Nakajima. They are from Japan. We have Hong Nguyen, and she's from Viet Nam; Jin-Young Eom, and I believe that she's from Korea – I may have that wrong – and then Abdulla Alkhatib. They are accompanied by my son Courtney, who is helping them to learn English. I'd ask them all to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm deeply honoured to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly the 99th Girl Guide association from my riding of Edmonton-Ellerslie, a long established association providing girls with opportunities, experiences, and long-lasting friendships. This wonderful group of 17 students and their chaperones are here this evening to tour the Legislature. They are seated in the public gallery. I request them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Main Estimates 2005-06**

Seniors and Community Supports

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Before I begin, I'd also like to take this opportunity to introduce staff that are in my ministry, and they're in attendance here tonight. I have my deputy minister, Ken Wilson – I'm going to ask that you rise as I introduce you, Ken – also Chi Loo, my assistant deputy minister for housing services and who has been our chief financial officer as well; Dave Arseneault, assistant deputy minister for strategic planning in support of living; and many of you, of course, know my executive assistant, Zoe Kolbuc, from my office. I'd ask that you give them a warm welcome.

Mr. Chairman, I'm really pleased to be here to present the Ministry of Seniors and Community Supports 2005-08 business plan and the budget. I'd like to begin by providing an overview of our programs, as this is very much what this ministry is about and, of course, the many people that we serve. Then I'll be pleased, as well,

to go through our budget items with you in detail along with how this budget will further enhance the programs and the services that we provide.

As many of you know here in the Assembly, community supports programs were added to this ministry just this past fall, and I'd like to mention that this was the first time that responsibility for disability programs was placed under one department. That's a fairly significant change with the ministry. Prior to the reorganization the former ministry of seniors was comprised of three key areas: seniors programs, housing for lower-income Albertans, and public guardian services.

The ministry and the number of people we serve changed significantly with the addition of the assured income for the severely handicapped program, persons with development disabilities, and community support systems. As of April 1, Mr. Chairman, responsibility for the Alberta Aids to Daily Living program was added to this ministry from the Ministry of Health and Wellness, and it was a welcome addition because that is where it will make the most sense, I think, at this time to be because of the change in the ministry's portfolio.

The vision for the new ministry is "a vibrant province where all Albertans live with dignity as full participants in society and experience the best possible well-being and independence." I'll briefly mention the ministry's four core businesses from the 2005-08 business plan. The first core business is to provide "services, programs, and planning for seniors and the aging population," the second is to provide "supports, services and planning for persons with disabilities," the third is to support "the provision and ongoing management of housing for lower-income Albertans," and the fourth core business is to provide "supports to enhance choice and well-being for clients of the Ministry."

With the expanded scope of the ministry total spending for Alberta Seniors and Community Supports will reach \$1.6 billion in 2005-06, which is an increase, Mr. Chairman, of more than 12 per cent over last year's budget. More than \$176 million in new funding for seniors programs, the renewal of the assured income for the severely handicapped, known as the AISH program, and provincial housing programs are highlights in this new budget.

But I'd like to begin with our seniors programs, Mr. Chairman. The budget renews our commitment to one of the most generous packages of benefits for seniors in the country. Although the focus of our benefit programs are on those seniors who are most in need of assistance, there are some benefits that are available to all seniors, such as premium-free Alberta health care insurance and Blue Cross coverage.

Approximately 143,000 seniors currently receive the Alberta seniors benefit, a program which provides a monthly cash benefit for eligible seniors. This year's budget increases the total spending on the Alberta seniors benefit program to \$249 million to fund enhancements that were announced last year. As of July 1, 2004, increased thresholds made 17,000 more seniors eligible for cash benefits from the program while existing recipients have seen their monthly payments increase.

In addition to the Alberta seniors benefit, Alberta also has the special needs assistance grant program. Last year this program provided more than 35,000 payments to lower income seniors facing one-time emergency or extraordinary expenses. And I'm also pleased that this program will continue.

Part of our commitment to supporting our province's generous seniors benefits package includes \$52 million in new spending to support three programs which you're aware of Mr. Chairman: the dental and optical assistance programs and the education property tax assistance program. About 80 per cent of the 336,000 seniors in

Alberta will receive some assistance through the enhanced dental and optical assistance programs, and the maximum benefit is \$5,000 coverage for basic dental health procedures every five years and up to a maximum of \$230 for prescription eyeglasses every three years.

This year we are also pleased to announce a program for seniors looking for education property tax assistance. In 2005-06 we estimate that approximately 115,000 senior households will receive education property tax assistance, which protects them from year-to-year increases in the education portion of their property taxes. Under the new program seniors can apply to be reimbursed for the difference between the 2004 and 2005 education property tax amount. This year's budget includes \$10 million for the education property tax assistance program.

As I mentioned earlier, the scope of the ministry has expanded, Mr. Chairman, from seniors and housing matters to include the assured income for the severely handicapped program. Approximately 32,000 Albertans rely on AISH and will be positively affected by this year's budget increases. We are increasing the AISH budget program by \$80 million, bringing total spending to more than \$488 million. Of this \$80 million increase, \$45 million will go toward implementing the MLA committee recommendations, and \$35 million will address increasing program costs. This is a significant investment, Mr. Chairman.

8:10

Without getting into too many details about the MLA review, I would like to mention that last Friday, with the support of my colleagues here in the Assembly, I accepted the committee's recommendations to renew the AISH program. The AISH living allowance will be increased from \$850 per month to \$950 per month and \$1,000 per month by April of 2006. These increases will cost approximately \$40.3 million in 2005-06 and \$62 million in 2006-07.

However, Mr. Chairman, renewing the AISH program is about more than just an increase in the monthly living allowance. It's about an entire package of benefits and helping those who need it the most. AISH clients will continue to receive a comprehensive health benefits package worth an average of \$300 per month. That package is at no cost to the client and includes premium-free Alberta health care insurance, Alberta Aids to Daily Living supports, all prescription drugs, complete eye care, full dental care, emergency ambulance service, and essential diabetic supplies.

Last Friday we also introduced supplementary benefits as a new addition to personal income support through the AISH program. Among other things these supplementary benefits may include school supplies for children, utility arrears, medical supplies such as wheelchair repairs and batteries, and support for guide dogs. The supplementary benefits, which will be available starting in October, will cost an estimated 10 and a half million dollars to administer for the remainder of 2005-06 and \$22 million next year.

We're also working to improve the earning power of AISH clients by increasing the employment earnings exemption for those clients who are able to work. As of October a single person who is an AISH client will be able to earn up to \$400 each month without affecting their living allowance. That's twice as much as they can earn now. Couples or single parents who receive AISH benefits can earn \$975 per month before it affects their living allowance.

We are also implementing a number of AISH enhancements that will be done within the current dollars allocated for the programs. These include requiring AISH staff to meet with clients to be sure clients are getting the best support possible, improving client service delivery, and partnering with disability organizations to provide ongoing training for AISH staff.

Mr. Chairman, I am pleased that we have followed through on the

commitment of renewing the AISH program. But I'd also like to take a few minutes to review our budget for the housing initiatives. The ministry is working with communities throughout the province to develop a range of housing facilities and support services that include emergency shelters, transitional housing, supportive housing, and affordable housing. New spending of \$16.7 million will be used to address increased costs associated with the operation of family and specialized housing units across Alberta. This includes funding for the upkeep of the approximately 25,000 provincially owned or supported units to ensure that our clients have a safe and secure place to live.

Support for operating homeless shelters located in major municipalities throughout the province will rise by \$6 million in 2005-06, bringing total provincial support for transitional housing and the homeless to more than \$23 million. We want to ensure that emergency shelter spaces are available. Keeping that in mind, we are also working to develop long-term housing solutions to assist people to live independently in our communities. I hope that the budget information that I'm reviewing today is useful in providing further guidance to the Member for Lethbridge-East, who asked a question last month about grant funding for homeless shelters.

Mr. Chairman, seniors' lodge assistance also falls within the housing portfolio. An additional \$6 million will be used for seniors' lodge assistance grants, bringing total program spending to \$21.7 million per year. This funding helps provide accommodation, meals, and housekeeping to approximately 8,900 low- and moderate-income seniors throughout Alberta.

In our constant quest to develop affordable housing, Budget 2005 includes \$25 million to conclude phase 1 of the Canada/Alberta affordable housing agreement, 12 and a half million dollars from the province and 12 and a half million dollars in matching federal funding. Phase 1 of this agreement has led to the development of approximately 2,400 affordable housing units in Alberta during the last three years. With the current funding program scheduled to end in 2006, we are currently discussing a second phase of this program with the federal government. To date these funding partnerships have resulted in new affordable housing units in at least 18 areas of the province, and we will continue to search for innovative ways to provide low-cost, affordable housing for lower income Albertans and for persons with disabilities.

My department is also now responsible for persons with developmental disabilities, known as the PDD program. In this budget I am pleased that we are committing an additional \$21 million to the PDD program, bringing total funding to \$489 million in 2005-06. This increase will help people who are new to PDD and requiring supports. In addition, it will work to enhance our communities' ability to support citizens with developmental disabilities, a concept known through PDD as community inclusion. Through community inclusion people with disabilities are encouraged to participate fully and make active contributions in their communities.

I am conscientious of the time, Mr. Chairman, but I'd still like to mention a few other budget highlights. Budget 2005 includes approximately \$2 million in new funding for the establishment and monitoring of accommodation standards in supportive living and long-term care facilities. Developing provincial standards and establishing an effective monitoring mechanism are essential for the well-being of people in supportive living and long-term care facilities, and these standards will address areas such as maintenance, housekeeping, food services, social activities, safety and security, and nonmedical personal services.

An additional \$400,000 has been committed this year to the protection for persons in care program. I know that protecting people in care is important to members of the Assembly as it was

already raised twice during this legislative sitting. This new funding will go toward implementing changes to the Protection for Persons in Care Act and for investigation services.

Just as we must ensure the safety of those in care, Mr. Chairman, we must also ensure that we help those who can't make decisions for themselves. The office of the Public Guardian, which provides assistance to individuals who are unable to make personal, nonfinancial decisions for themselves, will see an increase of approximately \$800,000. This funding increase will provide Albertans with the best possible service by reducing the client to staff ratio. Some of the funding will also go toward promoting personal directives across Alberta, an important issue that recently came into the spotlight with the recent case in the United States.

The newest addition to the ministry is the Alberta Aids to Daily Living program, which was transferred, as I said earlier, from the Ministry of Health and Wellness on April 1 this year. This program provides assistance to people who have a chronic disability or illness, and this program also provides assistance to individuals who require basic medical equipment and supplies which will allow them to be more independent in their home or in a home-like setting. In addition to its existing budget, which was transferred to my ministry, the program will see an increase of \$2.3 million to support annual caseload growth, price increases, and necessary maintenance to computer systems.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, as you can see and as I mentioned earlier, the elements of this diverse ministry are serving those Albertans most in need. I am pleased with the programs that we're able to offer to Albertans, and I am committed to ensuring that these continue to meet the needs of Albertans.

I'd also be pleased to answer any questions. Those that I'm not able to answer just in the course of time, I'd be pleased to respond to in writing if we're not able to get to them over this next period of time. I think it's by 10 o'clock.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

8:20

The Chair: Hon. members, before I recognize the next speaker, could we revert to introductions once again?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to introduce to you and through you to the members here Mr. Abe Neufeld, who is the director of the Canadian Association of Agri-Retailers. They are suppliers to farmers. He is also a business owner in Grande Prairie. Mr. Neufeld is also a high school friend of our distinguished Minister of Advanced Education, and he also has a distinguished MLA, the Minister of Gaming, and also another MLA, our distinguished Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky, in his business, I believe. I will ask Mr. Abe Neufeld to stand up and receive the warm welcome.

head: **Main Estimates 2005-06**
Seniors and Community Supports (*continued*)

The Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I really would like to thank

the minister. I think that under her direction there have been some very positive things and certainly an understanding of what's required.

The opposition is pleased with the increase in the budget, and it is a great first step and certainly a long time in coming. It's been many years since AISH recipients got an increase in living allowance, and seniors on fixed incomes were aided in their struggles to meet the ever-increasing costs that sometimes only allow survival. I certainly see an understanding of the importance of protecting our most vulnerable citizens, those in care, be it long-term care, assisted living, or in group settings, but in fact it's sad to say sometimes they need to be protected from their own families.

Safeguards are needed through standards and legislation to prevent physical, emotional, sexual, and financial abuse. The AISH payments, I believe, should have been raised immediately to a \$1,000 a month level because there has been an increase in the cost of living of 30 per cent since they had their last raise. I've had numerous calls regarding raises of those who live in subsidized housing because out of the \$100 raise, the first \$30 will go to rent as their rent is based on 30 per cent of their income.

There's been so much talk of off-budget increases if the price of oil remains, and perhaps the government may have even used their forecasts and lowballed them. I'm wondering: could this ministry increase the AISH benefits before April 6 and perform the review before the two years? I believe that, in my opinion, that's too long. The other question to go along with that would be: what formula would be used? The market-basket measurement is very comprehensive, and I think that it really reflects local communities. Or perhaps the formula which is used for the MLA yearly salary adjustments.

Perhaps I'll stop there, and we can go forward after.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you. Hon. member, I'm pleased to see, too, that you're addressing the area of AISH because it is so recent with this announcement of the renewal of the WISH program. As you know, that review was fast-tracked. It was over a six-month period. There were 11 recommendations that came forward from the review, and we have implemented all 11 recommendations. But having said that, I know that you are looking for – we discussed this – that increase in living allowance to occur immediately to a thousand dollars. It is, as you know, in two increments, the first being \$100 and, as I mentioned earlier, the next, \$50, being April 2006.

But I want to tell you why that decision was made. It was made after a lot of discussion with the chair of the WISH review committee and with the committee members, and it was really thought that it would be much more beneficial in the context of what the budget was, which is \$80 million this year in that program and \$91 million next year, if rather than doing an immediate living allowance increase to a thousand dollars, we provided what had been asked for in the Alberta disability strategy report. It meets three recommendations out of the eight there.

Those recommendations related very much to a personal income support program, and that income support program, as I mentioned earlier, is to meet unique needs of clients that have not been met before. It was never a part of the AISH program, and it is very important, which is why I had introduced the bill yesterday, so that it will be placed in legislation, so that it will not be very easily ever removed from this program.

The personal income support program will of course provide on a case-by-case basis, for now, whatever that individual client finds that they require over and above what their living allowance

payment would allow for. So that's a significant addition into the AISH program, and that's why I say that it was within the context of the budget. I know, hon. member, that you don't see that as ideal, you know, about that increase not being immediate, but at least it will be there over the next year.

Also, you asked about the subsidized housing at 30 per cent of the income, the concern that some clients may have that they are not going to be able to keep their hundred dollar increase. We had heard that same concern from clients, and approximately two to three weeks ago – I can't recall the exact date – I wrote a letter to all of the management bodies to indicate that they are not to raise the rent based on this hundred dollar increase and that if they do, we will know about that immediately. We do have 25,000 housing units in the province, and I am hoping that with that direction being in writing and as firm as it was, the management bodies will follow through with that.

The benefit is being reviewed every two years. I know that we have, just as we're doing today, the normal process that we follow through with. We have the process, you know, of budgets being allocated and then going through this process with the Assembly. I don't look at that as an informal process; that's formal too. But I think it's more formalized when in two years we actually have a formal review of the program rather than what I think you were thinking about, indexing of the living allowance.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you for that. Yes, I was thinking about indexing, but I guess what I wanted, perhaps, was it being very definitive: this is exactly how we're going to do it year after year so that they can at least count on it. Even if it's a small amount, at least it's a little bit that goes up.

The opposition is also very pleased with the increases to the seniors' benefits and increases for housing. Some of the concerns were with the standards for housing, with the enforcement to back that up, especially when public dollars are paying the private sector and after a number of years these accommodations are substandard with no legislation to ensure that any level of the standards are maintained. I think that you have answered the question, but I'll ask it again if you don't mind. Are you contemplating legislation along these lines, and if not, why not?

The other question I think I can fit in before we break for answers. The increase for seniors to help with the school property tax is certainly more than welcome, but I can't seem to find a timeline. I trust that it is yearly, based on the differences from year to year.

The Chair: Hon. minister, do you wish to respond?

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you. Hon. member, there is a line item in the budget regarding the maintenance for housing, and I had alluded to that in my opening remarks. I agree with you that for people that are low income to moderate income and for whom we are subsidizing their housing, we do need to be very certain they are living in facilities that best meet their needs, whether it's with a disability. You know, people with various disabilities require certain services within that housing component, and we do have grants in place to assist with that.

More importantly, I think you were asking that the housing be kept in good repair, and that is a responsibility that we have. I have made my deputy minister and my staff very aware that following session I would like to go out, and I'd welcome you, hon. member, if you'd like to come with me, and look at the housing market that we do have out there – I have not done that yet at this stage – and see where that new funding in the budget can best be allocated for

the repair of housing. As far as it being incorporated in legislation, though, as standards, no, I haven't contemplated that.

Thank you.

8:30

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. Just a couple of different categories of issues that I'd like to question the minister on. Thank you to my colleague from Lethbridge-East for letting me get in on some of her time.

The question has been asked a couple of times, and the minister has not directly answered it, but I'd like to know why the choice has been made to not index the AISH benefits to some kind of measure. We in the Liberal opposition have proposed a number of times to hook it to the market-basket measure, but the minister is not responsive there. So I would like to know why the choice has been made not to proceed with indexing to anything.

I'd also like to get the minister on the record to see if there have been any changes at all to the allowable asset levels for people on AISH. I know that there was a great deal of concern from the community that the asset level would be lowered in some way or perhaps some sort of staggered limit. I'd like to know exactly what the decision-making was there and if there are any plans to change that within, I take it, the two-year period that this current program is expected to run without any changes.

I'm sure that the minister is aware of the social determinants of health, and I'm wondering if those factor in in any way to the decision-making process that she uses in her department. Just for the record, social determinants of health as determined by Health Canada, the public health agency of Canada, include things like income and social status, social support networks, education and literacy, employment and working conditions, social environments, physical environments, personal health practices and coping skills, healthy child development, biology and genetic endowment, health services, gender, and culture.

Essentially, once you take away the sort of preventable injuries like accidents and genetic predisposition, you can make people as healthy as you want, but if they're poor, they're still going to be sick. They're going to develop chronic illnesses. If they live in unsafe housing, they are going to manifest that difficulty through their health. We have not been successful thus far in getting the government to work with social determinants of health, and again I'd like to know why that choice is being made. I guess I should put on the record: is the government, in fact, aware of these? I'm assuming that you are, but let me put it on the record. Then, why the choice not to use it?

You know, for example, we ended up with, I think, the second-lowest or the lowest minimum wage in Canada. Well, that's one of the significant social determinants of health. If we're trying to get higher birth-weight babies, if we're trying to get more kids completing high school, and if we're trying to end up with lower chronic diseases, which cost our health care system a great deal, these things have all got to be factored in. I don't see the government following that, certainly not by the practices that we've seen, for example the very low minimum wage. There's also a real issue around housing. So I'd like to hear from the minister what the department's attitude is and whether they'll ever consider using social determinants of health to help them develop policy around this. Who do they work with for advice on this, et cetera?

The minister mentioned that there was a disability strategy – I think I heard that correctly – and that three of the eight recommendations were accepted. I'd like to know: what were the other five that were not accepted, and why weren't they accepted?

One of the interesting things that I noticed was that there was an awful lot of money being spent moving people from AISH onto social assistance and back again, trying to be able to help people access various medical benefit programs that existed in either place, and that was costing the department a significant amount of money. Could the minister tell us how much money was saved, then, by putting forward this additional health access program that is being offered and whether that relates directly to the additional cost in the program? In other words, if it was \$25 million that it was costing the department to move back and forth, is that the amount that has now been increased on the one side of the ledger and decreased on the second side of the ledger? Maybe you report back to us on that.

On housing could the minister please give us the exact plans for the expenditure of the housing dollars and, with that, the amount of money that is the contribution from the federal government and the corresponding, matching amount from the province and exactly how that money is going to be distributed? How many units are expected to be created within this fiscal year, and what type of unit is expected to be created? Also, since we're looking at a three-year plan put forward in this budget, I'd like to get those same categories extrapolated forward. I know that I can depend on the minister's excellent staff to provide the nitty-gritty detail of that in writing. I would just ask that we please receive it before we're expected to vote on the budget appropriation bill in May.

I note that according to various statistics – and they all say the same thing – in Edmonton alone we are looking at a need of 4,700 new housing units. That includes things like 275 emergency shelter beds or mats; 675 units of transitional housing, for example for women's shelters and counselling and treatment beds, drug and alcohol treatment beds; 1,750 units of social housing, with subsidized accommodation for low-income residents; 700 units of affordable housing; and 183 fully adapted units for the disabled. How is the ministry progressing towards achieving those targets?

Given that these targets are for the fiscal year that we're in – actually, I think those figures are from the fall, so we're now six months further into this, with I don't think having created very many of those units. So how is the department measuring up against that? Given that I highly doubt 4,700 new units are going to be built out of this year's budget, what is the plan to be able to catch up with this in the future? Given that these are Edmonton figures only – I'm sorry; I represent an Edmonton riding, and homelessness and transitional and social housing are big issues for my constituents – but, you know, easily the same number in Calgary and probably the same number again for the rest of the province, we're looking at a need for between 13,000 and 15,000 units in Alberta within this year. I'd like to know what the plan is to catch us up on that one.

In the extra hundred dollars that was given for the housing for the seniors' accommodation, I'm wondering if the minister has changed the regulations to allow the cost of the telephones to be included with the rent. Most of the management companies will not include the telephone, so that's an additional cost. For example, the senior is paying 30 per cent of their income for the rent, and then they're paying the cost of the telephone. For anybody living downtown, they're also paying the cost of basic cable TV or they don't get any cable TV, which might sound like an extravagance to many here, but frankly to a senior that doesn't have many activities they can participate in, being able to watch television, at least watching the news and keeping up on current affairs, is one way for them to keep in touch with what's going on and to have some kind of very limited interaction with other human beings. So it becomes very important for my constituents anyway. Those regulations didn't encourage that with the housing management companies, and I'm wondering if there's been a move – I hope there has – towards encouraging the

inclusion of the telephone and the cable TV into the 30 per cent rent.

Has there been an improvement in the housekeeping rates and the understanding of what housekeeping is for the seniors? A number of seniors talk to me and say that, well, they could stay in their own homes and be more independent if they could just get reasonable housekeeping, but the housekeeping services that are offered for them just don't do the job. They're far too limited. They won't help people with meal preparation, for example. They won't do the cleaning that's really required. Eventually the senior gives up and moves into some sort of care facility, which is much more costly, as the minister knows, and much more costly for all Albertans who participate in that.

8:40

Those are the specific issues that I wanted to get on the record that have come up in my constituency and a bit left over from my work in my previous role as the critic for Seniors.

There were some additional questions that had come up when I went through the budget briefing book. On page 310 of the estimates book, under vote 2.2.5, the dental and optical assistance program, which the minister also referred to earlier, I'd like to know what this is based on. She gave new figures for what it's possible for seniors to apply for, and I think I heard \$230 for a pair of glasses every three years. Is that three years based on anything? Do you have statistical information that tells you that seniors tend to replace their glasses every three years? I'd be interested in knowing that or, better yet, having the minister table it.

With the dentures, again, I often hear that as they age, their mouths are changing faster than they did, and in fact the time limit that was allowed for them to replace dentures is not adequate for their needs. So again I'm looking for any statistical backup that you have that sends you in the direction of saying: you can have this much money every this many years.

I'd like to know what is covered exactly on page 309 under vote 1.0.4, strategic corporate services. That budget increased by \$2.9 million, from \$3.8 million to \$6.7 million. Could I get a breakout, please, of exactly what that is?

Just generally for your budget, could I get a breakout, please, of how much was brought from each of the other ministries to create this new department? How much was brought from Seniors? How much was the allocation from housing? What was the amount of money allocated to PDD, how much to AISH, and now how much for Aids to Daily Living? If I've missed anything that has made up the budget for this department, I'll ask for that to be included as well, please. If I could get any kind of a report on whether that corresponding amount of money was in fact taken out of the departments that they were in, which would've affected Community Development the most, I think.

On page 312 if I could get an explanation, please, on vote 4.1.2, supportive living and long-term care accommodations, under management and operations. This budget is increased from \$506,000 to \$2.4 million; in other words, it increased fivefold. I'd be interested in knowing why. Under supportive living grants, the corresponding vote 4.2.1, has gone from \$4.5 million to \$500,000. Perhaps these are connected, but if I could get that explained, please.

I'm wondering if this department has any hand in program development or policy development for adult FASD, please.

With those questions, thank you for my being able to get those on the record. Given our very limited time tonight and the very long list of people who wish to question the minister, I'm happy to receive the answers to those in writing, but I do ask that they are received within the next couple of weeks, before we have to vote on the budget.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will take the opportunity to respond to a couple of the questions from the hon. member. The one that I would like to respond to is regarding the Canada/Alberta affordable housing agreement. The hon. member had asked questions about this program. I indicated that it was 12 and a half million dollars in funding from Alberta and 12 and a half million dollars in matching funds from the federal government to finish up this first phase of the program.

I have met with the federal minister, hon. member. We are in discussions on the next phase, which would be phase 2, and it is a matched program. Twenty-five million dollars in 2005-06 will provide funding for over 400 additional units. I know that you mentioned an awful lot just here in Edmonton alone and the 4,700 that you were concerned about.

This has been a very good program. It has provided over the past three years approximately 2,400 new affordable housing units. Those have been in very high-need, high-growth communities, and that was with \$53 million from Alberta and \$53 million from the federal government, for a total of \$106 million. We are continuing – and I think you know this, hon. member – to look at innovative ways to provide low-cost, affordable housing for our lower and moderate-income Albertans. I just want you to know, though, that we are in discussions for the next phase of the program.

Also, you asked a question regarding dentures, and I thought that that would be an important one for you to know as well. You were looking at the benchmark that we used and how we came to the conclusion that for the dental program that we were offering, first of all, that it was necessary to add this \$50 million into the budget for this program. It's two, dental and optical, which you know as well, but it has come into effect as of April 1.

We did involve very professional organizations to determine what that list should be of the dental care that seniors would require; for example, at the University of Alberta through Dr. Gordon Thompson with the dental faculty and the association. He and many others contributed why we should increase our dental program, which is currently \$5,000 over a lifetime and limited to basic dentures and maybe some fillings, you know, cleanings. Well, this list that we have now is much more extensive, which would include root planing and endodontics and, you know, that type of dental care. Also, they indicated that the \$5,000 per person over a five-year period was much better than what it had been, over a lifetime, and that that should meet the needs of seniors. I did meet with seniors' groups which you're familiar with. The groups are well-known organizations throughout Alberta, and they as well indicated that \$5,000 over five years would meet the needs of the seniors.

That's the same also with eyeglasses. We heard through the ophthalmologists and the optometrists, you know, that if we looked at a three-year period for \$230, that would cover prescription eyeglasses, and that that was an average for seniors. But I want you to know this: it's not that it's cut in stone, that if a senior came to us and they had lost their eyeglasses, or if somebody had stolen their purse with their eyeglasses or whatever, we wouldn't try to assist that senior. We do have other programs that would be of assistance, like our seniors' assistance programs.

I know you know that the other questions, as you indicated, we'll provide answers in writing. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think the minister has at least partially answered one of the questions that I had for her on

behalf of a constituent who says that he had not noticed in news releases, in any event, relative to the budget anything in particular with regard to seniors referencing dental, glasses, general health care items, taxes, et cetera. He was specifically concerned about dental. He said, and I'm quoting here: it is difficult to contemplate doing certain necessary items such as extensive dental because of the very high costs.

Clearly, you've changed from \$5,000 over a lifetime to \$5,000 over five years, which I think is very good and very progressive. But for my information could the minister speak perhaps in a little more detail about what constitutes basic dental and what constitutes extensive dental. You mentioned a couple of examples there. I'm thinking about things like crowns or root canals or things like this, which can be, as we all know, very pricey at any age, manageable, obviously, if you're an ordinary working Albertan with an ordinary income and an ordinary, perhaps, group health benefit through your employer where you would end up paying 50 per cent of the cost of that. But certainly it would constitute a major setback, I think, for anybody on a fixed income who is required to pay 100 per cent. So I wonder if the minister could add just a little more detail about the dental.

8:50

The other question that I had also focused on transitional housing and homeless support initiatives and, of course, comes primarily from the Calgary perspective. I guess that much like my colleague from Edmonton-Centre, who referenced the fact that she's an Edmonton MLA, I'm a Calgary MLA. I suspect the stories in our two cities are very similar, but I'm, of course, more familiar with the Calgary situation. In Calgary it seems to me that we have in many respects a tremendous program for getting homeless people, who may present with a wealth of issues, off the street and into, really, a graduated program of taking them through substance abuse issues if there are problems there, mental health or psychological or emotional issues if there are problems there, upgrading of education, upgrading of skills through transitional housing, several-step programs, and so on and so forth. They work their way up the ladder, Mr. Chairman, kind of to the top and to graduation, at which point it's almost like they fall off the ladder and go back to the start again because of a chronic, acute shortage of affordable housing.

I wonder if the minister could give us a workable, serviceable definition. I know this is difficult to do because I'm asking almost for a one-size-fits-all definition here, and this is anything but a one-size-fits-all problem. Can she give us some insight into perhaps the definition the government uses of affordable housing and talk a little bit more about that?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm going to go back to the dental program because it is an important question, especially because it had been asked by the member previously. As I indicated, it did come into effect April 1. People are asking already: can that be retroactive? The answer to that is yes. We met with stakeholders just at the very end of March to indicate that, and it is going to be seamless. Seniors can apply in the dental office, because it's through Blue Cross, and once they've applied, they will not have to reapply and reapply. Especially if they're on our seniors' benefits program, they're already in our system, and we won't be asking for new information. But this program is for low-income to moderate-income seniors. It has changed in that regard as well.

We anticipate that approximately 80 per cent of all our seniors in Alberta, which is 267,000, are eligible to receive financial assistance

through the dental care and the prescription eyeglasses. Eligibility for the program is income based, as I just mentioned, the maximum coverage targeted to lower income seniors, who are most in need, but also to moderate, who will receive partial financial assistance. Seniors with annual incomes up to \$20,000 or couples with incomes up to \$40,000 a year will be eligible for up to the maximum amount, and that's about 186,000 seniors. Seniors with incomes between \$20,000 and \$30,000 and couples with incomes between \$40,000 and \$60,000 are eligible for partial coverage, which ranges up to 99 per cent coverage. We're thinking that about 81,000 seniors will be eligible, and I mentioned how we came to the determination of the amount of money over the five-year period being \$5,000.

You asked then, too, about why the list is more extensive than it had been previously. Of course, it is going to include basic dentures, but as I mentioned, it's going to include not just diagnostics like X-rays and whatnot but what dentists refer to or will refer to as restorative, with root planing and endodontics. I think there are about 10 items on the list that we received from the college, that I'd be pleased to share with you for your constituents.

The whole area of transitional housing, though, too is an important area. Like you, hon. member, I have visited in the city of Calgary with the Calgary Drop-in Centre, with the Mustard Seed, you know, with different organizations, and my understanding is that there is a real change now in the continuum of housing for people that are homeless. It's happening right with the drop-in centres. You know from being there that there is transitional housing support in, I think, the top four floors for people that may have been homeless but are beginning to work in the community in some way, still want the supports that they've been provided with within that context, and will stay there, you know, for a few months.

The \$23.3 million budget for homeless support in 2005-06 consists of homeless shelters, \$13.5 million; transitional housing, \$6.8 million; and homeless initiatives, \$3 million. The additional funding of \$6.2 million that's going to be allocated in this budget is going to address the cost pressures experienced by operators who are struggling to provide basic services because of rising operating costs, and that will include utilities. I think that's important for you to know. The \$3 million budget for the provincial homeless initiative is allocated throughout the province, and that's to address the needs of the homeless. These funds in 2004-05 were provided to seven major urban centres. I know we've heard of the Calgary and Edmonton situation, but there are seven centres.

Also, I think it is important that you know as well that we're continuing to work toward a financially sustainable shelter system and toward fostering independence among homeless people by creating long-term solutions such as the transitional and affordable housing that we discussed earlier. But we can't do that alone, you know, which is why we're working with the organizations in this area.

Thank you.

Mr. Taylor: Might I ask just a supplementary question? Could I get the minister to briefly talk about what some of those longer term plans and partnerships are? Ultimately, that's where the system breaks down right now – isn't it? – at the point at which the client is through the transitional housing, needs affordable housing, and in expensive centres like Calgary and Edmonton, of course, affordable housing, although the definition changes depending on the person we're talking about, can be in terribly short supply.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, the long-term plan – and this is through the organizations that I've discussed this with and with the books there are. There is one written by the Mustard Seed that you may wish to

read, and you'll see what their goals are. The long-term plan is: what we refer to now as homeless shelters, people are looking more for transitional housing.

Mr. Taylor: Beyond that?

Mrs. Fritz: They are. Yeah. It's changed.

Then beyond the transitional housing, where people move out into the community to supportive living, whether that be in an apartment setting, even some still in a group home depending on whether or not they have addictions or whatever they may be experiencing. Beyond that, hopefully at that time, then, they are, you know, working as well as getting other supports, and then it moves on from there back to what we refer to as affordable housing.

I think that's a good plan. I agree with the community in that regard, and also I know from meeting with the federal minister, Joe Fontana, that that's very much the direction that they're taking now as well. That's not just here in the province of Alberta but throughout Canada.

Mr. Taylor: Just one more quick stab at this, if I might, Mr. Chairman. I'm in full agreement with the minister as far as she's gone so far, but what I'm trying to get to is: what happens after all that, when the homeless person has been through the shelter system, through the transitional housing, perhaps through the group home experience if that's applicable, and on to the point where that person is deemed by themselves or others or both to be now capable of living on their own, in their own accommodation, in a rental apartment or whatever? My understanding is that it is at that point where you often have a breakdown because there's simply a very small, virtually nonexistent inventory of that kind of affordable housing, the kind of apartment that rents at a level that someone on a low income can afford to meet the rental payments every month, the kind of apartment that carries a damage deposit modest enough that that person can reasonably expect to come up with it.

I'm using somewhat out of date statistics here, Mr. Chairman, I'm sure, but we are told that there have been times in the recent past where upwards of 50 per cent of the homeless people in the city of Calgary – and although I don't know for a fact, it would not surprise me if the statistics in Edmonton were very, very similar – are, in fact, people from another province who have come here without a job in search of the dream that is Alberta, you know, without a whole lot of assets of their own. They get a job easily enough, but it's a low enough paying job relative to the cost of living in a city like Calgary that they simply cannot scrape together the money for the damage deposit; ergo, they're homeless. So if the minister could address specifically that issue of affordable accommodation after you've been through the system, which does, admittedly, a very good job of transitioning people up to a point.

9:00

Mrs. Fritz: We do have a next program – I know we have a number of programs we're discussing here tonight – and it is a support program to our community housing providers, and it's very much in keeping with what you are asking about here tonight. There's been an increase of \$14.75 million allocated to this program for this year. Its additional funding was also planned for 2006-07, because I keep looking at the next part of the budget, which is a further \$4.1 million, and then 2007-08, another \$4.3 million.

It's to assist the local housing providers with increasing operating maintenance costs, that kind of thing, but also that they administer 8,200 provincially owned and 2,400 municipally owned community housing units. Those provide modest rental income for our low-

income families, for individuals or persons with special needs. These 10,600 community housing units provide safe, affordable housing as well to over 32,000 low-income Albertans.

I'm hoping that's answering your question. I know we've gone from homeless to transitional to group homes and now into the community provision of supportive housing.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to ask the minister for some clarification on behalf of some of my constituents in terms of the dental plan. It sounds better. Can you tell me specifically what it's going to mean to my constituent who's concerned about fillings that he needs to get done and has been waiting for, hoping that they might be covered? What is the cut-off level for getting the full coverage? Can you tell me those things?

Mrs. Fritz: I can. I apologize. I don't have the long list of services that are being provided with the dental plan. Those, as I said, did come through the college, but as I had mentioned earlier about that plan – I'll just go back to the numbers that I had. Just let me look here, Mr. Chairman. I want to be sure I have the exact numbers for the record. I know that it's full coverage of \$5,000 for five years for \$20,000 and less for a low-income Albertan, and then between \$20,000 and \$30,000 for a single person it is based on a scale of income. But for a couple it's not going to be that a couple is \$30,000. For a couple each person in that couple would be up to \$30,000, so it would be up to \$60,000 for a couple for coverage.

Mrs. Mather: All right. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to thank, also, the minister for her excellent presentation on her department budget this evening. As chair of the Seniors Advisory Council I have enjoyed working with her and getting to know about the many issues related to seniors.

In spite of some of the media and opposition reports, I have visited many seniors' homes and facilities as the chair of the Seniors Advisory Council. I have visited many of these facilities and found them to be very nice places. The seniors and the people that live there are well looked after and, mostly, are very generally happy to be in the places where they live. My own mother lives in a seniors' home in Red Deer and enjoys it very much.

In her remarks the minister referred this evening to the fact that more seniors were made eligible for the Alberta seniors' benefit because of changes brought in last year. While that is good news, I still hear from some constituents that not enough is being done for those who fall slightly above the threshold. Does the minister have plans to review these thresholds on a regular basis? Maybe I'll just wait for an answer, and then I have another question.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to thank the hon. member. As chair of our Seniors Advisory Council you certainly are doing a lot of work, hon. member, on behalf of our ministry, and it's well appreciated. I know that we had a discussion earlier today about this, and I know that you are thinking of looking at this issue in a more detailed way through the council, but thresholds were changed as recently as last July, and that made 17,000 more seniors eligible for the benefit. It increased the average monthly payment as well to those that are already on the program.

I have to say this again, hon. member – and I know that we're going to have more discussions about this – it really is the most generous benefit program in the country right now. It did add 17,000 more people to the threshold level, and the monthly payments as well are also the highest in the country. I would still be pleased to hear your views back from the council.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The minister also referred to new dental and optical programs, and I believe that these will be a welcome addition for our seniors. Can the minister advise how these programs compare to programs that the province used to offer to the seniors?

Mrs. Fritz: So how the dental program compares to other . . .

Mr. Prins: The way it was before.

Mrs. Fritz: As I mentioned, Mr. Chairman, this program is – well, it's like a renewal of the program because of the extensive list that will be offered in dental services. As well, the income threshold level is higher for the recipients of the program. It is streamlined so that it will be far easier for people to access, being directly through Blue Cross and indirectly through the dental office. As well, the amounts of money are the \$5,000 over a five-year period, and it's very inclusive of our population that will be able to access the program.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to break down two or three areas with a few questions. I think it comes down to some perhaps philosophical differences with the government, maybe not so much with this minister; I'm not sure of that. But we look at the AISH announcement, and of course any money that can flow to the most vulnerable in the society is welcome. I would suggest that in a very rich province with the oil and gas reserves that we have, we still could've done better. I expect maybe the minister tried to do better. I can say to the minister that my office has had a lot of phone calls, and they are not satisfied. They expected more in terms of the increases.

I've recognized that the health benefits and that have been helpful too, but I think that we have to look at this in perspective, Mr. Chairman. The massive cuts came back in the mid-90s. If we look back at 1993 and we take inflation – and it might even be higher with the living allowances now – just the CPI or something like that, up to the time that the minister announced the increases last week, they had lost 23 per cent of their income. Now, these are the most vulnerable people, that have no other means of doing this. It's not that you can take on two jobs or three jobs or whatever to deal with the very serious problem. The minister's announcement, while welcome, by next year when we get up to over \$1,000 that will be a 15 per cent increase. But the point I'm trying to make is that even after that people on AISH are still not as well off as they were in 1993. There are not a lot of people in this society that can say that, and these are the most vulnerable ones. So I think we have to keep it in perspective.

9:10

With all due respect to the minister about the indexation – I do believe that if she had her way I think she might agree to this, but I know she also has to go through a cabinet.

I was interested that at the news conference with MLA Rob Lougheed, who chaired the review committee, he suggested that the reason they didn't index it is they might want to in the future raise it more than indexation. Well, that's a rather ridiculous statement because you could still have the indexation. You can raise it to whatever you want. The government can do that. But it seems to me that that's a key point. There should be some form of indexation for the most vulnerable people there.

I know the minister will say: well, we'll look at it, I think, in two years. Now, I would remind this minister that her intentions may be good, but you have to go through a cabinet, caucus, and all sorts of things. AISH has been reviewed and reviewed and reviewed over the last 10 years, and whether they have a review in two years doesn't necessarily mean money in the pocket for those people. I guess I would say – I know this is what's going to happen at this present time. We know that's not going to change, but I would hope that the minister as an advocate for AISH and seniors will push for indexation and not say that we're not doing it because we want to give more. That just doesn't flow with people. I mean, it's just not an answer that's acceptable.

I guess the only question I have, well, a couple perhaps, from the AISH is: does the minister have some idea of what we're looking at in the future in terms of numbers? I think it's \$80 million overall, but there's probably some of that \$80 million that they're projecting in the next year, with more people going on AISH. Are there some rough figures that the department's working at that we're looking at in the next two- to three-year period? I think the minister said the numbers now are 32,000 – correct me if I'm wrong – on AISH. What are we looking at in the next couple of years?

I think it was alluded to by the Member for Edmonton-Centre that, as we know, the people on social services, those numbers are way down. What is the relationship between AISH and social services, if any? There is some speculation that people have been moving back and forth because of the benefits before.

Could I stop there and just do the AISH, or should I continue?

The Chair: Yes, you may.

I'd just like to remind the member of your referral to another member by his proper name instead of a constituency name.

Mr. Martin: Fair enough. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will make just a couple of comments on the AISH program because I know that you're fairly familiar, hon. member, with the people that are on AISH and that we do have 32,000 clients and that it is between two areas.

Now that we have disabilities under our ministry, there are two areas which people often mistake, but we're trying to have the recognition of what this is. That is that we have persons with development disabilities. There are approximately 8,000 people who've had from a disability from when they were born, a developmental disability, but there are also approximately 24,000 people that received their disability at some time during their life. This program is for people over the age of 18. AISH refers to both disabilities. It's the assured income for the severely handicapped, which people don't often realize is for persons with developmental disabilities as well. Approximately 92 per cent of people are receiving the AISH benefit.

When you take that into the context, which this review committee did, and they had 18,000 submissions from Albertans, when they put

all of that in place and were looking for a holistic program for people, to provide what I said from the Alberta disability strategies report, to provide that personal income support level for these unique needs, when you put it into its complete context, the review committee decided not to request an indexed living allowance, not to request it to be indexed. Rather than that, they put in recommendation 11, which I'll refer you to when you read your AISH review book, which explains why they made that decision.

They were under the impression, even from everything that they had taken in, you know, in regard to the information that was given to them, not just by people that made submissions but by the staff and others, that increasing and indexing a living allowance at this time would not be in the best interests of the development of this program because it may not necessarily meet exactly what people were looking for if it's just continual, continual. They were looking more for what is the true cost of having a disability and being in the community with a disability and what that would mean in the overall context, and they hope that part of the personal income support of that will be reached.

The other five recommendations in that disability strategy report that the Member for Edmonton-Centre had asked for addressed that as well. I don't know if that assists you. I respect what the committee came forward with in regard to that.

The future of the budget. It is \$80 million now for the 32,000 clients. It is \$91 million next April. That's \$171 million. When you include what we were discussing earlier about affordable housing, with four people based on 30 per cent of the living allowance, the cost, when you include that and what's in the budget here, you will see there is approximately \$30 million to address that as well. So over the two-year period that is at least \$200 million in this renewal of this program, but it's just a first step. It's a beginning, and then we'll see how it goes over the next 24 months and what the community identifies as needs.

I go back to this too, hon. member, that this is unprecedented across Canada, this increase and this way that we are viewing the program, to try to determine to have full inclusion of people in the community.

I'd be more than pleased, too, to hear from you over the course of time. I have heard from a number of organizations, like the Alberta Disabilities Forum, who have written that they are pleased with the personal income support, with the health benefits, with the living allowance, and with the housing that is being provided.

We are working with municipalities. I know that Edmonton, for example, is meeting some of the transportation needs through their bus-pass system. We are working with the transportation committee in the city of Calgary as well. So there are many other needs that will need to be addressed. This is just a start with that.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There's nothing to say that we can't set new measures, but indexation can be part of those measures, and again I think we say that if it works here for MLAs, it should work for theirs. But you can set whatever measure and then index it. I don't think one follows the other necessarily. I know the minister is trying to make the best out of the situation.

The figures. I was trying to get a handle on the numbers because when we get into millions of dollars and that, it tells us about the budget. It doesn't tell us, you know, about what sort of numbers we're looking at in the future. It's largely irrelevant to the people here because we're happy to be in a boom economy because of oil and gas. We're wealthier than other provinces, perhaps other states even, because we're fortunate to have that, and that creates other

problems for people and the most vulnerable. To say that we're the most generous doesn't mean much to those people that we talk to out in our constituencies.

Let me just go from the AISH into just some general things. I have the release that the minister's department put out during the budget, and there are some steps in the right direction from where we were with the cuts in the past, no doubt about that. Enhanced dental and optical programs – I will come back to that just briefly – and the program to reimburse the education portion of the property taxes. But flowing from that – we've been asked this, and I'll throw it out – is that that's nice that the people that are fortunate to own their own homes are getting a tax break. We've had other seniors say, "What about us?" That's always the case when we do that. "We happened to sell our house, we're renting, whatever. There's no particular tax break for us." I'm wondering why we didn't take that into consideration, even if it's a marginal one. I know it's budget, but I throw it out as a question to the minister.

9:20

The other area, though, that I do want to talk very briefly about is long-term care. I think part of the problem that we're facing here – contrary to the member, we're getting all sorts of calls lately about problems in long-term care. Obviously, there are going to be some good ones around the province, but there are some serious problems. I know the minister has part of the department and Health the other part of it. I think that's a problem in itself. I think the government should look at putting it in one or the other. Probably the health minister has enough to do, and it probably should be there, but I don't know.

All these people that are going out to care centres – there are a number of elder abuse groups – are saying that there are some real problems, and they're willing to document them in many cases. I think we have a serious problem that we don't seem to have, sort of, standards and enough staffing, perhaps, in some institutions. There's got to be some good ones, but we do have some serious problems. I think for the government to, as the Premier did the other day, huff and puff and say that there are no problems there is just not right.

I think that one of the petitions that the minister is aware of was put in by Lynda Jonson yesterday, a petition with nearly 500 signatures, and she's been all over the province. A very sincere person. I'm sure the minister knows her. I think this makes something that we should be working for. They're saying that even though the staff wants to do the right thing, in many of these places, these long-term care centres, they can't do the proper job. They can't look after this one because they've got too big a client staff. I think it is a serious problem. She's suggesting that we work towards staffing levels of 1 and 5 during the day and 1 and 8 in the evening. Surely we can afford that in this province, because that could be our parents or a lot of other people's parents that are facing this.

The fact that there are so many groups out there, they can't all be wrong. They can't all be wrong. So we think that there are some serious problems there, and it's something that I hope that the minister of health and this particular minister are talking about.

I notice, for example, patients at the Bethany Care Collegesside facility in Red Deer have raised serious concerns regarding staffing levels and quality of care and food that they have received. That's been public, and I know the food is specifically in the minister's department.

So I think that we have to take a better look at this, because we think that there are some serious problems out there around the province, and it's not just us. It's not us manipulating these poor people. They're people coming to us that are saying that this is a

serious problem, and there are a number of different groups. Some of the horror stories and some of the pictures that I've seen are not pleasant. We will pursue it, and I hope the minister will pursue what's going on in that area. I'd be interested in her comments about the staffing levels at least.

The third thing I just want to generally talk about is something that's happening in the housing area, and I know that the minister alluded to that, and I think the Member for Edmonton-Centre asked for a breakdown. If I may speak about Edmonton – I expect it's true in Calgary; the minister would know Calgary better than I do – we have a growing population. There is always a downside to a boom economy. The downside is usually that there's a big migration into the cities, and the migration often is the very poorest people. Especially in northern Alberta this is what's happening.

When I was on the Edmonton public school board, we had the fastest growing aboriginal population or the fastest numbers coming in in the country, and it has implications for the school system. Many of these people are coming from very tough backgrounds, and they're the ones that often end up homeless and the rest of it. So even if we have housing – and I know the minister has talked about the dollars, and they're a significant amount of money – it's a growing problem, and I don't know how we can keep up with it because homelessness is growing in this city. So even what we're doing now, it's not enough.

Part of it has to do with the boom economy. It's all right to have the boom economy, and some people are doing very well, but the Alberta disadvantage is that more and more people are falling in the cracks, at least in this city. That has to do with housing and social services and a lot of other things, but the minister is responsible for housing. I think we have to take a look at that because even the money that's there, the numbers that I've seen are growing in this city even with what we're doing. So we have to relook at it, and I would hope that the minister would do that.

I would just conclude with two or three questions that are not related to either of those matters. It has to do, again, with the release, other new spending highlights on the release that was put out. One is an \$800,000 increase for the office of the Public Guardian to increase the number of staff to provide better services. You know, whenever I see more money and we're going to give better services, I'd like a little more specific idea of what they're going to do to give people better services.

The other one was right under that, the \$400,000 increase to implement changes to the Protection for Persons in Care Act and for investigation services. Are we concerned? I know the minister and the member from – I'm trying to remember. Edmonton-Strathcona: now I've got it; I can remember. They talked about that there wasn't abuse, the whole thing. Is that investigation service, that \$400,000, going to investigating abuse, or what is that all about?

The last thing is just about the money for glasses. We got into it, and the minister says that in studies, about every three years. That may or may not be enough. I don't know. I think in Blue Cross it's every two years for other people.

What I found interesting are the figures. Of course, many older people experience problems with their vision, ranging from difficulty reading or watching television to more serious impediments such as being unable to drive or read. This is interesting: about 3 million Canadian seniors, 82 per cent of the population age 65 or older, reported having a vision problem in 2003. In Alberta it was a little less, 79 per cent. With those figures, I don't know if that has implications on whether it's every two or three years, because obviously that's a significant portion of people. Well, some seniors can afford it, but we're talking about the ones that can't. I don't know if that should be reviewed or not, but it's just food for thought.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Hon. minister, I've had a number of people express a view to speak. Would you want to respond individually, or would you like to respond near the end?

Mrs. Fritz: I'll respond to these questions because there's such a range of them, Mr. Chairman, and not to all at this time, which the hon. member can understand, then, based on other people that would like to.

I'll go back to your AISH question again regarding the budget, et cetera. For the 32,000 clients on AISH the total budget is almost a billion dollars, and that's on that 32,000 client base. You asked for the overall figure. I think it's about \$980 million, when you look in the budget here, and of course that isn't inclusive of all ministries that provide programs in some way for people with disabilities. We have about 10 to 12 ministries that provide programs in some way, but for the area that I have, for the whole area of disabilities, it's about \$980 million.

9:30

The question that you had asked regarding seniors being concerned that on a universal basis they don't receive a tax cut, especially if they don't own a home and they don't qualify for the education portion of the property tax, shielding that's going to be put in place now. We do have other programs, and some may not look at this as a tax cut, but it is a change that puts more money in the pockets of seniors in a universal-type way, which you're familiar with. That would be the premium-free Alberta health care insurance. That was for all seniors, and it made them exempt from paying their health care premiums. It was a savings of \$528 per year for a single senior and \$1,056 for a senior couple.

Also, we have premium-free Blue Cross coverage for seniors. Premiums are paid for all seniors, their spouses, and their eligible dependants, and that's a maximum of \$25,000 in benefits per year and per person.

Then, of course, I mentioned earlier that we have the Aids to Daily Living program that was transferred to this ministry. That, too, is a universal program for seniors. It funds medical equipment and/or supplies that best meet their basic, medically assessed needs; for example, hearing aids, wheelchairs, compression stockings, oxygen, et cetera. I know that not all seniors own their own home and that that education portion of the property tax just refers to those in their own homes, but hopefully they'll see that we are considering all seniors with these others that I had mentioned.

You did ask as well about long-term care. That's a very important issue. It's significant. As you indicated, you know that this ministry is responsible for the accommodation side, which many people refer to as room and board, and the Ministry of Health and Wellness for the staffing side. You'd asked a number of questions about staffing and asked that I comment on those questions. There is an unbundling of the services, as you know, so that we identify what is housing, the housing area that would be for me, the health care, the care services.

It's a complex matter to do that because of the numbers that we have and especially because what's offered in the community is changing as we speak. Over the last three to five years, three or four years really, we changed the interim of housing in long-term care. We've gone from long-term care to designated assisted living to enhanced living, and in there are lodges as well and, of course, seniors in their contained apartments. So it's an issue that does require some careful, thoughtful discussion as to what we now provide in standards.

There are industry standards. The regional health authorities – I just met with the Capital health authority this week – have industry

standards which are excellent for long-term care, and so do the organizations responsible for the housing side, like ASCHA, the Alberta Senior Citizens Housing Association, and so do other organizations, including our department, that have contributed overall toward this, even the organization that may own the facility.

There are industry standards in place. Together the Minister of Health and Wellness and myself and Children's Services, because they're responsible for the Social Care Facilities Licensing Act, are looking at the development of standards overall that would best meet the needs of people.

You mentioned about meals and that that's under my portfolio, and you're absolutely right. That's the social side of care in long-term care, where people, you know, have meals together. We have facilities that I've visited throughout the province, like a couple in Camrose, Wetaskiwin, where they'll offer two choices of meals for their clients. We do need to have, I believe, dietitians in place – that would be a part of standards – who govern the meal plan because there are people who have different needs related to their health care needs, like a renal diet or a diabetic diet or whatever. It's an area where I could contribute to the standards when they are being developed, and we are working overall with that.

I apologize that I can't discuss the staffing because that's not in my ministry.

The office of the Public Guardian. You had asked about that \$800,000 and were wondering: how do you improve services, or are you just putting money into the existing administration? The budget increase was approximately \$792,000, and it is going to increase the client/staff ratio. Currently each guardian representative has approximately 60 clients, but the new funding is going to decrease the ratio to approximately 50 clients per Public Guardian representative. The office through the Dependent Adults Act, which you know we're in the current process of reviewing, provides assistance to individuals who are unable to make personal, nonfinancial decisions for themselves, and the financial decisions are made by Justice's office of the Public Trustee.

But that office doesn't just administer that part of it. It also administers the Personal Directives Act, which is being looked at in context with the Dependent Adults Act. It's legislation that's going to allow Albertans as well to choose a substitute decision-maker and provide specific care instructions in the event that they require assistance sometime in the future. Part of that additional funding is for promoting personal directives across Alberta.

Also, as I indicated, the two acts are going to be reviewed. The office currently provides public guardianship services to approximately 1,800 Albertans, and it assists approximately 8,000 private guardians in their decision-making roles. I hope that that reassures you that it's not going just into administration.

The rest of your questions I'll respond to in writing, if that's okay.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I see the hon. minister has \$25 million in her budget for affordable housing. This is an important area, especially for those working Albertans who are struggling to make ends meet, and it certainly is no different in my constituency of Highwood in the towns of Okotoks and High River. I know the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie has covered this off pretty much, and I appreciated the questions he asked and the answers he got. However, could the minister please explain how decisions are made about funding on affordable housing?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. That's a question that I hear often from the community, and it's actually a very simple procedure. We do accept applications from a variety of organizations that are interested in providing affordable housing. We evaluate those applications, and it's based on the needs expressed by the communities that have put forward the applications throughout the province.

I know that there is a total of \$25 million which was budgeted, as I said earlier, to complete the first phase of the Canada/Alberta affordable housing program. Since 2002 we have committed close to \$53 million in funding to develop almost 2,400 new affordable housing units, and these are in high-need, high-growth communities throughout Alberta. Those are where we receive the applications from. So it is through an application process based on need.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hinman: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I'd like to start off by commending this minister and the great improvements that she's announced with her budget. It's very enjoyable to see the compassion and the care and concern that she shows for those seniors and community services, which she is over. [interjection] She could hear that; be careful.

The thing I'd like to start off with, I guess, is that you've given those people on AISH the ability to earn an extra \$400 before clawback, \$975 for couples, which is commendable. It's also good to see that you're leaving dollars in the seniors' pockets with their health care premiums eliminated, the education tax going down.

I guess the first comment, though, I'd like to make is that to me the goals should be to help seniors to help themselves and to also help families to be able to help their aging parents. One of the problems that I haven't been able to find in here – and I believe B.C. is leading in this – is that too often we don't allow families to help their own aging parents. I'd like you to point out if there is anything that's in there. I feel that's critical, that a lot of families aren't able to support and help their parents because they're penalized by keeping them there, or they have no benefits if they're staying with their grandchildren or their children. I'd like to know if there are such accommodations made to enable families to help yet the seniors who are living with their families still receive the benefits. In the rural areas quite often they have allowed what they call granny apartments into the yards in larger areas, that have to be removed when the parents are gone.

9:40

An area that I'd like to address also, I guess, is that if they're getting an income of \$950 and they earn \$450, they're only getting \$1,300, \$1,400 a month. The question is: why would we want to start clawing back at such a low income? It just seems like a very onerous tax and no incentive for them to go out and really try and become more self-sufficient or enjoy the fruits of their labours to try and get ahead. So I'd very much like to see that increased to give them the chance to get ahead and the desire to improve their lifestyle.

Under Aids to Daily Living another question that I guess goes back to the same one. I've met some very wonderful front-line workers that are there helping these seniors in their homes and facilitating them in overcoming their difficulties in staying in their homes longer. I guess I'm always perplexed at the micromanagement, when we have such fine front-line workers, that they're not allowed to work on a more individual basis with those seniors and to help them in their living at home.

Another area I'd like you to look at. My understanding is that those seniors are not allowed to hire their own family to do work

when often they're the very best and most qualified to do that. Like I say, I believe B.C. is making accommodations for that now, and many of those seniors would prefer that. I think that our front-line workers are very capable of making those assessments on those people that need assistance, and it would be great if they had more autonomy in making those decisions to improve their quality of life.

I guess one or two other areas I'd like to address in Seniors is that we have a huge, thick book for benefits for them to go through, and it just seems like somehow we need to be able to streamline that for seniors that need help rather than having to go through and look at every different category and see: well, I can get glasses, but I need something else. It's a huge job, and it's time consuming for my constituency workers to have to help seniors going through and looking and trying to identify a program that would help them. It would be greatly appreciated by the seniors to streamline and have aid there if, in fact, they needed it and not have to fit into a certain category.

The other thing that I'd very much like to see – and I've talked of this in other areas. It's good to see that the education taxes are being reduced for seniors, but I have to ask the question: in order to help them stay in their homes longer and to facilitate them in that area, if we were to look at property assessment taxes. It seems like the government is perhaps its own worst enemy at causing inflation. If we were to take more of a market value, especially for seniors that have been in their home for 50 years and perhaps only paid \$50,000. Their income hasn't gone up, they live on a set amount each month, yet as their property is reassessed, it's spiralling up. and it causes them a great deal of stress. For the sake of the seniors, if they could have their property assessment at their cost rather than market value, that would be a great assistance to them and allow them to stay in there and have the incentive to stay in their homes longer.

Also, to look at the other concern that I've heard the most from seniors, the cost of electricity and gas, perhaps there could be some area where we could assist them in that that would allow them also to stay in their homes.

Thank you.

The Chair: Hon. members, the background noise is getting rather loud. If you would like to continue your conversations out back, it would be appreciated.

Mrs. Fritz: Mr. Chairman, I will be brief just because there are other questions that hon. members would like to ask.

You had a number of questions that were interesting, excellent questions on behalf of seniors, some that I have heard about even through developers regarding granny flats and suites behind homes, that kind of thing. I know that when I phoned the city of Calgary to look into that for somebody that had called me, that is related strictly to their bylaws. It's not us that govern that through legislation, but I would be very interested in any information that you do have from B.C. in that regard.

In the area of us assisting seniors to stay together, what comes to mind for me when you said that is about seniors in long-term care, that we're working towards having seniors no longer be involuntarily separated and that in this new interim facility provision we provide through the designated assisted living or the assisted living facilities where there's room in that facility for the senior couple to stay together. If they're unable to, like if we hear of a senior that may be in a rural municipality and their spouse is 50 miles away or whatever based on where they had lived their lives, we do provide transportation funding for that spouse to visit their spouse in the long-term care centre.

We have other assisting programs as well, but we do encourage

families, of course, to help out with their loved ones, whether they're in a long-term care centre or whether they visit at home. We do provide home care services, Meals on Wheels through the community. You know, there's lots of assistance for seniors in that way to assist them with staying in the community.

Also, when you indicated that our benefit booklet is far too thick and too much information and difficult for people, we do try to keep it as clear as possible, as easily understood as possible, large writing for people to be able to see what the benefit is quickly, well categorized. I know that we are adding more of the dental, optical, and the education portion of the property tax to that as well.

But our seniors, too, are very familiar with this, that we have a seniors help line that I've been to see in the department. We have a number of workers there. The calls are answered very quickly, within one to two minutes, and we have about 30,000 calls. I think it's about 30,000 calls. I'd have to look at my staff, but I think it's about that per month, so it's well utilized. What seniors ask for is: where can they go in their community in order to have assistance with filling out the forms and whatnot? That's available too, a one-stop area in a lot of the communities throughout the province.

The market value that you had mentioned is with the Minister of Municipal Affairs. It's through the MGA, which I think governs back to the municipality about how they set the mill rate and whatnot.

I hope that assists you. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you. I'll be very brief this evening, minister. I was really happy to hear the minister talk about keeping couples together because that's been a big concern of mine as well. You know, you see these couples that have been married for 70 years, and then I just think it's tragic if they have to separate. So I'm very, very happy to see that the minister is sensitive to those issues and working at trying to keep senior couples together. I think that's a very important component of compassionate care for seniors.

The minister answered my question, but I just want to follow up with the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner. He was asking about when seniors access. They often call my office and want to know what the new programs are – and we had some very good news in this budget – how they can access them. You talked a little bit about assistance for them to fill out forms. But one of the questions I have: are there multiple forms for them to fill out? Is this a very simplistic way for them to access these programs? I mean, they're at a point in their life where they can't handle that kind of great complexity.

Thank you.

Mrs. Fritz: In response to that question, Mr. Chairman, actually it depends on what the senior is applying for. I know that there can be more than one form, and depending on the program that they are applying for, they are required to bring in information with them. They may need assistance for clarification of what that information is related to that particular program. But what's important is that once they have applied, for example, for our seniors benefit program and let's say that they're then applying for assistance, that they had a unique need and are applying for our seniors assistance program, which is \$5,000 per year that they can apply for up to – once they've applied for a seniors benefit program, that's already in the computer, and we don't ask them to reapply, and we will not be asking for that re-application with the dental program.

9:50

Also, back to the seniors information line: I found it, and I think

it's an opportunity, you know, for you to utilize in your constituency office as well, although I know that in constituency offices MLAs help seniors with their forms too, but it's 1-800-642-3853 or 427-7876 in Edmonton.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Backs: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I again would like to compliment the minister on a professional and informed presentation on a department that is probably one of the more difficult in government and one that has been really crying for some improvements for some time.

First off, on some of these things if I could have some written replies, I'd appreciate that. One is on AISH. Of course, the increase is very timely, and many people on AISH that I've talked to are happy to receive it and, certainly, are happy at the increase in the clawback levels. I have a number of people on AISH in my constituency. I have a number that worked on my campaign, and some of them have shown to me how difficult their lives really can be. To live on what was \$850 a month meant they couldn't have a DVD; they couldn't have a computer; they couldn't do a lot of things that people often take for granted in our society as just being normal.

Ms Blakeman: To have a holiday.

Mr. Backs: To have, as the Member for Edmonton-Centre said, a holiday. Simple things. Like, they would take turns on various months on having a bus pass, so sometimes they would walk. It's not like they were bad people; they just were ill. They'd attempt to make a life, and they cannot work. They need that.

I would ask the minister to consider, just like has been mentioned in a number of other programs, that if the surplus is looking up in this year that it be considered that it be increased to the higher level sooner rather than April. I think that that would go a long way to alleviating the lives of these people and to ensuring that we are in fact a caring and civilized society.

Home care has been mentioned by a number of previous speakers, and it is very, very important to ensure that seniors can stay in their homes for as long as possible. I must comment personally that with my own mother she was able to stay at home in a difficult situation, and the people who helped her were very, very professional, very good, sometimes wanted to maybe have a better living themselves and sometimes didn't think that their pay and benefits were adequate and expressed that but in reality were very caring, very professional themselves and very helpful to my mom.

In other areas, the training of group home staff and the actual provision of sufficient levels, there seems to be a real difficulty. There was an incident last week that I mentioned in this area and in the supervision even of the people by the managers of these companies, and it's a great concern in my constituency that this be very, very closely watched. It brings to light the sometimes conflicting objectives within a department and within government of many of the things that are done. The safety and security of seniors and children and the ability of our communities to be comfortable and vibrant cannot be compromised.

Another item as well is, you know, just the question on what sort of costs and what sort of things are really planned in the next year to look at preventing the abuse of seniors. What sort of cross-ministry strategies are really being developed?

Also, the cumulative impact of various costs on seniors. Some were mentioned by the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, the

various utility costs, some of the various rising long-term costs. What is being charged, you know, on various seniors because of their spouse's needs?

Other than that, I think many of my concerns were covered by the previous speakers, and that concludes what I have to say, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the member's questions. The AISH question I will get back to you in writing because I've answered it a number of times here today.

Home care, as you know, is working very well for our seniors, to assist them with staying in their homes. It's an excellent program. So are, as I mentioned earlier, Meals on Wheels, other public kinds of agencies that assist the seniors with staying at home. I know the home care program is with the Minister of Health and Wellness, but the program that I do have that assists seniors is the Aids to Daily Living program, that, you know, supplies people with the assistance that they need and can help them with staying in their homes. I agree with you, hon. member: people should be safe, and they should be treated with dignity and respect, especially people that are vulnerable in our society, whether it's our seniors or people with disabilities.

I know you did ask the question regarding the group homes and regarding standards and the education of people within those homes. I had mentioned to you before with this budget how it's allocated that it does go through to the provincial board for persons with developmental disabilities, but they then allocate it regionally to the six regional boards, and the board that's here in Edmonton, then, contracts to the agency or to the home. They follow standards that they've put in place just as we have the AARC standards, the rehabilitation standards. I think it's the circle of excellence or the centre of excellence, something like that is the name, but I could give you a copy of those, which they do follow, and that includes the training of staff.

The Protection for Persons in Care Act we did discuss earlier regarding the 13 key recommendations that were made. They are being reviewed. They're important. You know, if you look at the act and then you see the needs that the community has identified, I can tell you at this point that I agree with many of those changes, and you will see that over the next few months, that that, hopefully, then, will be here in the fall or the next year for the changes in legislation to incorporate those recommendations.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The changes to the amount AISH clients can work is an important part of the package of changes the minister announced last week. Does the minister know how many AISH clients are actually able to work?

Mrs. Fritz: That's a good question, Mr. Chairman. My recollection is that approximately 14 per cent of our AISH clients are able to work. But I can tell you that we're hoping that the changes that we've offered with the exemption that was referred to earlier – because we've doubled the exemption rate where it used to be \$200 and then the \$300 we had clawed back \$75, we've doubled the exemption rate so that it's now at \$500, and we've changed the actual exemption with the clawback, that it will be 50 per cent instead of the 75. That, I'm hoping, will assist even more people to have incentive to work and increase that 14 per cent.

10:00

The single person who is an AISH client, as you indicated, is going to be able to earn the \$400. That was determined through the community. That scale came directly from many agencies in the community who determined the scale of work and the amount of money that people can have when they do work. It'll give them more incentive, but there's a limit to that, a capping at a place where they still receive their health benefit. They don't lose that if they earned \$500, and so that, too, continues to provide the incentive.

Couples and single parents, Mr. Chairman, who receive AISH benefits, I indicated earlier, will be able to earn \$975, which is \$200 more than they can currently earn, and that's before it affects their living allowance as well, hon. member.

I think the rest, about the thousand dollars, I stated earlier. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: My goodness. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I just want to ask a couple of questions about homeless funding. First of all, can the minister please explain how the homeless funding is used? Is it provided to the municipalities directly? That's it.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think I'd like to add to the previous question regarding the homeless funding from a member earlier as well as this hon. member because we do provide \$3 million in funding, as I said, to the high-need, high-growth communities. We had mentioned the two urban centres of Calgary and Edmonton, but there are seven, and that does include Fort McMurray and Red Deer, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat. What we do is that we continue to work with communities to develop a range of the housing facilities and the support services which were mentioned. Your question was whether or not we give the funding directly to the shelters, and the answer is: yes, we do allocate funding to the agencies that are delivering the services.

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. minister, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(4), which provides for not less than two hours of consideration for a department's proposed estimates, I must now put the following question after considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Seniors and Community Supports for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2006.

Agreed to:

Expense and Equipment/Inventory Purchases \$1,582,528,000

The Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Mr. Renner: Mr. Chairman, I move that the committee now rise and report the vote of Seniors and Community Supports and request leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2006, for the following department.

Seniors and Community Supports: expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$1,582,528,000.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head:

**Government Bills and Orders
Third Reading**

Bill 28

Municipal Government Amendment Act, 2005

[Adjourned debate April 7: Mr. Renner]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak in support of this bill and just to make a few brief comments. You know, the Official Opposition stands in support of this bill. Some of the items that are involved in it, like the community revitalization levy, do hold some potential to really provide some tools to municipalities to try and redevelop areas that need that sort of thing. You know, it's called tax increment financing. It can be used to redevelop Calgary's troubled East Village. I think some of the areas in Edmonton that are being looked at could also use this scheme. It has some great potential.

We may need it in the future because of the closing of schools, as some communities do deteriorate because of that.

Ms Blakeman: It changes the neighbourhood, doesn't it?

Mr. Backs: It changes the neighbourhood. You develop a problematic sort of doughnut hole around certain older areas. When you don't have the driving core, like a school inside of it, you lose the attraction for young families. It's a similar problem that a lot of smaller communities had in the past in losing their grain elevators and their schools in the smaller centres.

The community aggregate payment levy, even at two bits a tonne, you know, may provide some additional funding, and there should be, I believe, some agreement on that part by the municipalities of some benefit to them.

In general, the Official Opposition does support this, and at that point I will just say that we'll support moving this.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would just take a couple of minutes. I've had some discussion with the minister about this. It's always the details that we worry about. I'm speaking only and specifically about the tax increment financing. I think this has the potential to be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on how it's worked out. As the minister is aware – and we talked about it – apparently where this was tried in Chicago it has, I believe and from what I've been told, been a bit of a disaster. It didn't do what it was

supposed to. It didn't increase the number of businesses. It did not create a net increase in the number of jobs. It tended to increase residential property sales. People living there thought they'd lost control. So I think almost universally what I've heard about that is that it actually had the opposite effect; it just forced people out.

10:10

I think that's the major worry. A lot of this is going to happen in the inner city. I know that Calgary is probably further ahead in terms of wanting to do this, but I'm sure that it'll be looked at in Edmonton. There's some concern by inner-city residents that they may lose control of their neighbourhoods and be forced to find other places to live. So gentrification, you know: we do something here and then people that are in that area just keep moving out.

The minister said that he's aware of this, the problems that happened in Chicago, and I take him at his word. I don't know a great deal about it, but my understanding is that Vancouver has had some success in this sort of approach. As I say, the proof will be in the pudding here.

The minister I think said that the opposition could take a look at some of the regulations when they come in so that some of those concerns that we have about, you know, the inner city and things that happened in Chicago will not happen here. I'll take him at his word on that and look forward to seeing those regulations at some time.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, anyone wish to rise on Standing Order 29(2)(a) for a question or comment?

Seeing none, does the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs wish to close debate?

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the opposition for their comments. I think they were all very useful, particularly from the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview. He indicated that I had had some discussion with him, and I intend to keep my word on that. Not that I will share all of the regulations with the hon. member, but he had some specific concerns. I said that I thought we could address them in regulation, and I intend to work with him and take into account his concerns and deal with his specific concern. We will work with him on that particular regulation.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I call the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 28 read a third time]

head:

**Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

Bill 39

Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2005

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Magnus: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to move second reading of Bill 39, the Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2005.

Very briefly in view of the hour, I'd like to make a few comments about it, and I'll do that now. The changes proposed by the Traffic Safety Amendment Act, I believe, reflect this government's commitment to road safety. In conversation with many of the members from both the opposition benches and the government benches, I believe that everyone here has a commitment to road safety. It's my desire and my hope that, frankly, this bill will get a smooth ride through this Legislature.

The main objective of the act is to make the road safer for all users of the road, in particular those people who are emergency responders, who are out there on our highways and byways on a very regular basis protecting us when we most need them, in other words when we've had incidents on the road, when we're going too fast, perhaps, for safe purposes, and to keep them safer. We've had many, many instances where our emergency responders – people like our firefighters, our police officers, our emergency medical people – are out on the road, and we've created situations where some of them have actually been killed on the roadways of Alberta and some of them have been severely injured. I'll talk at length about those later on.

Bill 39 creates new offences for speeding past these workers as well as workers in construction zones and sets speed limits for motorists passing those emergency vehicles. The amended act increases penalties for those people driving without insurance, and it improves road safety by helping government ministries, law enforcement, and the registrar share information more easily while still protecting the public's right to privacy. The amended act enhances the ability of the minister to make regulations that govern the safety of commercial motor carriers. Again, we've had numerous instances recently where this information and this information sharing becomes even more important.

The Traffic Safety Amendment Act came into force in 2003. It consolidated a number of statutes that had not been reviewed in many years, and Bill 39 addresses the various requirements for clarification that have come to light since 2003.

Mr. Speaker, in view of the time and the fact that I would really very much like many, many members of this Legislature to have the opportunity to hear other members debate, I would like to move adjournment of this bill.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to call the committee to order.

**Bill 1
Access to the Future Act**

The Chair: We are currently discussing amendment A2.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. I'm really glad that I was on and able to add a few comments in support of amendment A2. What we have attempted to do here under the guidance of our Advanced Education critic, the Member for Calgary-Currie, is to strengthen the access to the future legislation. There were three areas of particular concern for us that we felt could be made better, and this is the second of the three amendments that are being brought forward to do just that.

The first, of course, was to lift the cap on the \$3 billion because we felt, in fact, that more money should be going in there, that the \$3 billion shouldn't be treated as a ceiling but as a floor. We were trying to get the government to really commit and to fast-track that money. Unfortunately, the government couldn't support that. I hope that's not a reflection of their support for funding overall.

Mr. R. Miller: It could take them eight years at that rate.

Ms Blakeman: Yes. My colleague for Edmonton-Rutherford is noting that it could take them eight years at the rate they're going to actually get that \$3 billion in there, which is a little frightening.

But now we have attempted to convince the government to follow up with our second excellent recommendation.

Mr. R. Miller: Twelve years.

Ms Blakeman: I'm sorry. My colleague for Edmonton-Rutherford is now correcting himself and his math. That would be 12 years to reach the limit.

Concentrating on the amendment at hand, what's being suggested here is that we nail down the membership of the advisory council that is suggested in the legislation. The way the legislation stands, it's very vague about who would be on the advisory council. The way it is now, it just says that it would be established.

The Minister may, with respect to the members of the Council,

- (a) appoint [them] . . .
- (b) prescribe their terms of office, and [of course]
- (c) authorize or provide for . . . remuneration,

and the minister can designate who the chairperson is going to be. Then it goes on to talk about council responsibilities.

We felt that was very loose, and we wanted to make some concrete suggestions about who we felt should be considered for membership on the council, so we went forward. In this amendment what's being suggested is laid out very carefully, our suggestions on who we think should make up a 17-member council, including representatives from various levels of postsecondary, for example, the universities, the colleges, the nonprofit private colleges, academic staff, nonacademic staff, undergrad students, grad student representatives.

10:20

Then we go further and suggest seven members of the general public. What we were considering there were representatives representing parents, representing alumni, representing business organizations and organized labour. That isn't meant to be a hard-and-fast list. That's why we used the wording that we did, which suggests that "not more than 7 members of the general public . . . may be representative of," and then we list those four groups because we wanted, in fact, to be able to make a suggestion but not tie the minister to it.

Now, the minister has already responded to this amendment and has responded by saying that, no, the government finds this too restrictive. They deliberately wanted to leave this sort of loose until they got rolling with this advisory council and decided exactly how they wanted to get it to work. I appreciate that point of view, but I was looking for a bit more clarity from the minister. You know, I'm always interested to see where the government makes the choice to be very specific, in fact micromanage, and the other times when they just sort of take that big step back and go: "Oh, well, no. We're just going to let this flow, one with the universe." It's very interesting where they choose to do that.

I listened to the minister, and I reread his notes in *Hansard*. Not that the minister's words made me suspicious that there's anything nefarious going on here, but I sure am interested that a number of things have been nailed down in more detail, and to leave this wide open: I'm just curious about that. Let me leave it at that. Obviously, we would prefer to see things laid out and followed a bit more closely. A big part of that is accountability for us.

Now, the minister is saying that they can be accountable without that kind of detail. Yes, but the accountability gets less difficult to track. It's much more difficult for a group to say: well, we weren't consulted. That happens often with this government where they get

a good way into something, and then the group they supposedly consulted comes forward and says: "We never heard of that. Nobody ever talked to us about it." The whole thing grinds to a halt, and the government picks up sticks and goes back and actually consults with the group as they were supposed to.

Part of what you get from an idea like we've laid out is that you know exactly who you should be consulting with up front, who's part of that committee, who should be on it, and make sure that, in fact, that's who you're working with. So I'm interested that the minister was refusing to consider that. I had hoped he'd be more open to a higher level of accountability than what he's willing to work with on this particular bill.

This is two strikes, in my opinion. We've experienced difficulty. In our opinion, there's been difficulty in the government's stepping up to the plate on the funding of this in that we had the hesitation from the minister in removing the cap, so it remains a ceiling. Then we get the budget coming out a few days later, and, in fact, only \$250 million is in the budget for this year and no other money for it. We're nowhere close to that \$3 billion that is supposed to be going into this fund and no future commitment on any of the rolling three-year business plans. So we're starting to think: "Well, how long is it going to take to get this money in there? Where is the commitment for this?"

Then we get into this off-budget money, which reminds me a bit of off-track betting. What are we supposed to make of that? We'll all hang out now and hope that the government has pegged the price of oil per barrel low enough that the money is just going to roll in. It's unbudgeted and therefore, I might add, unaccounted for. That does not bode well here, Mr. Chairman. So, again, I'm wondering about the hesitation from the government in actually following through. I mean, Mr. Chairman, this is Bill 1. This is the flagship. This is the *pièce de résistance* from the whole spring sitting, from the whole 2005 term of the Legislature, and we can't get confirmation on the money. We can't get confirmation on who's making up the council. It's all beginning to look a bit like a wish, a hope, and a dream and nothing concrete to it.

I don't know that my words will move the minister to change his mind on this, but maybe at some point in the future he can look back and say: yeah, we should do that, and we should do it quickly. I do think the way the minister has it weakens the bill, and this amendment would have strengthened it. So those are the particular points that I wanted to raise around why we're proposing this amendment and what we'd hoped to see from it.

Because I represent so many students, I was particularly glad to see the inclusion of both an undergraduate student rep and a graduate student rep. I've found over the years that I've gotten some very interesting perspectives and very practical front-line recommendations from the undergrads and the grads that live in my constituency and give me commentary on the postsecondary education system and, indeed, on the proposals from the government for that system. I'm always impressed with how thoughtful their comments are, so I certainly would have included a rep from both the undergraduate and the graduate students programs, and in fact I was glad to see that the Member for Calgary-Currie did include those two sectors in his amendment.

So thanks for the opportunity to speak in support of this amendment, Mr. Chairman, and I urge all members of the Assembly to vote in support of amendment A2. Thank you.

The Chair: Any one else wish to rise on amendment A2? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This amendment deals

with staffing of the authority that will be set up to oversee the access to the future fund. The bill provides for this to be done by ministerial appointment, and I have to agree with my colleague from Edmonton-Centre: it seems very vague. Our proposed amendment does not take away the ultimate authority of the minister but commits him to appoint nominees made by the postsecondary institutions themselves.

This delegation of the power to appoint is similar to our province's appeal to the Prime Minister to appoint Alberta Senators from a list of names nominated on-site, not from co-opting of the federal government's friends and supporters. But there is another reason, more than simply a geographic decentralization of authority.

Education has long been recognized as an expression of our culture and collective values that encompass us all. Educational standards, curriculum, and staffing should therefore rest on a broader base of support than simply that of the party in power. At the local level we recognized this in the past by setting up the school districts and boards separate from municipal district, city, town, and county councils. These boards enjoyed a measure of autonomy under the ministry. Now, while this government has curtailed the powers of school boards, the principle is still valid, and the structures remain in place.

I urge the government to recognize the validity of this principle in the structure it is setting up to oversee investment in postsecondary education by allowing an amendment to pass that provides nonpartisan local and regional input into the appointment process.

I have spoken appreciatively in the past of the hon. William Aberhart, who as both Premier and minister of education laid the basis of the standard of educational excellence that we in Alberta now enjoy. But there's another side of the Aberhart legacy that's less admirable. When the University of Alberta, bowing to pressure from faculty, reneged on an honorary doctorate it planned to award the Premier, Mr. Aberhart broke up and reorganized its governing structure. The U of A's tricameral system of senate, board of governors, and faculty council goes back to that act of political intervention.

10:30

I urge this government to rise above the temptation to make higher education and its administration a political football by including in the appointment process other stakeholders than the government itself. I urge all members to support this amendment. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. On this particular amendment one of the things that we have suggested that we should have done before we get into all this – and I think it did put some focus on it. I mentioned before that I had some thoughts that it was a waste of time, but it was the Learning Commission. It superseded what I thought it would do, at least put a focus in terms of things that should be happening in public education. We've said that we should have had the Learning Commission do the same thing in Advanced Ed to show where we're going. Obviously, they're not going to do that, at least at this time.

If that's the case, then, what we need is this council of people that is supposed to oversee what's happening in terms of advanced education and, hopefully, be giving the government some guidelines of what's important and what's not important, where we should be going. It should not be people that are appointed by the government, because they're going to think the same way as the government. They're not going to question anything the government says, and they're going to be sort of yes-people to the minister. Now, I don't

think that's even good for the minister ultimately because a lot of mistakes are made that way. Maybe some good Conservatives make a few extra dollars, Mr. Chairman, but I'm not sure it's the way to go in terms of setting policy for advanced education.

Looking at the amendment that the hon. member has brought in, it seems to me that this is an attempt, if we're not having a Learning Commission, to at least have some independent people that will give the government advice about where, if you like, advanced education goes. Mr. Chairman, I think it's important that this be as nonpartisan as it can. It should be broad, not just people that are hand-picked by the minister because I don't think that leads to very good policy development down the way. It's the great unwashed talking to the great unwashed.

As I see it, this is an attempt to make this a more independent, a more vital, and a much more meaningful council than it would otherwise be. For those reasons, I certainly would support this amendment to Bill 1. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will be brief, but I did want to get on the record as supporting this amendment because I think it's very, very important that the government be at arm's length from any advisory council; too much government power and too little autonomy for the universities and the colleges, who, in fact, must establish their own culture and their own way of giving education.

I'm wondering, too, about letting the minister control the funding, sending to the institutions. What about private funds, and what about people who might want to give private donations? Going through a government agency is not how I think it should be done.

The chair of this committee that should be the 17 people should actually be chosen from within, voted amongst themselves. I think the most important thing is that the universities and the colleges absolutely have to have autonomy, and by having that autonomy, they also would respect the collective agreements that they have in place at the moment.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm sure that members on both sides of the House are getting eager to vote on this particular amendment, so I, too, shall be brief. I want to thank my colleagues who have spoken in support of this amendment. I think they get it.

I want to note that the hon. Minister of Advanced Education spoke favourably, I guess, to the principle of what we're trying to accomplish with this amendment but suggested that the members of this House should vote against this amendment because he didn't feel that by prescribing who should sit on the advisory council, how it should be comprised, how it should be composed, it was flexible enough. I beg to differ with the minister. I think there is flexibility built in here in a number of different ways.

We've required, requested that up to seven members of the general public but not more than seven members of the general public sit on that advisory council. We've suggested, only suggested, that for the good reasons that I spoke to a week ago, it might be advisable for the minister to choose representatives of parents, alumni, business organizations, or organized labour, suggested that all four of those groups of stakeholders had a place at the table should he desire to offer them one, but I did not require that he choose from each or any or all of those groups.

He spoke at some length last week about using the Justice Policy Advisory Committee from when he was Justice minister as sort of the template for setting this up and suggested that one of the great

things about that was that as they were sitting around the table, they were able to say, "Aha, we need someone who is representative of persons with disabilities sitting at the table, and we need somebody from the education sector," that sort of thing. He suggested, you know, that if this is an endowment fund, you might want to have somebody with endowment experience on here.

Well, I would submit that all of that is possible. That flexibility is there right in subsection (viii), you know, the one that says, "Not more than 7 members of the general public who may be representative of parents, alumni, business organizations or organized labour," or, Mr. Chair, other groups. Plain and simple. There's flexibility in here in that although we have to a degree prescribed who should sit on the council or what organizations, what stakeholder groups they should represent, we've made it very, very clear that those groups would submit nominees and the final decision as to which of the nominees to choose would be the minister's. We said further that the chair of the council should be appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council rather than just the minister himself because that brings a little more transparency and accountability to the process.

I have to acknowledge my colleague the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, who mentioned that she found it interesting that this government at times can be so micromanaging of organizations, yet at other times, which, you know, I took from her remarks meant at other times when it suited the government, the government can be very loosey goosey about all these things: "No, no, don't pin us down here. We want flexibility. Don't tell us how to do our job. We need that flexibility, but we're perfectly prepared to tell you how to do your job, right down to the dotting of the i's and the crossing of the t's." I think, Mr. Chairman, that what's good for the goose is good for the gander. Plain and simple.

When I introduce my next amendment, I'll be following up on that theme. What we need is some accountability. What we need is some autonomy. What we need is some arm's length here. What we need is a broadly based – this is an important concept, this advisory council charged with making good decisions about how the income produced by the access to the future fund should be invested in order to achieve excellence. I know. I know. To start it's only \$11 million worth of excellence, but, hey, it's a drop or two in the bucket anyway.

10:40

So this is important. Getting the composition of this board, this council right is important. Allowing this board to have the independence and the autonomy to make good decisions, objective decisions in favour of long-term excellence in public postsecondary education is vital. That is why, Mr. Chairman, I would urge that everyone in this House vote to support this amendment.

Thank you.

[Motion on amendment A2 lost]

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Oh, well, we'll try again. I have here my third amendment, 90 copies thereof.

The Chair: We'll call that amendment A3.

Mr. Taylor: Are you ready for me to speak to it now? Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We will call this amendment A3, I believe the chair said. This amendment says that we move that Bill 1, the Access to the Future

Act, be amended in section 4 by adding the following after subsection (8). This would be: “(8.1) In the Ministry’s annual report, the Minister shall report on each grant from the Fund, including its objective, total value and the amount allocated to each recipient.”

Mr. Chairman, this is a reporting requirement. If this amendment passes, it won’t be the only reporting requirement in the bill. There is already one. The minister is specifically required by section 2(3) to report on access and affordability. “The Minister shall report on the progress in enhancing access and ensuring the affordability of advanced education in the Ministry’s annual report.” We simply believe on this side of the House that he should be similarly required to report on each grant. Again, we are talking here about accountability. Again, we are talking about, I guess, a quid pro quo of a sort: what’s good for the goose is good for the gander. Again, we are suggesting simply that if this government or this minister or this ministry seeks to require the institutions and organizations under its management to be accountable to it, it in turn should be accountable to this House and to the people of Alberta, many of whom pay a good chunk of the bill for their sons and daughters to be educated in our postsecondary institutions: our colleges, our universities, and our technical institutes.

So that’s what this is about. It specifically requires that the minister report on each grant in that fiscal year, I guess, in the annual report. Accountability requires that each grant from the fund be reported on by the minister in his annual report. This fund has been established for specific purposes. Therefore, it’s important to specify that accountability mechanisms are in place to support those particular purposes. It simply asks the minister to do the following: to tell this House in his annual report about each grant from the fund, who got what, to what end, for what objective, for what purpose, how much that particular grant was worth, the amount allocated to each recipient. Although I would hope that the minister in the course of his annual report would address this, there’s not even a specific requirement here that the minister tell this House whether the grant achieved the goal or not. But we do need to see, the people of Alberta need to see the value of the grant, the purpose of the grant, the recipients of the grant so that they can judge for themselves whether that was a wise use of the money.

The minister has made the point frequently – and I fully support him on this – that one of the purposes of the access to the future fund is to foster excellence in postsecondary education. It also addresses accessibility and affordability, of course, but excellence is the other key component here. Whether it’s \$250 million, which is all that we’re committed to so far – and I’m thinking back to my failed attempt . . .

Ms Blakeman: Noble.

Mr. Taylor: My noble but failed attempt, yes, to remove the ceiling, the cap on the fund. It seems so pointless now in light of the budget because that ceiling is so high that it makes this ceiling look like an eight-footer in this Chamber, Mr. Chairman.

In any event, whether it’s \$250 million or \$3 billion or \$30 billion or whatever this could grow to if the minister would do it right, it needs to be accountable. It needs to be accounted for by the minister because that’s the only way of ensuring that this money, the income that this endowment fund produces, actually goes to fostering excellence and not just fostering convenience, something that happens to be trendy in a particular year, some sort of applied knowledge for which there may be so many other sources of funding, and so on and so forth.

So that is why I have moved this amendment A3. I’m sure that many members of the House would like to debate this before it comes up to a vote. At this point, then, I would like to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Mr. Renner: Mr. Chairman, I move that the committee rise and report progress on Bill 1.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 1. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Acting Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that the Assembly now stand adjourned until 1:30 tomorrow afternoon.

[Motion carried; at 10:49 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

