



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
Third Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Seniors and Housing
Consideration of Main Estimates

Thursday, April 13, 2017
9 a.m.

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Third Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participants

Ministry of Seniors and Housing
Hon. Lori Sigurdson, Minister
Darren Baptista, Senior Financial Officer
Shannon Marchand, Deputy Minister

9 a.m.

Thursday, April 13, 2017

[Ms Goehring in the chair]

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

The Chair: Good morning. I would like to call this meeting to order and welcome everyone. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors and Housing for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2018.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have all MLAs introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce the officials that are joining you today at the table. I'm Nicole Goehring, MLA for Edmonton-Castle Downs and chair of this committee. We'll continue, starting to my right.

Mr. Smith: Hi. I'm Mark Smith, MLA for Drayton Valley-Devon. This is my assistant, Maureen Gough.

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

Mrs. Pitt: Angela Pitt, MLA, Airdrie.

Mr. Clark: Good morning, everyone. Greg Clark, MLA, Calgary-Elbow.

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

Ms Sigurdson: Good morning, everyone. I'm here with my officials. John Thomson is the assistant deputy minister of the housing division, and to my right is Deputy Minister Shannon Marchand. Next to him is Darren Baptista, the senior financial officer.

Ms Miller: Good morning. Barb Miller, MLA, Red Deer-South.

Ms Luff: Robyn Luff, Calgary-East.

Ms McKittrick: Annie McKittrick, Sherwood Park.

Mr. Horne: Good morning. Trevor Horne, Spruce Grove-St. Albert.

Drever: Good morning. Deborah Drever, MLA for Calgary-Bow.

Mr. Shepherd: David Shepherd, MLA, Edmonton-Centre.

Mr. Hinkley: Good morning. Bruce Hinkley, MLA, Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to note the following substitution for the record: Mr. Gotfried for Mr. Rodney.

Please note that the microphones are being operated by *Hansard*, and the committee proceedings are being audio- and video streamed live. Please set all your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. Before we proceed with the consideration of the main estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing, I would like to review briefly the standing orders governing the speaking rotation. As provided for in Standing Order 59.01(6), the rotation is as follows. The minister or the member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf may make opening comments not to exceed 10 minutes. For the hour that

follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of the third party, if any, and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of any other party represented in the Assembly or any independent members and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes private members of the government caucus and the minister may speak. For the time remaining, we'll follow the same rotation just outlined to the extent possible; however, the speaking times are reduced to five minutes as set out in Standing Order 59.02(1)(c). The speaking rotation is set out in the standing orders, and members wishing to participate must be present during their appropriate portion of this meeting.

Members may speak more than once; however, speaking times for the first rotation are limited to 10 minutes at any one time. A minister and a member may combine their time for a total of 20 minutes. For the final rotation, with speaking times of five minutes, once again a minister and a member may combine their speaking time for a maximum total of 10 minutes. Discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not speaking times are combined. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their rotation if they wish to combine their time with the minister's time. If members have any questions regarding the speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send a note or speak directly with either myself or the committee clerk about this process.

A total of three hours have been scheduled to consider the estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having the break? Seeing and hearing no opposition, I will call the break at the midpoint.

Committee members, ministers, and other members who are not committee members may participate. However, only a committee member or an official substitute for a committee member may introduce an amendment during a committee's review of the estimates.

Ministry officials may be present and at the direction of the minister may address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon by the minister, have access to a microphone in the gallery area. Ministry officials are asked to identify themselves for the record prior to responding to a question. We have pages available to make deliveries should any notes or other materials need to pass between staff in the gallery and the table. Members' staff may be present and seated along the committee room wall. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table; however, members have priority for seating at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and we will adjourn. Today we will adjourn at 12 p.m.

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

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

The vote on estimates is deferred until consideration of all ministry estimates has concluded and will occur in Committee of Supply on April 19, 2017.

If there are any amendments, an amendment to an estimate cannot seek to increase the amount of the estimate being considered, change the destination of a grant, or change the destination or purpose of a subsidy. An amendment may be proposed to reduce an estimate, but the amendment cannot propose to reduce the estimate by its full amount. The vote on amendments is deferred until Committee of Supply convenes on April 19, 2017.

Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are being moved. Twenty copies of amendments, including the original, must be provided at the meeting for committee members and staff.

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

Ms Sigurdson: Well, thank you so much, Madam Chair. It's my pleasure to present today the 2017-18 estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. First I must say how much I've enjoyed my first full year as the minister of this important ministry. Together we are making a difference in the lives of seniors and Albertans who require safe, affordable housing.

Let me give you a quick snapshot of who we are. We have an annual operating budget of \$689 million and about 302 staff. My ministry includes the department, the office of the Seniors Advocate, and the Alberta Social Housing Corporation. The department includes three main divisions of seniors: services, housing, and strategic services. Our programs and services are designed to support Alberta's 540,000 seniors and any Albertan, including seniors, in need of affordable housing. The Speech from the Throne talked about Alberta's enduring values of compassion, hard work, and justice. Those values guide this government's commitment to making life better for all Albertans, and they guide all decisions in my ministry.

In Budget 2017 we are exercising restraint while investing in affordable housing, protecting seniors' programs, and being careful stewards of government spending. My ministry's budget is good news as we continue to make life better for Albertans. We are supporting seniors and vulnerable Albertans in need of affordable housing. The government understands that cuts hurt Albertans, and that's why there will be no reductions in our programs. We are choosing to protect the programs and services Albertans count on as well as supporting job creation rather than making reckless cuts that would only hurt families and set our economy back. We continue our commitments to a sustainable, affordable housing system and providing safe homes for low-income Alberta families. Service levels across all programs and services are holding steady, and some will even increase.

Given the ongoing downturn in the economy, this government continues to be careful stewards of government spending. My ministry will absorb a government-wide reduction in budget for supplies and services and pensions.

I will now get into a few of the specifics about my ministry's estimates. No reductions were made to seniors' benefits in Budget 2017, and funding increases in some of the programs ensure that all eligible seniors who apply will be accommodated. My ministry will spend \$400 million to support seniors by providing financial benefits to low-income seniors and grants for community-based initiatives that help seniors maintain their independence and ability to remain in their communities.

I'm proud to say that our special-needs assistance program is unique in Canada. It makes available funding to about 30,000 low-income seniors who may need help with appliances – fridges, washers, dryers – and personal and medical supports such as diabetic supplies, a lift chair, or long-distance medical trips.

Last July we launched the seniors' home adaptation and repair program to help seniors make needed repairs and adaptations to their homes. This helps seniors stay in their homes in the communities they love. I'm happy to report that we have had a terrific response and have received more applications than we had anticipated. Because of this we have added \$3 million to the program's budget this year to handle the increased number of loan requests we're expecting from seniors.

9:10

Our seniors' community grants support community-based stakeholders that work to ensure seniors may live independently with dignity and safety. Looking forward, my ministry will continue to work with our community partners to enhance efforts that prevent and raise awareness of elder abuse.

As I mentioned earlier, my ministry also supports a full-time Seniors Advocate office. With the hiring last September of Dr. Sheree Kwong See, we are now one of only two provinces to have a Seniors Advocate. Seniors and their families from across the province are contacting her office to request information and help resolve issues.

I'm proud that financial assistance to low-income seniors through the Alberta seniors' benefits program has been protected and even increased. The program has two components. In the first component we recognize that for almost 1 in every 3 seniors in Alberta the federal benefits programs are not enough. For these 150,000 low-income seniors our Alberta seniors' benefits program will supplement their monthly income.

In the second component of the Alberta seniors' benefits program we offer a supplementary accommodation benefit for low-income seniors living in long-term care or designated supportive living. Because we expect Alberta Health to increase these fees on July 1, my ministry has topped up this program to ensure that the more than 12,000 seniors receiving this benefit will not bear this extra pinch on their monthly income. This benefit ensures that seniors retain at least \$315 in discretionary income each month after paying the accommodation charges.

I will now explain my ministry's commitments to housing supports for all Albertans, including seniors. I'd like to point out that 1 in 10 households in Alberta is in core housing need. This means that they must pay more than 30 per cent of their household income to afford a suitable home.

To build an effective and affordable housing system in Alberta, we're taking action on three fronts: developing a provincial affordable housing strategy, updating the Alberta Housing Act regulations, and continuing to implement our government's commitment from 2016 to invest \$1.2 billion over five years in affordable housing stock. Over the last year my ministry has been working with many different groups to develop a provincial affordable housing strategy, which we expect to announce later this spring.

The timing is also right to update our housing regulations. This work is long overdue as the five regulations have not been reviewed and updated since they first came into force in 1994.

We are implementing the seniors' housing agreement we signed with the federal government last year. The new agreement replaces 17 cost-shared federal-provincial agreements that had various conditions and expiry dates and now gives Alberta full ownership and control over joint programs. Given the new federal budget on March 22, 2017, we anticipate working closely with the federal government to take our partnership even further.

We continue to implement the housing programs that serve more than 110,000 people in more than 70,000 housing units owned and supported by the Alberta government. About \$106 million of our housing operating budget is directed to the more than 100 housing management bodies that operate government-owned and -supported housing units. Although no increase was provided to our housing providers in Budget 2017, we're working closely with our housing partners to ensure that there are no reductions to the number of households supported.

We are pleased to follow through with our government's 2016 commitment to invest \$1.2 billion over five years in affordable

housing. This commitment not only provides more housing for low-income Albertans, but it will also create approximately 9,600 person-years of employment.

In this year's Budget 2017 our housing capital plan is allocating a four-year, \$937 million investment in building additional housing units and renovating existing ones. This money is critically needed to clear up a maintenance backlog. The demand for the housing units will continue to grow, and we expect our wait-list to swell beyond the current 15,000 households waiting for housing units and programs. Many units should be available for these Albertans but aren't because the units need upgrades and renovations.

We need to recognize that most housing units are at least 30 years old, and in the case of seniors' lodges many are more than 40 years old. That's why we're spending almost \$240 million on preservation and maintenance of existing units over the next four years. Part of this funding is committed to the safety and security of our seniors living in seniors' lodges in every corner of Alberta. We are also installing sprinkler systems in all seniors' lodges and long-term care units and are on track to complete them all within two years.

In addition to renovating housing units, we will press forward with the construction of new housing facilities. We will spend \$698 million over the next four years to construct new housing and regenerate and renovate existing units. We will focus on several shovel-ready projects, new programs for off-reserve housing for Alberta's indigenous people, and new projects to support homeless and specialized populations.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. As I've outlined, the majority of my ministry's budget provides financial or housing support for low-income seniors and other vulnerable Albertans. I look forward to answering your questions and hearing your comments today.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Mr. Smith, would you like the timer to be set at 20-minute intervals so that you're aware of time, or would you prefer to let the hour run without interruption?

Mr. Smith: Let's set it at 20-minute intervals, but I'd also like a notification at the halfway mark, 30 minutes, if we could.

The Chair: Absolutely.

A few reminders. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of the rotation if they wish to combine their time with the minister's time, and discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not speaking time has been combined.

Mr. Smith, are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Smith: If that's amenable to the minister, that would be great.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That's fine.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Smith: Thank you very much, and thank you, Minister, for being here today. I listened to your introduction, and I'm glad that you started off by talking about the 540,000 seniors that we have in this province. I think most of us that are involved in this job realize that that's only going to get larger over the next few years, so this ministry is critical to the development of this province and to taking care of the people of this province. I want to thank you for making

a difference. I believe that we do and that you have one part of this job and I have another. I just wanted to thank you for being willing to meet with us today as we go into this.

Let's start with this. I'm going to start by looking at outcome 2 in the business plan. The questions that I'm going to be asking you here go to page 123 of the business plan and outcome 2, where it states that "Albertans have access to appropriate housing and related supports," but I want to do that by flipping into the Auditor General's report of October 2016 for Seniors and Housing. There were some outstanding recommendations from that report, and what I want to find out is if any of those recommendations are going to be reflected in the 2017-2018 budget.

The Auditor General recommended that the department of seniors "assess the effectiveness of the Seniors Lodge Program" and that they "obtain sufficient information periodically to set the minimum disposable income of seniors used as a basis for seniors lodge rent charges." So they want that to be reviewed, they want you to assess the effectiveness of it, and they want to improve its processes for identifying the increasing care needs of lodge residents. I guess my first question would simply be: has your department addressed and implemented these recommendations over the last year, or are they reflected in this year's budget estimates as we go through the business plan?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Thank you for the question. Of course, it's very important for us to be supporting seniors in the lodge program. It's kind of an extremely unique program in Canada and one that we're very proud of. The Auditor General did issue the two recommendations recently regarding the measures for the lodge program as well as processes for the lodge residents' increasing care needs, and department staff are and will continue to work with stakeholders to improve the seniors' lodge program.

One step taken was to review the minimum disposable income level for setting lodge rents, and this was increased by \$50 to \$315 per month starting July 1, 2014. This recommendation was something that, actually, the Auditor General had given us previously. Of course, that is after everything else is paid for, you know, so it is very much discretionary income. All of their housing, food, many recreational supports in the lodge program, housekeeping: all of that is taken care of. This additional \$50 makes it \$315, and that's on a per-month basis.

9:20

Mr. Smith: That's been built into the budget plan?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That's in the budget plan.

Mr. Smith: That would be line item – is that the Alberta seniors' benefit grant?

Ms Sigurdson: No. The Alberta seniors' benefit is like an income support program. It's under supplemental accommodations benefit.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Good.

Ms Sigurdson: Line 3.3.

Mr. Smith: Thank you.

We take a look at another Auditor General recommendation, the development of "performance measures and ... information systems so that the department can better evaluate and report on its affordable housing grant programs." Has this been accomplished, and will we see the benefits of this in the 2017-18 budget? Have you worked on those performance measures and information systems?

Ms Sigurdson: Sorry. Can you just say it again about the performance measures?

Mr. Smith: Sure. The Auditor General's report addresses affordable housing grants, and it recommends the development of "performance measures and . . . information systems so that the department can better evaluate and report on its affordable housing grant programs." I'm wondering: in your business plan or in this budget how much money have you set aside, and what have you done with that money in order to be able to better evaluate and report on your affordable housing grant programs?

Ms Sigurdson: Right. Okay. Thank you. I appreciate the clarification. The department accepted the recommendations to improve the monitoring process by developing and conducting the risk-based monitoring activities, following procedures and processes when performing monitoring activities. Certainly, in terms of the development and the evaluation of the system we are developing performance measures and adequate information systems to better evaluate the program and complete periodic evaluations of the affordable housing grants program.

Once these recommendations are fully considered, the ministry will schedule a follow-up with the Auditor General regarding that. This is all ongoing work, so this will be coming forward.

Mr. Smith: You anticipate this coming forward this year?

Ms Sigurdson: As I said, we're continuing to do the work on this. There are allocated funds in line item 4.1 to do this evaluation assessment and work with the Auditor General regarding his recommendations.

Mr. Smith: These recommendations: my understanding was that these were past recommendations that had not been fulfilled by previous governments and moving into this government. I'm just wondering: have you got a timeline for the development of that?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we are working with the Auditor General. We have accepted the recommendations, and we're considering the full implementation of them. It's going to be more in the fall of 2017.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Good enough. We understand that there are the plans and then there's the reality, but thank you very much.

Okay. The last one from the AG report was that the Alberta Social Housing Corporation would develop a contracting policy for capital additions. I was wondering if you could explain how you see that working, how you see that developing, and is there any movement moving forward into the 2017-18 budget? Have you set monies aside for this? A contracting policy for capital additions: you know, there's a lot of money that could be covered by this. Have you set aside money in the budgets for this? How are you moving forward on this recommendation?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, the office of the Auditor General did recommend that the Alberta Social Housing Corporation's contracting policy and procedures be updated to align with the overall government of Alberta policy. This work has been implemented and reviewed by the office of the Auditor General. They have confirmed that the recommendation has been implemented by putting in place a new contracting policy in the Alberta Social Housing Corporation along with supporting procurement procedures. This finding will be reflected in the upcoming Auditor General's report. You know, you asked specifically about additional funding, but this is ongoing work of government, so there is not an additional cost.

Mr. Smith: Okay. So you're saying that the new contracting policy and the procurement policy will be seen in the upcoming AG report?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. Smith: Do we have any idea exactly when that's going to happen?

Ms Sigurdson: It is really up to the Auditor General when he decides which ministry to publish regarding this.

Mr. Smith: So in your discussions with him he hasn't indicated when that's going to come forward?

Ms Sigurdson: He hasn't, but certainly, you know, he has seen the work that we've done and has agreed that our work has been implemented based on his recommendation.

Mr. Smith: Are you interested in stealing some of his thunder by letting us know what some of those might be?

Ms Sigurdson: I think I will leave that to the Auditor General, absolutely.

Mr. Smith: I can understand why. Always stay on the good side of the Auditor General.

Okay. I want to take a look at the 2016-2019 business plan for a second, which I'm assuming still holds value in 2017. You're looking at me quizzically there, Mr. Marchand.

Mr. Marchand: Sorry.

Mr. Smith: Okay. There is a thing called the business plan for 2016-2019, I believe. There's a key strategy there, 2.4, which is to support the Department of Labour in implementing the government of Alberta's strategic response to Syrian refugees. I'm wondering, though. In the 2017-2020 business plan there doesn't seem to be a mention of this anywhere. Are all of the Syrian refugees well housed and supported now, or has this just fallen off the horizon? Where are we at with that?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, we're here today, of course, to talk about the business plan for 2017-2020. You know, some of the Syrian refugees have been here for longer than a year, and of course then we know that they are eligible for housing, like other Albertans are. We certainly do have supports for many Syrian families who still qualify for our programs. They are just seen as sort of part of vulnerable Albertans. We don't gather information about ethnicity, that kind of thing, regularly in our requirements for applying for social housing. That's why we don't have a specific line item or information about that.

Mr. Smith: Well, it just seemed to me that this was a key strategy for the 2016-2019 report, and I guess we're just wanting an update. How do you know that they're doing okay? How do we know that they are being taken care of? I know that I've met with several families, probably half a dozen, over the last year and a bit, and I know that it's tough for every immigrant that comes into this new milieu that we call Alberta. You know, if this was a key strategy last year, I'm just wondering: are there continued expenses as we brought in this influx of new Albertans and new Canadians? Is that continuing? How do we know that they're continuing to prosper and to fit in and to acculturate? As a part of that, as a part of Seniors and Housing, we know that if families are not well housed, that becomes a huge issue in every part of their lives. Are we still

working with Labour to find suitable housing for these refugees? Is that still on the horizon for this coming year?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, thank you. I appreciate the question. Certainly, you know, last year it was a specific focus because people were being settled in Alberta, so that's why that was identified. Now that they have been here for a year, they do integrate into our regular housing system for vulnerable Albertans. Minister Gray, our Minister of Labour, would be able to give you more details specifically about that settlement process because that is certainly in her portfolio.

I think that for Syrian refugees who have come and settled in Alberta, we were very gracious and welcomed many. Communities opened their hearts to them and supported them. We have an affordable housing system that has significant investment in it in our province, so they're in a good position to access that. With our capital plan of \$1.2 billion, the maintenance and preservation funding that is supporting affordable housing, supporting housing management bodies across this province, they are being well supported through our system, as other vulnerable Albertans are.

9:30

Mr. Smith: Okay. Thank you.

Similarly, in the same business plan your ministry made a commitment to aligning its policies, programs, and affordable supportive housing initiatives with the principles and the objectives of the UN declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. Is this still a priority in your ministry? How much money was spent or is going to be spent specifically on these initiatives, and where do we find that in this budget?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Absolutely. Certainly, we know that in many of the, you know, metrics that we measure in terms of citizens' well-being, in the indigenous community people aren't doing as well. So it's very much a focus of our government to make sure that indigenous populations receive support to be able to overcome many of the challenges that they face. Housing is a significant one, and that's why in our five-year capital plan we targeted \$120 million specifically for indigenous communities, to support them with housing.

This year, beginning in May – we're calling it a listening tour because, of course, we don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past by going into indigenous communities and telling them what they need to do. We very much want to work in partnership with them, as UNDRIP, of course, does put out in its principles. Therefore, we are working with them throughout this year to understand what they need. This engagement process is very important, but there are dedicated funds specifically for indigenous populations. In the business plan it is strategy 2.4.

Mr. Smith: Where would we turn to to be able to see clearly the policies and the housing initiatives that have been directly informed by the UN declaration?

Ms Sigurdson: In the business plan for 2017-20, you know, page 123, key strategy 2.4 says: "Develop and implement an affordable housing program to provide affordable housing options for off-reserve Indigenous populations in the province." That is the key strategy that we are working on with the indigenous community to make sure that they are supported in their housing needs.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Fair enough.

Let's go to outcome 1 in the 2017-2020 business plan, page 122. It says: "Seniors have access to programs, services and supports that help them live safely and independently in their chosen

communities." There are four strategies that you've developed for outcome 1, but I have some questions about the performance measures and the indicators that you've got for outcome 1. Let's start with performance measure 1(a). That's the one that says, "Fire and safety upgrades: percentage of residents whose accommodations are equipped with sprinklers, in accordance with the provincial building code [and] government-owned and supported seniors lodges." That's performance measure 1(a). I'm wondering how counting fire and safety upgrades relates directly to supporting seniors living independently in their chosen communities. That's your outcome 1. How is it that when you are trying to address issues of safety and fostering independence, you are only measuring compliance with building codes for sprinklers – well, let's start with the first question. How does this performance measure 1 line up with outcome 1?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, making sure that seniors are safe. I mean, the lodge program is, you know, assisted living 1 and 2, and those are considered independent seniors, really. They are. They're living in a lodge facility, but they're living in independent units and with supports. Of course, making sure that those fire and safety protections are in place is crucial. Unfortunately, we all remember that horrific fire in Quebec where they did not have those kinds of measures and there was loss of life. We do not want that to happen in Alberta, so this is a very important program. As I said, many of the lodges are 40 years old. Some are older. Piper Creek in Red Deer was built in 1956. Those kinds of provisions in terms of our building code were not in place, and it's so important that we make sure our seniors are safe.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Thank you.

Let's just move on here for a second to performance indicator 1(a), increase in awareness of elder abuse indicators and available resources for clients. Where in the budget do we see the funds for training for this awareness of elder abuse? How much is being spent on that?

Ms Sigurdson: Line 2.1 in the budget, program planning and delivery, has the training for elder abuse programs.

Mr. Smith: How much is being spent out of that budget? I mean, 2.1 has a budget of \$23 million. How much of that \$23 million are you setting aside for the training with regard to elder abuse?

Ms Sigurdson: We don't have that broken out for you. Specifically, it would include staff time. But, you know, we can get that to you.

Mr. Smith: If you can get that to us, that would be fine. Thank you.

I guess the question is that you're going to spend X amount of that \$23 million, but over the last two years, based on what we've seen here, the results in the business plan, you seem to be going down. Why have the results gone from 94 per cent to 84 per cent in performance indicator 1(a), and then for posttraining, the second bullet there, it goes from 96 to 87 per cent? The question we've got to ask ourselves is – you're spending X amount of money on training, yet the performance indicators appear to be showing us that the results are dropping.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. [A timer sounded]

The Chair: That's just the first 20-minute indicator. Please continue.

Ms Sigurdson: So I can go ahead?

Mr. Smith: Yeah.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That was the same question I asked, so I agree with that query because I thought: hey, does that mean we're going down?

That's not what it means at all. It is about just the extent to which we've been implementing this program across the province. When we first began, there wasn't a lot of awareness or knowledge about that, so our numbers were quite high. Like, you see that in 2013-14 it was 94 per cent. A lot of people didn't really know about elder abuse. It was new for them. So that was sort of a measure of their increased awareness of it.

I think the program has been well received, and many people have been involved in it. We've had a train-the-trainer program also to support people all across Alberta to be able to go back to their home communities to do this program. There isn't, you know, as high a level because people already have an awareness of elder abuse. That really, actually, is an indicator that shows that we've been doing good work because people do know about it.

But I appreciate the logic of what you're saying. It does look like it's going down, but in fact there is somewhat of a saturation. That's why there's not a significant increase.

Mr. Smith: Yeah. I thought that was a question that was worthy of asking. You're saying that we're really the victim of our own success. As we've educated people, people have become more understanding or knowledgeable about what's going on here, and that's why you see the drop.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Obviously, I mean, it's still in the 80s, so people are still learning about it. But it's not as dramatic as it was earlier on.

Mr. Smith: What metrics have you used to come to that conclusion?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, they're identified here: posttraining the percentage of community service providers who reported increased awareness – these are, you know, identified here in the business plan – posttraining the percentage of community service providers who reported increased ability to respond to elder abuse. These are self-reports from people who have completed the training.

Mr. Smith: But my question, really, was this. We can see the figures there, and they would originally lead us to believe that something is going wrong here. What is it outside of this that has drawn the conclusion that: well, everybody is so much better educated now; therefore, we believe that . . .

Ms Sigurdson: I mean, it really is about the magnitude of the number of people who have been involved in our programs and are taking it to the next level. So people have taken sort of the first level and now are taking the train-the-trainer program, so their communities have their own experts within them.

Mr. Smith: Maybe I can rephrase it. What is it in the training program specifically that you would attribute to these results? I mean, I guess maybe it's asking a lot of the minister to know exactly what the training is and what the details of the training are. But I guess it's a question that I would ask you to consider because, at the end of the day, if we're starting to see results going down, spiralling downwards, then maybe it's a result of the training that these people are going through. I would like you to consider that.

9:40

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. I'm happy to consider it, but maybe if I just share a bit of the magnitude, that might also assuage a concern that you have. Since 2012 the ministry has provided more than 100 presentations to seniors and service providers to raise awareness about elder abuse and provide information about elder abuse resources. Between 2012 and 2017 more than 1,200 service providers have attended awareness and prevention training workshops to help them support individuals impacted by elder abuse. More than 200 service providers have taken training-the-trainer sessions to allow them to deliver workshops in their sector or community.

Mr. Smith: Who provides the training?

Ms Sigurdson: Our staff. The ministry staff.

Mr. Smith: So this is done internally.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. Smith: Okay. This is a program that you've developed internally.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. Smith: Okay. What was the cost of that?

Ms Sigurdson: It would be in earlier years, you know, the staff, of course . . .

Mr. Smith: What costs, moving forward, then, in this budget do you anticipate for the training?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. I mean, as I said before, we don't have a specific pullout for that.

Mr. Smith: If you could get that to us, that would be great. Thank you.

I guess the last question I've got on this before we move on is: why are there no targets for this coming year?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, these programs are ongoing. I mean, we've given the communities extensive resources. What is it? A \$3.6 million investment in community grants. You know, they're working in their home communities also with – obviously, this is another ministry – FCSS funding to support communities across the province.

Mr. Smith: I guess in my mind there's a hierarchy, Minister, and the hierarchy is this. If we can't keep our seniors safe, then everything else is off the board, okay? So when you look at the training, is the training broken down by region? For each of the regions how do you allocate – I'd like you to consider. I don't know if you have this detail, but I'd like to know, if it's broken down by region, how many regions? Is that money allocated on a per capita basis? Is it allocated – I don't know how it's allocated. If you've got any comments shortly, and then we'll move on.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Well, certainly, we have stakeholder advisers across the province, so we work with them. You know, they understand their own communities best. We work with them to determine the needs of their community. So we really are informed by people who are serving seniors in their home communities.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Well, it would be nice to have the data, when you bring it to us, broken down by region and then maybe some indication of what the rationale is that you're using for that.

Okay. Let's go on to performance indicator 1(b), seniors' income relative to population. How is knowing something about seniors' income relative to the population, either the Alberta population or the Canadian population, related to the strategies or the measures in this business plan? There's little the ministry can do to impact income for seniors relative to the rest of the country, so why do we need to know this?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, it's a performance indicator, right? It is just something that we can measure to see where Alberta is compared to other provinces. It's a StatsCan measure. You're right. You know, it's not something that we're impacting, but it's good for us to know about where seniors in Alberta sit compared to the rest of the provinces. Performance indicators give a snapshot in time, provide context about the environment in which programs and policies exist. By comparison, performance measures track actual progress towards an outcome. Certainly, under outcome 1 we're tracking a performance indicator related to how people's incomes relate to others' across Canada. That just helps us have a perspective on the environment.

Mr. Smith: Yeah. I understand that it provides you with some more data. I guess just if we were looking at safety and how to keep our elders safe, I'm not sure that that's data that really has a significant impact on that. I guess I would wonder and I would ask you to consider whether that performance indicator couldn't be replaced by something that is going to provide us with a little more information about how our elders are doing in this province as far as their safety. I know that we've had several examples of elders that have gone through horrific abuse, I would call it, and in some cases died. I would probably argue although not being personally involved – there's probably data other than this that would bring more clarity to the picture.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I just wanted to, you know, point you to outcome 1, and it does talk about safety and independence. You know, if people have incomes where they can support themselves, that does create independence. It is a measure of that, so that's fair. I mean, other types of abuse, child abuse prevalence, domestic violence abuse – elder abuse: unfortunately, there's not as much sort of national data regarding that, but we did contribute to a national study regarding prevalence. Those indicators are being developed as we speak. It's true that they're not as clear as – like, we know national standards for child abuse and things like that.

Mr. Smith: You're working on that, you're saying?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes, absolutely. We invested in federal research regarding that. But we do know that about 10 per cent of seniors in Alberta experience some form. It could be financial, it could be physical, it could be social, or it could be sexual. There are different kinds of abuse that seniors do experience in our province. We know it is about 10 per cent.

Mr. Smith: Well, obviously, I think all of us in this room would agree that, you know, if elder abuse isn't addressed, if our elders aren't safe, just about everything else falls off the plate as far as what we need to be focusing on.

Let's start to look at the budget. I'm going to be focusing in on page 228 in the budget. Specifically, I want to start with line 2.2, special-needs assistance grants. I've had conversations with various groups across the province that provide housing, and their

programs, I believe, are funded under 2.2 with the special-needs assistance grants. They are very concerned about their bottom line. We've brought this up, I believe, in QP a couple of times. They believe that they're negatively impacted by at least two government decisions, the increase to the minimum wage and the carbon tax. Have you heard these concerns from various groups, Minister?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, if we're referring to 2.2, which you did identify – just maybe we can clarify and make sure that we're talking about the same thing. Special-needs assistance grants are grants, you know, for seniors to support them to sometimes be able to replace an aging fridge or stove in their own home, so people get support to be able to buy these appliances. They could be health-related appliances, like CPAP for people who may have sleep apnea, that kind of thing, those kinds of machines, diabetic supplies. It also supports seniors who may have to travel to one of the major centres to see a specialist, so it helps defer the costs of accommodation or transportation.

Mr. Smith: Okay. If we're talking about seniors that are in a lodge or if we're talking about seniors that, you know, pay a rent of some sort and the carbon tax or the minimum wage is boosting the costs to that program that they're involved in, which budget line would that be under?

9:50

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, I think you're talking about the operating grants, perhaps, that we do with housing management bodies.

Mr. Smith: Okay. So which budget line would that be?

Ms Sigurdson: My officials will get that, but I can certainly speak about that.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Fair enough.

Ms Sigurdson: We're working with housing management bodies across the province regarding, you know, the supports that they need during this time. We've invested \$57 million this year in maintenance to support them to do upgrades that may help with their energy efficiency. We've also given \$500,000 in grants to support them to do energy audits to ensure that they're doing what makes the most sense in terms of energy upgrades, to support them so their costs of energy go down, so ...

Mr. Smith: So you – I'm sorry; I apologize. Sometimes I do that.

You've said that you've provided money, \$57 million, for energy efficiencies, for energy audits. How much money is set aside in your budget, then, to put in that more efficient furnace? It's one thing to do an audit; it's another thing to actually address the carbon issue and the costs that they're facing. What they're telling us is that there isn't anything built into their budget to actually – it's going to cost them and therefore their clients in order to be able to cover that carbon tax. I'm sure that you've received letters and you've received concerns from various housing management bodies, et cetera, saying, you know: we're going to have to raise our rates to cover this. An energy audit doesn't cover what the concern is. Can you speak to that?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Sure. Specifically, we are investing \$57 million in maintenance to support housing management bodies to do those energy-efficient things plus \$500,000 in grants to do energy audits. Those are two separate sort of pools. Certainly, we work very closely with our housing management bodies to assess the situation. We're going to continue to monitor that with them.

There are so many factors in terms of what the costs could be. It depends on the facility itself, you know, how new a facility is, how much it already has energy-efficient items like energy-efficient furnaces or how old it is. Like, some of these facilities are quite old. We continue to work closely with them. I mean, we're wanting to make sure that people are well housed in Alberta. We don't want individuals to be bearing the burden of this, so we're working very closely with housing management bodies, and we will monitor and assess as time goes on.

Mr. Smith: I guess, you know, the carbon tax was only one side of that.

I'm going to move on, but I would like you to consider that the actions of your government also in the area of minimum wage have put these housing management bodies and programs at risk. If you've stepped in, as I understand you have, and said, "No, you cannot place an additional cost onto the clients to cover that," then there's a disconnect here. You've increased their costs, but you have not allowed them to increase their bottom line. That's a significant problem for them.

But let's move on. Lines 2.1 through 2.4 – actually, I'm just going to skip down to line 2.3, to the SHARP program. You mentioned it, and you talked a little bit about it in your introduction. On the seniors' home adaptation and repair program on the website we read that you need to have a 25 per cent equity in your home to qualify for the SHARP loan and that anyone that qualifies for a SHARP loan cannot qualify for the SHARP grant. Does that mean that, you know, essentially what you're trying to do is steer seniors into a loan and only as a last resort or as a last alternative offer the grant for home repair?

Ms Sigurdson: There is an income threshold, yeah. There are eligibility requirements; that's what it is. If you qualify for the loan, then, yes, you don't qualify for the grant. But if you are a vulnerable senior on a low income and you don't have 25 per cent equity in your home, then you have access to the grant program, so it doesn't exclude seniors who are more vulnerable.

Mr. Smith: Okay. The SHARP grant: what does it actually cover? The brochure that we have in my office, for instance, simply says: some basic and essential home repairs. Could you give us an indication of what the length and breadth of those repairs would be?

Ms Sigurdson: It is more limited than the loan program. I mean, it can be up to \$40,000 in the loan program, and those are for households that, you know, make up to \$75,000 in income. It does really support a much broader array of things. It includes essential repairs like bathroom repairs – certainly, seniors may need a walk-in bathtub, that kind of thing – carpet replacement, chimney, cistern, electrical repairs, faucets and taps, furnace.

Mr. Smith: Will it cover a roof?

Ms Sigurdson: Will it cover a roof, a house roof? Yes, it will.

Mr. Smith: Okay. So it's similar to the previous program as far as the loan goes.

I guess, one of the things that I would bring to your attention is that for many seniors that come into my office, they get very confused and are really quite frustrated because in order to be able to pursue the grant, they have to pursue the SHARP, and they have to go through the paperwork for the loan. They keep telling me: "I don't want a loan. I don't want a loan. I don't want a loan." We say, "Yeah, but you have to do that, to go through this first, to get the

grant." In some cases they just walk out frustrated. So you may want to consider how better to organize this.

Secondly, there was some confusion because when they get the brochure, all they see is a very short, one-sentence line about the grant. It gets lost in there, and they're not even aware many times that they actually have that option.

I think that some of your literature and the website and maybe the way we address this needs to be refocused because I don't think it's really all that effective, and it's very confusing for the seniors that have walked into my office.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I appreciate the feedback. Thank you. I'll take that back, certainly, to my ministry.

I think the intent is just, actually, to facilitate and support the senior to make it more simple, and I hear that it's not, what they've experienced, in your understanding. But it really is kind of like a one-stop shop. They're not sure where they fit. Do they qualify? Don't they qualify? Is it this? Is it that? So if we can kind of assess with them through that one form. But, you know, I hear what you're saying.

Mr. Smith: Okay. In budget line 2.3, under operating expenses, you've allocated \$2 million to the SHARP program, and then in budget line 2.3, under loans and advances, on the same page, you've budgeted \$10 million for the SHARP loan.

Ms Sigurdson: Right. Okay. The grant: you're wanting to understand that?

Mr. Smith: Is the \$2 million just for the administration of the SHARP?

Ms Sigurdson: No. The \$2 million is for the grant.

Mr. Smith: It's for the grant. Okay.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. Smith: The \$10 million or so is for the loans?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That's right.

Mr. Smith: Okay. I was looking at this, and I was going: well, if that's for administration, that's 20 per cent. I'm going: whoa, that seems, like, a little steep for administering a program. But I'm glad we've got that figured out.

Now, here's a question, I guess, I've got. You're paying compound interest on the money that you will use to fund the SHARP program. Is that correct?

Ms Sigurdson: I think I'll let my officials answer that.

Mr. Baptista: Treasury Board and Finance handles the borrowing. The funding to fund this program comes from general revenue.

Mr. Smith: Okay. So technically we could make the argument that with a \$10 billion deficit at least a portion, if not all, of that is borrowed money that's being paid for at compound interest. Some or all of that is probably being paid back at compound interest for Albertans. Is that correct?

The Chair: Can you please introduce yourself prior to responding?

Ms Sigurdson: Darren Baptista. He's the senior financial officer.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Smith: Am I correct in that assumption?

Mr. Baptista: How Treasury Board and Finance funds us? They provide us the funding through general revenue, and they do the financing for the government as well.

10:00

Mr. Smith: Okay. Well, I don't think it's a big leap for Albertans to realize that with a debt of \$10 billion plus and a debt that's going to be \$70 billion by the time the next election comes around, much of the money for this budget, for this program, is borrowed money, and that will be paid back on a compound interest. My understanding is that the SHARP loans are being paid out as simple interest by the seniors. Is that correct?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That's correct.

Mr. Smith: Yeah. Is there a concern on your part that when these loans come due, the larger Alberta population will have to pick up the difference between the simple interest and the compound interest?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, I think the seniors' home adaptation repair program is to support seniors to be able to remain in their own homes and their own communities. The simple interest that we're offering them, the at-prime rate, means they don't have monthly payments. They only have to repay that loan when they sell the home.

Mr. Smith: Yeah. We're aware of that.

Ms Sigurdson: I mean, this is a program to support seniors to remain in their own communities, and that's definitely the focus.

Mr. Smith: Have we got an idea of the cost that that's going to be at the end of it? We obviously have to run this program. There are going to be costs in running the SHARP program. Not only is it going to be in the difference between the compound interest and the simple interest, but it's also going to be in the administration of this. Essentially, what it sounds to me like is that with this program the government is turning itself into a loan operation, a bank. What are the costs of the SHARP program, and where do we see that in this budget?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, the administration of it is through our ministry. You know, we administer many programs, a significant Alberta seniors' benefit, an income support program. We have the capacity within our programs to do this, so there isn't an additional cost.

Mr. Smith: You are adding and you have added staff to your department this year. We'll get to that a little later, hopefully. When you add a program to government, you add people to that government to administer it, and you add costs to the taxpayers, or the citizens of this province. I guess what I'm asking is: what is the total cost to administer this program? What have you built into your budget for it?

Ms Sigurdson: Again, it's in line item 2.1, you know, as one of the programs that we deliver.

Mr. Smith: Maybe you don't have it right now. That's fine. But could you give me the cost of this program at some point in time?

Ms Sigurdson: Sure.

Mr. Smith: Thank you.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. We can do that.

I also just want to identify that the special-needs assistance program, which is similar – you know, I know I've already spoken about it – helps with the costs of appliances, health care costs, that kind of thing. People would apply, sometimes, for these kinds of renovations through that program. We really did have the capacity in that program and have moved it over to the SHARP program. So that is all within the regular administration of our ...

Mr. Smith: Maybe let's broaden this out a little bit. It would be nice to be able to get the figures for not only the SHARP program but for the programs you were just talking about there and be able to see where the costs for administering those programs lie. If you could do that for us, please, that would be great. I'd be grateful.

Okay. Let's move on to line 2.4, seniors' community grants. What is the range of grants? Could you just give me in 30 seconds to a minute what the range of grants is that is covered by seniors' community grants, line 2.4?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly. These are some of the elder abuse grants – we've talked about elder abuse already – and sort of dementia-friendly communities. Okotoks and Calgary, for example, have grants regarding that. There are the age-friendly communities and our Grey Matters Conference, which is an annual conference for service providers for seniors, that we support each year. It brings forward best practices and supports people to serve seniors in their communities. Certainly, those are some of the grants. Co-ordinated community response models to address and prevent elder abuse at local levels: there's funding for those.

Mr. Smith: Okay. The total amount you've got there, line 2.4, is almost close to \$2 million.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Smith: By cost, what would be the top three grants that you bring out in this?

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I would say that, certainly, the funding to support services for SAGE here in Edmonton and the Kerby Centre in Calgary, support for housing and information resources would be the top ones. Funding to support the Grey Matters Conference is also another significant cost, also the dementia-friendly communities.

Mr. Smith: Okay. All of those, I'm sure, are really positive things. Maybe just pick one of them and tell me some of the positive things that come out of those grants. I want to let you brag a little bit because I think we do a lot of good work with seniors.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I can talk about the Brenda Strafford Foundation. We have funding supports in the development of two dementia-friendly communities, demonstration projects in Calgary and Okotoks. Project deliverables include the design and development of tool kits and resources that will share best practices with other communities. These are sort of two lead communities that support, you know, folks to be able to understand the needs of people with dementia and how best to serve them in their communities.

Mr. Smith: Well, as somebody that is pretty convinced that he's going to need those facilities at some point in time in his life, I'm glad you're investing in them.

Now, I guess one of the questions that I've got is this, then. When I take a look at that budget line, I see that there's about a 31 per cent

drop in it or a 30 per cent drop, somewhere in that range. Is there a reason why you've chosen to do that?

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you. That's an important question because there is no reduction, even though it's obvious there is one. So it's a good question. The budget has decreased by \$806,000 to reflect a transfer from our ministry to Community and Social Services for elder abuse shelter funding. Minister Sabir has many shelter programs, you know: domestic violence, youth shelters, addictions. We have actually amalgamated them all with efficiencies, so that was transferred to his ministry. The money is still there; it's just not in my ministry.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Now, that clears things up. That's why we do this process, isn't it?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Very good.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Let's take a look at lines 3.1 and 3.2, the Alberta seniors' benefit. When you go to the Alberta seniors' benefit page to apply, you've got to – well, let me back up here. Line 3.1 is program delivery. That's the administration costs for this, I'm going to assume.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That's correct.

Mr. Smith: Line 3.2. How many seniors are currently receiving the seniors' benefit?

Ms Sigurdson: It's about 150,000.

Mr. Smith: About 150,000 of the 540,000 seniors in the province?

Ms Sigurdson: It's 150,000, yeah.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Great. When they go to the seniors' benefit page to apply, they have to complete a seniors' financial assistance application. What is the difference between the seniors' financial assistance and the seniors' benefit? Maybe just clear it up for me if you could.

Ms Sigurdson: The distinction between the Alberta seniors' benefit and the special-needs assistance? What are you asking?

Mr. Smith: No. Is the seniors' financial assistance application form just the form that they have to fill out, or is that a separate program?

Ms Sigurdson: It's just the form.

Mr. Smith: It's just the form. Okay. And that is just to help them register to be able to get the seniors' benefit. Okay. Good.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah, because it's dependent on what they receive from the federal government. Then, of course, we top that up for the low-income seniors.

Mr. Smith: So that just ties the two programs together? Okay.

One program that you have under the Alberta seniors' benefit, I understand, is the taking action against elder abuse co-ordinated community response grant program. Is that correct?

10:10

Ms Sigurdson: Well, that was in the previous program. Yeah. It's 2.4, seniors' community grants. That's within there.

Mr. Smith: Oh, that's within the 2.4. Okay. How much funding does that specifically receive this year in your budget?

Ms Sigurdson: Which one are you asking about now?

Mr. Smith: The taking action against elder abuse co-ordinated community response grant program.

Ms Sigurdson: This is a three-year program which was launched in 2014, and it was \$3.6 million in grants to support 30 communities and regions to develop or enhance community response models for elder abuse. That money has been allocated.

Mr. Smith: Okay. That actually doesn't fall under the Alberta seniors' benefit program, then?

Ms Sigurdson: No. The Alberta seniors' benefit is just an income-support program.

Mr. Smith: Okay. The Alberta seniors' benefit program is really just to top up, you know, to address low-income seniors as they're looking for lodging?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. It's an income support program, financial assistance. It's, you know, \$280 maximum monthly for an individual and \$420 for a couple.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Good enough.

Let's take a look at the budget line 2.5, the Seniors Advocate.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay.

Mr. Smith: The Seniors Advocate 2015-2016 annual report on page 27 says that the primary reason that seniors contacted the Seniors Advocate was to get help with navigating the seniors' system; in other words, as they're trying to navigate through your department and the programs and all the other things that are there. It said that that there were 474 information requests and navigation issues, and if I'm reading the table correctly, roughly 70 per cent of the calls were for helping people navigate the complex service system and financial programs across a variety of categories. Is there some way that your ministry can simplify all of the information about the programs and services that are made available? Because if that's primarily continuing forward from 2015-16 – have you continued to see that issue there with the Seniors Advocate? Is that what we're going to see them continually doing, working on these kinds of issues?

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you. That's an important question. Certainly, we want to make it as easily accessible as possible. We do have several different programs for seniors that support them. Currently, as of September of 2016, we do have a stand-alone Seniors Advocate office. Before it was amalgamated with the Health Advocate. That's a significant step forward for us. Dr. Sheree Kwong See was the successful candidate and certainly is working diligently to support seniors in our community.

I know that some of the feedback that you've gotten from constituents is that they're a bit confused by the application for the SHARP loan program, but that whole idea about a one-stop shop is something that we have implemented. For example, when people turn 65, they do receive a package of information in the mail that helps them see what they need. When they apply, our staff go through the programs that are available to them to make sure that they have, you know, the maximum benefit, of course.

We are working very closely, and Dr. Sheree Kwong See certainly is. I meet with her on a quarterly basis, and she has already served over 600 clients in terms of supporting them to address whatever concerns they have. A lot of it is information sharing. That added resource that we have implemented this year is helping

seniors and their families and caregivers to be able to navigate the system.

Mr. Smith: I'm very happy to see that we have a Seniors Advocate, and I would really pass that on to you. Kudos for doing that. I guess, as you said before, there was one that covered Health and Seniors, if I understood correctly. Are they still – I mean, often the issues that they seem to have do revolve around health. Are you tracking or encouraging the two advocates to work across ministries so that when these two issues in seniors' lives come together, it's an easy transition? They don't need another layer of bureaucracy, but they need to have that communication that allows them to easily deal with those kinds of issues. Could you explain, maybe, just how they work together?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That's a very important point, of course, that many seniors do need health supports, so some of their concerns are regarding health. That's why it's very important for the Health Advocate and the Seniors Advocate to work closely together, and they do. They have a very close working relationship. I also just want to identify that Alberta is one of only two provinces that does have a seniors advocate. That is a significant support to the seniors community.

Mr. Smith: It absolutely is.

Ms Sigurdson: It's like having two, you know? It's an additional.

Mr. Smith: It's been a very positive move.

Ms Sigurdson: The advocates work very closely together to make sure that the senior who calls the Seniors Advocate's office concerned about health doesn't have to also then go call Health. You know, the caseworkers work together, as do the advocates themselves, to make sure that they can get the answers they need regardless of who they contact.

Mr. Smith: Yeah. I think that one of the things that maybe leads you a little bit here – because I think this is actually a very positive thing. I understand that the Seniors Advocate and the Health Advocate have launched a new website to better connect people and programs and services together. I guess I would ask: are you tracking the effectiveness of the website in meeting the needs of seniors, and is it making a difference to accessing timely and appropriate supports?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. We're continuing to monitor that and make sure that we are. You know, you can't make improvements if you don't know what you're doing, so of course monitoring it throughout is important. [A timer sounded]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Smith: Say it isn't so.

The Chair: It's so. Sorry.

At this point I would like to invite Mr. Gottfried from the third-party opposition and the minister to speak for the next 20 minutes. Mr. Gottfried, are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Gottfried: Yes, please.

The Chair: Go ahead, please.

Mr. Gottfried: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you to the minister and to your staff for joining us today and answering our difficult

questions, as the case may be. Minister, we know that we're facing some challenges in the years ahead. I was looking at some information about demographic projections, which project that we'll have a million seniors in Alberta by 2036 – that's just 19 years from now – almost doubling our number of seniors or in excess of doubling our number of seniors. I'm going to assume that that means that we need to also ramp up and possibly even double the facilities or at least expand the options and opportunities for seniors to live independently and to live a dignified and respectful life.

Minister, I just want to start out with some current initiatives and investments you're making. I'm going to start out with some references to the CapitalCare Norwood complex on page 46 of the fiscal plan. Minister, the government has committed \$364 million to renovating and expanding the CapitalCare Norwood long-term care centre. My understanding is that this money is used to tear down one wing, renovate another wing, and add 145 new beds to the complex. Are those numbers correct? Is that the general plan of tearing down, renovating, and then adding some new beds to that facility?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, Mr. Gottfried, it's Health who's doing that, so I would encourage you to talk to Minister Hoffman.

Mr. Gottfried: That's not related to any of the investment that you're doing in those facilities?

Ms Sigurdson: No.

Mr. Gottfried: All right. To move forward, then, in terms of the fiscal plan, the continuing care facility, with \$131 million: is that under Health as well? That's not related to your investments at all. That's fine.

I wanted to move forward, then, to some of the funding that has been done in the past. We started out with the ASLI program a number of years ago. There were 2,612 spaces that were being invested in and a \$180 million investment to achieve those 2,600. We've seen that now reduced to about 2,000. That investment was at the rate of about \$70,000 per door. Can you give me a little bit of an insight as to the costs of some of the new facilities and new beds per door at a per-door cost that you're undertaking in terms of current and new investments?

10:20

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly. Our five year capital plan, the \$1.2 billion that we've invested: it's about 4,900 units that we will have through that program. Some of it is, certainly, regeneration. As I've said previously, much of our stock is very aged. When we do have additional stock, then we are – when we do regenerate, oftentimes we can increase density. Of that, regenerated units are about 1,973, and the net new units are 2,920, and we estimate that it's about \$190,000 per door.

Mr. Gottfried: It's \$190,000 per door. Okay.

Could you tell me, with respect to some of the past investments through the ASLI program, what the per-door cost was in terms of achieving similar numbers of units in partnership with the private or the nonprofit or faith-based sector?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, similar to the earlier questions ASLI is with Health, so that is a question for Minister Hoffman.

Mr. Gottfried: Okay. So that's not something that you're going to be touching here, the ASLI program. That's on the capital side, of course.

Minister, we've heard from a number of stakeholders that are very happy to see increased funding for community and home care,

but they're not sure exactly how the money is going to be allocated. Can you outline how this money will be utilized? Be as specific as you possibly can in terms of how those dollars will be spent for enhancing community and home-care initiatives.

Ms Sigurdson: Again, that is the Ministry of Health.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. These are some fairly large issues in terms of home care.

On the home-care issue can you maybe explain to me how your ministry is working through the home-care opportunities with your fellow ministry in terms of providing those services to seniors?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, we work very closely with Health, but, I mean, it is Minister Hoffman who's allocating that funding. You know, sometimes we have facilities that have sort of from designated living 1, 2, which is the lodge program, which is what I'm responsible for. Hers is 3, 4 dementia care, further down the continuum, so we work together. It helps people to age in communities in the same facilities. It helps couples not have to have divorce by seniors' facility. If someone in the couple is independent, they can be in the lodge program whereas if someone is in dementia care and they need that kind of more secure facility, it can be connected. These are ongoing discussions that we do with Health on a regular basis. Certainly, lodges do arrange with their local home-care providers regarding having home care come into the lodge. That happens across the province.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. Minister, last year in budget estimates you said that you would partner with the private sector. However, later in that same session one of your colleagues asked you about your preferences for wholly public facilities, and you stated, "The priority for capital funding will direct investment in capital-owned and -supported housing units rather than capital grants to others." You went on to say, "We are moving away from private or community ownership and back towards the province financing and owning housing assets." These seem to be a bit contradictory in terms of your response. Can you tell me your general perspective in terms of public planning, owning, building, and operations versus partnering with the private and nonprofit, even faith-based sectors?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, it is in alignment with our direction. We're moving from private ownership towards a provincial ownership model. As we develop new housing and transition existing housing assets towards this direction, there are some instances where government ownership may not be feasible. Many of these projects that we've announced are in the design and the construction phases. But, you know, when we came into government, we certainly reviewed our public portfolio. There was tremendous need. There are very aged facilities. Units are closed because they weren't maintained properly. Of course, it's very important for our government to make sure that those units can be accessible to people who need them, who are on low income.

Certainly, we have a very ambitious capital plan, \$1.2 billion. The private sector is supporting through, you know, constructing in the plan, design stage, but our focus is working with the very high demands in the public system.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Minister.

We've heard that some of your partnerships with the private, nonprofit, and faith-based sector have only required about \$70,000 per door to leverage some of the investments to achieve additional net housing assets for seniors. We've heard up to \$180,000 a door in some other ones. In your Proposed Future Directions for Alberta's Affordable Housing System there are a couple of things

here. "Evidence-based: Housing investment and program decisions are based on the best available evidence." Also, "Fiscally responsible: The housing system maintains fiscal responsibility and accountability in order to meet the current and emerging housing needs of Albertans."

I'm going to, you know, go down this path again. Is it not your plan to follow fiscally responsible and evidence-based things by leveraging the public investments of Alberta taxpayers' dollars to achieve the best possible outcome in terms of meeting that almost doubling of the seniors' housing needs over the next 19 years? Obviously, you're focusing on the next two or three years in terms of your business plan, but how are you going to meet those needs with limited tax dollars without going further into debt?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, our government's direction is to make sure that we have an equity share in that asset that we are investing millions of dollars in. We know that previous programs – and, you know, this is in Health. In the ASLI program there was a 20-year commitment of those funds, and then that goes back to the private market. That's too short a period of time. We need to make sure that that asset that we've invested millions of dollars in is available for Albertans for the long term. That's why we're making this long-term investment, to make sure that Albertans will have access to affordable housing.

Mr. Gotfried: A contractual obligation to provide that housing to Albertans based on income and other criteria is not adequate, then, for you in terms of investing those dollars to the best leverage and best benefit of Albertans in the medium to long term.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, at this time we have a significant need in the public delivery of our affordable housing system, our housing management bodies. It is tough fiscal times, and we are devoting our \$1.2 billion capital plan to supporting those. We are working with faith-based organizations. There's Bethany in central Alberta, which provides many affordable housing units, and we are working with the nonprofit sector. You know, Deer Lane in Banff is a unique program. Fresh Start is another nonprofit that supports men with addiction issues. There is a myriad: the nonprofit sector, municipalities, and housing management bodies.

Mr. Gotfried: You mentioned that it's tough times and the leveraging of that investment is so important, so I'm a little interested there. And you did reference ASLI, so I'm a little concerned there. That's not in your ministry; that's actually in the Health ministry, as you pointed out earlier.

Minister, there are obviously some opportunities. On April 4 during question period you responded to a question from my colleague Mr. McIver. You mentioned that you were listening to the housing management bodies, and you increased their operating budgets by 2 per cent. However, my understanding is that you increased their operating budgets last year by 2 per cent and that this year there was a zero per cent increase to the housing management bodies. Is that correct?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That's correct. It was, you know, in the last fiscal year 2 per cent.

Mr. Gotfried: Why is there no increase this year when obviously you've said that there's such a focus on the housing management bodies and on providing better care and services and housing for seniors?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we didn't increase the operating, but we are investing \$57 million in maintenance and repairs, and that can be

used for energy upgrades, plus \$500,000 in grants for energy audits, so we're doing other initiatives this year. You know, I just will say again that we're working very closely with them to assess and monitor the situation, and they're important partners for us.

Mr. Gotfried: Minister, have you done an assessment? I'm thankful that you're investing \$57 million to help these organizations with achieving greater savings in terms of their energy use. Do you have any figures in terms of the increased costs across these housing management bodies in terms of the impact of the carbon tax?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, there are so many variables regarding that. It depends on the weather, it depends on the type of facility, and it depends on the age of the facility, sometimes location. I mean, there are many things. Certainly, we are working with housing and management bodies. You know, as the year goes on, we will get information from them, but certainly we are monitoring. These energy audits will give us, again, some very specific information about what the needs are to reduce those energy costs, which of course is our goal. We are continuing to monitor the situation.

10:30

Mr. Gotfried: So you're not sure how much the \$57 million is actually going to help them to save costs and what the payback time will be on that \$57 million investment?

Ms Sigurdson: We will, certainly, through the energy audits, I think, have a better understanding of that, and those are ongoing.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. We'll look forward to those statistics as well.

With all the new funding for housing – and, obviously, we're thankful that there is an investment. We see that there's need to come. How is the ministry determining the priority of new builds and new opportunities that are being brought forth to you in terms of really finding out where the need is and where the demand is and how you're going to direct funds towards supply in those areas of most critical need?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Well, certainly, at the outset we are working directly with our housing management bodies. Each year they do submit their business plans with their top priorities. This is what we see as the need, and of course they know best what their needs are in their communities. We do look at the age and the condition of existing facilities, sort of what's the current need. I mean, that's one of the reasons that Deer Lane in Banff was chosen. They've had zero per cent vacancy for a long time. People working in the service industry have, you know, a difficult time being able to pay rents in that community, so that was why that one was prioritized. Really looking at the organizational capacity of some of these housing management bodies matters, just sort of the stage they are in, sort of the preconstruction. Like, how much planning have they done? How shovel ready are they? Those are some of the indicators.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Minister. Are you contemplating any RFPs so that you can perhaps do a greater call for proposals, including some of the criteria that you just mentioned in terms of being shovel ready?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. We are, you know, looking ahead. We're still sort of assessing what we're going to do, but we do have some allocated funds that we are looking at a process for.

Mr. Gotfried: So no specific RFP planned at this point in time?

Ms Sigurdson: We're still assessing that.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. Thank you.

Minister, how's the ministry ensuring adequate funding for ongoing maintenance and upkeep of the existing stock? You mentioned, obviously, that there's some backlog in some of the maintenance and you're trying to maintain older facilities or at least bring them up to minimum standards. Obviously, the sprinkler system issue is within that. How are you ensuring that you have that funding, and do you feel you have adequate funding to meet those needs over the coming budget year?

Ms Sigurdson: In our sort of four-year total we have allocated \$239 million for that. We are also working with our federal partners during that to ensure – of course, we've just, you know, heard a commitment from the federal government in the recent budget regarding that. We have global numbers, and we're still working with them to find out what the specifics are, but we're hopeful that there'll be reasonable allocation for Alberta. So \$70 million has been estimated this year, and then it's over the next four years, up to 2020-21, that we have \$239 million allocated, which is a significant investment, to make sure that the facilities are upgraded and supported.

Mr. Gotfried: Do you feel that's going to meet the need, then, to bring those standards up? I know that you're closely monitoring the quality and the standards and the percentages that meet a minimum standard. Is that going to bring the lower quality of the stock up to reasonable standards?

Ms Sigurdson: We're working to have 1 per cent of the portfolio value in maintenance and repairs. We have a \$7 billion portfolio, so we're working to \$70 million annually.

Mr. Gotfried: Great. Thank you, Minister.

In some other jurisdictions there are teams within the housing providers that provide support to tenants, and I know that some of that may cross over into Health as well, but how are you working with your department and other departments to ensure that the ministry is supporting the nonhousing needs of tenants in social and affordable housing?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. You're referring, really, I think, to some vulnerable Albertans who need those wraparound services, someone who might be experiencing addiction issues and mental health issues, those kinds of things. Certainly, Minister Sabir in Community and Social Services provides the funding for those kinds of wraparound services, so we work closely with him to support facilities that would be – we know that just housing people isn't enough, you know, and actually sometimes that makes the problem worse because then they end up homeless again, and of course that's a difficult situation.

We have also been talking with, you know, certainly, stakeholders across the province. In our provincial affordable housing strategy that's coming out later in the spring, we have feedback from them, and I think you'll see some good information about that then.

Mr. Gotfried: Good. I'm glad you're working with the other organizations as well as with your other ministries.

We know that there's lots of good work going on in the nonprofit sector as well. How are you engaging with the nonprofit sector? You mentioned Fresh Start. Obviously, there are some great facilities there. How are you working with the nonprofit sector to provide some of those wraparound services as well?

Ms Sigurdson: You know, because Minister Sabir has the money for those wraparound services, they're sort of his direct stakeholders, but I have met with Homeward Trust and other stakeholders like the Calgary Homeless Foundation. Certainly, I meet with stakeholders regularly regarding the concerns they have and what – like, I'm sort of the one who has the capital dollars for the new builds and that kind of thing whereas he has the wraparound services, but of course they work together. I'm making sure that I'm hearing their concerns and then working closely with Minister Sabir.

Certainly, housing management bodies, too, you know, have connections with nonprofits in their communities, and they work well with them and have the support. It's not sort of a discrete line between homeless supports and then all of a sudden you're affordable and living independently but in a lower cost rental. It's not discrete.

Mr. Gotfried: You're right. There's a continuum there.

Ms Sigurdson: There is crossover.

Mr. Gotfried: Yes. Thank you, Minister.

Minister, you referenced some investment in energy efficiency opportunities. Your business plan does not mention the words "carbon levy" or "carbon tax" at all. Do you think this additional cost is not an issue in the Seniors and Housing community? It's not referenced. You've talked about some investments there, but are you not hearing from your housing management bodies and other providers?

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt. However, the time allotted for this portion has expired.

At this point I'd like to call a five-minute break. We will be setting the timer, and we'll reconvene when the timer goes off. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 10:37 a.m. to 10:43 a.m.]

[Mr. Smith in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Okay. I'd like to welcome everybody back. If we could call this to order.

Okay. We are now at the point where I believe we have the independent or other for the time slot here. I believe that's going to be Mr. Clark.

Mr. Clark: Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: You have 20 minutes.

Mr. Clark: I'd like to go back and forth with the minister if I may.

The Deputy Chair: Okay.

Mr. Clark: I don't know if I'm going to take my fully allotted time, but thank you, Minister. I appreciate very much your being here and also, of course, your staff and your team being here as well.

I'd like to start on the capital plan. I'll let you turn to page 45 of the capital plan while I talk, and I'll just give you a chance to get there. What I'm interested in is that on the top half of that page we have sustainable housing renewal, urban and rural. I'm just curious if you can provide us some clarity on what that line item includes.

Ms Sigurdson: That is certainly about our existing housing management portfolio. We have over 100 housing management bodies across the province and, you know, in pretty much every corner. That's funding for them.

Mr. Clark: Okay. I'm just curious why the amount budgeted for sustainable housing renewal, urban and rural, dropped substantially from \$196 million this year to \$155 million next year, \$103 million the year after that, and only \$19 million projected in 2021.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, it does reflect the project profile. You know, the allocation was more substantial early on, but if it's sort of the out-years of the project, then it sometimes goes down because the project has been built. So that's just the profile of the project.

Mr. Clark: Does this relate to one or more specific projects? I presume it does, obviously.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes, to several.

Mr. Clark: Can you either share with us now or table in the House a list of what those specific projects are?

Ms Sigurdson: For this fiscal year we have, you know, the Clover Bar Lodge replacement in Sherwood Park, Hillcrest Lodge in Barrhead, Linsford Gardens – the Leduc Foundation is doing that – London Road Gateway in Lethbridge, and Londonderry here in Edmonton. Capital Region Housing is doing a regeneration project there. These are this year's that I've just identified.

Mr. Clark: Okay.

Ms Sigurdson: Would you like me to . . .

Mr. Clark: Yeah, if you don't mind. You don't need to necessarily list them all off. If there's a list that could be tabled in the House, I'd very much appreciate that. That would solve that.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. We have it right here. We can do that.

[Ms Goehring in the chair]

Mr. Clark: Wonderful. Thank you very much.

I'm curious: is there a difference between maintenance work and the sustainable housing renewal? Do you make a distinction between those two things, and if so, can you tell us what that is and what the criteria are for both of those?

Ms Sigurdson: Renewals are significant maintenance, more than \$5,000. It is something that is a major renovation.

My deputy minister will add some more detail regarding that.

Mr. Marchand: Sustainable housing renewal, rural and urban: that really is for the replacement of a building, or you're doing a renovation that is of the magnitude that you're replacing the building, whereas the capital maintenance and renewal line is maintenance that meets the capital threshold – so it's a project in excess of \$5,000 – and an example would be putting a new roof on a building, new siding, replacing all the windows. You're not fundamentally regenerating the entire building, but it's a major maintenance project.

Mr. Clark: Good. That's very helpful. Thank you very much.

I'm curious how organizations apply for these funds. How are these funds allocated? Is there an RFP process? How do organizations that would seek these sorts of projects, either maintenance or renewal, access those funds?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, these are funds directed to our housing management bodies, the hundred or so that we have across the province. Each year they submit their business plans, and in their business plans they let us know what their top priorities are. The

funds were allocated based on, you know, the need in their community, the age of the facilities that they have, how much preconstruction planning they've done, and the organizational capacity. It is money allocated to our housing management bodies.

Mr. Clark: Thank you.

I just have to say, Madam Minister, that this is obviously a very important area of investment and something that, clearly, I'm very supportive of. I look at the numbers and the way these numbers flow with perhaps a bit of a jaundiced eye. I just wonder about the \$19 million that is projected in 2021. That is a long way off. It's 10 per cent of what we're spending this year. Is that truly an accurate reflection of what one would anticipate we would spend in 2021, or is that more a reflection simply of what applications you have before you currently? If it's the latter, is the \$19 million, in fact, a truly accurate reflection of what we can expect to actually see spent in the years 2020 and 2021?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, just to sort of unpack this a little bit, because I appreciate your question, planning dollars were allocated last year. The planning for these new projects is under way, and then the projects themselves will go into future budgets. Those numbers will change, right? They may increase, of course. We have allocated further dollars, because not all of the \$1.2 billion capital plan has been allocated.

Mr. Clark: Okay. So we can expect that number to go up, then?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

10:50

Mr. Clark: Okay. I might come back to that, but I'll move on and try to get some of the other questions.

I'm just curious how you decide: what are the criteria for organizations to access dollars to create new housing supply? Is there a basket of funds here under New Housing Supply – Community and Specialized Housing, I presume, or under New Housing Supply – Off-reserve? What are the criteria for accessing those dollars? How and when will that capital flow?

Ms Sigurdson: You've asked a lot of things in that question . . .

Mr. Clark: Yes, I have.

Ms Sigurdson: . . . so I'm going to start with one of them. I'm going to start with, certainly, working with our indigenous partners regarding off-reserve housing supply, new housing supply. We are planning a listening tour, beginning in May, because we can't just directly tell indigenous communities what to do. That's not the way we want to operate. We want to make sure that we can understand their needs as a community. We do have in our five-year capital plan \$120 million allocated to indigenous, off-reserve housing. That is still under way, and we are working with the indigenous population to allocate that funding. This year it is very much about that listening tour, and then in the further years of the capital plan there would be investment directly in that.

Mr. Clark: How about for the community and specialized housing beyond off-reserve housing?

Ms Sigurdson: In the new affordable housing supply we are, you know, still assessing exactly how to go forward. We have been receiving feedback, certainly, through our consultation process with the provincial affordable housing strategy and heard from industry stakeholders and other interested stakeholders regarding what their needs are. We are still assessing and determining what that program

will look like. Again, I can just go back to the business plans of the housing management bodies. When they need new capacity, when they need more support in their communities for affordable housing, they just submit those through the business plans.

Mr. Clark: Okay. You say that you're assessing. I'm curious when. Is there a timeline as to when that assessment will be completed?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we are looking at probably later. I'd say in the fall.

Mr. Clark: Okay. The fall of 2017?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. Clark: Okay. I'm going to move now to page 228 of the main estimates binder, line 4.1, program planning and delivery. I'm just curious: where does that money go? Is that all internal ministry dollars, or is that money that is available to agencies?

Ms Sigurdson: No. That is internal ministry planning and delivery.

Mr. Clark: Okay. Are there planning dollars available for housing providers, and if so, where can I find that in the budget?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes, there are planning dollars. This year \$2 million is allocated for planning for housing. On page 45 of the capital plan, in that top area, if you go to Planning (Seniors and Housing), \$2 million across the board there.

Mr. Clark: Yes. Right. What is the criteria, then, for allocating those dollars?

Ms Sigurdson: The needs in the community, age of the facilities, the capacity of the organization, you know, how much preconstruction planning has been done, how ready they are to have shovels in the ground.

Mr. Clark: Okay. Thank you very much.

I want to talk about just a couple of more items here, one being the impact of the carbon tax on housing providers. In particular, I think of one of the remarkable housing providers in my own constituency, being Horizon Housing. They have forecast that the carbon tax will cost them 28 per cent more per year in gas costs. I'm going off the top of my head here, and I could be mistaken, but I think that's in the neighbourhood of \$60,000 a year on them. Now, their model is that they can't increase rent whereas I think a private-sector landlord perhaps could be expected to increase rents. Their model is that the people will pay one-third of their income in rent regardless of what that income is, therefore the very model of subsidized housing. That's been a tremendously successful model, as I'm sure you know, from the 1970s onward in Calgary. There are many other providers like this throughout the province who are really struggling with the carbon tax itself.

I'm just curious. Again, I think you know my perspective on climate change, my perspective on the carbon tax itself. I am broadly supportive of a carbon tax in general terms, not thrilled with the way this government has implemented it. I think there's merit to it if it's done properly. This is one of those unintended consequences, at least I hope unintended, that I would hope your ministry would help organizations like Horizon Housing and many others to deal with. Can you speak to what you are doing, if there are any plans, to offset these sorts of costs?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, Horizon Housing is not a housing management body, so the folks who live in their facilities will

directly receive the carbon levy rebate, right? The individuals who live in the household will be receiving that, and of course that will support them with the costs.

We're certainly supporting nonprofits and the business sector through Energy Efficiency Alberta, which is a program that offers incentives to encourage organizations such as private facilities for seniors to choose higher energy efficiency products. Certainly, Horizon would be able to apply for this kind of funding to support them to cut their own energy costs so that they're not burdened by this.

Mr. Clark: I appreciate that, and I know they appreciate those things as well, but the cost of energy efficiency isn't zero, right? These would be grant programs where they would need to perhaps install a new furnace, install windows. Those are costs. Now, over time that may reduce their energy consumption, a very good thing, but it certainly doesn't take it to zero, and it doesn't offset fully. Again, I recognize that this isn't a hundred per cent only in your ministry, but as you sit around the cabinet table, these are things I can't imagine you intended to happen as a government when the carbon tax came in, but they're having real impacts. So I'd really encourage you to look at ways of either directly offsetting it or of exempting certain organizations from the carbon levy in the first place. I just can't imagine this is what was intended.

Ms Sigurdson: I appreciate your point. Certainly, we are working closely with the housing providers and are monitoring the situation.

Mr. Clark: Okay. Hopefully, we can get some action in addition to the monitoring.

Just one last question here, and then I'll wrap up. I'm just interested in, you know, grants, loans, subsidized spaces in lodges for seniors, and I'm thinking specifically of seniors' programs here. Are some or all of those programs income tested or asset tested, or is the entitlement just simply an age category? Can you just speak to that in general terms?

Ms Sigurdson: They're income tested. Certainly, we do have income thresholds that people must be under in order to qualify for those programs.

Mr. Clark: Income tested but not asset tested? What I'm thinking of here: my interest is very much in helping people who genuinely need help. As we age, we no longer work. I think of my own parents, not wealthy by any stretch but also not desperately poor either. They worked hard. They saved a bit of money. We help them a little bit. They're doing okay. They don't probably look like the sorts of people who necessarily need a lot of help, but they're eligible for certain things where I kind of wonder: gosh, are you really the sorts of people we need to be helping?

What I'm interested in is helping people who really need help. There are people out there who would be sitting on substantial assets, financial assets, or perhaps they own some real estate but can no longer be in their own home. I'm just curious if those folks are eligible for subsidized accommodations, other programs. Perhaps they're not the people we necessarily need to be helping.

Ms Sigurdson: As I said, our programs are income tested, and we do encourage people, of course, to have assets, right? Seniors do have assets.

Mr. Clark: That's good. They should.

Ms Sigurdson: They have their own home and things like that. You know, they may have that big asset, but they don't have that

monthly flow of cash to be able to take care of themselves, so it's important for us to look at their income and provide the support. We know that, you know, an asset-tested program has very high administrative costs. It's very difficult to administer. So we are focusing and have for some time on just the income aspect.

11:00

Mr. Clark: I imagine, sure, that asset testing would potentially cost some money, but in the aggregate that may be what's necessary. I guess what I'm really curious about is that as you look forward as a ministry, as our population ages, is this one of the things you're looking at and saying, "You know what? Maybe we need to start thinking about some of these different criteria for who really is eligible" just to make sure that for people who really need help, we're helping them, and we ought to. There are going to be some folks who perhaps don't need as much help, but we're finding that as a society we are spending substantial money helping those folks.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, this has come across my desk, you know, a few times since I've been minister, but it is pretty few and far between, those seniors who really have huge assets and therefore it feels that maybe they're not necessarily the ones that we should be supporting. But it is a fair comment, and certainly it's something that we hear occasionally. I would just say that it's not that common that that's a significant issue.

Mr. Clark: Do you have any data that you could share on that? Is that anything that you've looked at? I'd just be very curious to see what that information is.

Ms Sigurdson: I'm being told by my officials that we don't have really very much data on that at this point, but I can let my deputy minister unpack that a little bit more for you.

Mr. Marchand: A couple of things I would maybe just add. We don't have a lot of data because we currently don't do asset testing. We don't collect asset data. But what we do know in the lodge system is that over 80 per cent of our lodge residents are on the Alberta seniors' benefit. For a single person to be in receipt of the Alberta seniors' benefit, the income threshold is \$26,900, so, you know, there's a high proportion of low-income seniors who are living in lodges.

The other thing I'd perhaps just offer is that, you know, other jurisdictions have at various times – and we've explored this, or we've looked to their experience – introduced asset testing. Generally speaking, what we've observed is that when other jurisdictions introduce asset testing, they then remove asset testing. It doesn't tend to stick although it may be that the imperatives of demographic change may change that calculation going forward.

Mr. Clark: Okay. Thank you. I appreciate that.

Those are all the questions I have, so I'll turn it over to whoever is next. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clark.

At this point for the next 20 minutes I would like to invite Ms McKittrick from government caucus and the minister to speak. Ms McKittrick, are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Ms McKittrick: Yes, please.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms McKittrick: First of all, Minister, I really wanted to thank you for the leadership that the province is showing around affordable

housing. I know that in my own constituency it's really making a huge difference, and I'm sure it's making differences throughout Alberta. I also have really appreciated some of the focus around rural Alberta and off-reserve First Nations. I just wanted to start off by thanking you for that.

Also, I just wanted to make a comment that when we were talking about statistics, I'm reminded that for a number of years in Canada, because of the federal Conservative government's removal from Statistics Canada of the mandatory census, we don't have really good statistics, and I know that it's probably impeding the work of your ministry and ministries throughout Canada. I'm so glad that the census has gone back now to being mandatory and we're going to have really good data as we continue to work to make life better for all Albertans.

I wanted to talk a little bit about outcome 2 of the ministry business plan, which details a commitment to advance the actions of the provincial affordable housing strategy. Specifically, key strategy 2.3 states a commitment to "continue to invest in the regeneration and renewal of existing supply and the building of new supply of affordable housing options through collaboration with other levels of government and housing providers." I'm so delighted that the federal government has decided to invest in affordable housing and the work that you and your ministry staff have done in affordable housing. The question is: given the need to increase supply, can the minister speak to the progress you have made in developing a provincial housing strategy? I understand it's not public yet, but I was just wondering what kind of progress has been made.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Thank you. I appreciate the question. Certainly, we know that an affordable housing system needs to be improved so it will be there for Albertans who need safe, affordable homes now and in the future. Our provincial affordable housing strategy is going to guide that development to make sure we're effective and have a sustainable affordable housing system.

Throughout this last year my ministry has been engaging with housing stakeholders and service providers to help develop the strategy and update the Alberta Housing Act regulations. To better understand Alberta's need for affordable housing, we engaged with 1,800 individuals through the summer and fall of 2016. They provided input through an online survey, engagement sessions in seven communities, and a questionnaire on amending the Alberta Housing Act regulations. We've also had discussions with many different groups, including seniors, housing providers, and municipalities as well as other community stakeholders. I expect to announce the strategy later this spring, and we will continue to engage Albertans as we begin rolling out the strategy after that.

Ms McKittrick: Thank you, Minister. I know that many in my own riding are interested in affordable housing and have participated in the consultations. The feedback has been very positive. Thank you for that.

I wanted to talk a little bit more about the federal housing strategy. Through the business plan it is noted that your ministry focuses on collaboration and partnership with other levels of government to move towards a sustainable, affordable, and environmentally responsible housing system. Given that the new federal government promised more funding for affordable housing, I was wondering how that was reflected in the 2017 budget.

Ms Sigurdson: The federal Budget 2017 was announced on March 22, and it describes plans to develop a new national housing strategy and an affordable housing commitment of \$11.2 billion nationally over 11 years. The new federal commitment is not reflected in our

current capital plan, 2017, as strategy details have not yet been defined. We look forward to working with our provincial and federal partners on the development of that new strategy.

My ministry budget does, however, include commitments from previously announced federal funding over four years, 2017-21. The federal contribution amounts to \$111 million in capital support for new construction or major renovation of social housing and seniors' housing, \$109 million; shelters for victims of family violence, \$2 million. Certainly, we value our partnership with the federal government as their increased support and investment is making a positive difference to the lives of many Albertans. We will continue to work with them to sort of unpack what those global dollars mean for the province of Alberta.

Ms McKittrick: It probably will mean further great news for Albertans in need of affordable housing. Thank you.

I wanted to talk a little bit about the lodge renewal program. I wanted to thank you for the benefits in my own community of this program with the announcement of the Clover Bar Lodge. I also know that seniors' lodges are a cornerstone of many rural Alberta communities, and I definitely saw that when I worked in the county of Newell and the importance of the rural lodges. It allows the rural seniors to stay in their community if they want to, that they've lived in and they have ties to and have made friends in. I was wondering what kind of investment the budget makes to ensure that seniors' lodges in rural areas are there for generations to come.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. That's an important question. Certainly, the government owns or supports 14,224 seniors' apartment units and 10,239 lodge units throughout the province. My ministry has made the renovations of seniors' lodges a top priority. On average residents in lodges are older and have more mobility issues than seniors in self-contained apartments. Nearly 70 per cent of the senior lodge units are located in rural communities, where the response to fire and other emergencies may be inadequate, and the majority of the lodges were built before 1990, when fire sprinklers became mandatory under the Alberta building codes. We're making fire sprinkler and safety upgrades in the lodges to help seniors remain safe and secure, and we expect these upgrades will be completed within the next two years.

11:10

Ms McKittrick: Thank you. I know, having talked to many councillors at AAMD and C and some of the other rural municipalities, that the work that's around maintaining the rural lodges is really, really important.

We've talked about this a little bit, but I think it's really important to discuss it further. I understand that the province has a \$1 billion deficit in infrastructure maintenance for housing, maintenance that has not happened or buildings that have not been improved over the years. You've talked a little bit around the fact that a lot of the buildings are 30 years and older, and they were built in a different time with different codes and so on. We also face pressures to build more new homes for vulnerable Albertans. Minister, I was just wondering if there is enough set aside in Budget 2017 to address the backlog of both deferred maintenance and the new housing and the pressure of having to do both.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Unfortunately, we did come into this with that billion dollars in maintenance needing to be done. I'm pleased that we are continuing with our commitment of the \$1.2 billion over five years in our capital plan for affordable and social housing. This includes the preservation and maintenance of existing units and the construction of new community and specialized housing. This is a significant increase over what's been allocated in the past many

years. This work is vital because we already have many units in the province that should be available for all Albertans but aren't because they need upgrades and renovations.

We are making this investment for a couple of reasons. One, we need to maintain and preserve our valuable housing assets so they are available to Albertans for many more years. Second and most importantly, we need more available units for Albertans to call home. This government is committed to bringing more units on stream. That means more Albertans in a home and off wait-lists.

Ms McKittrick: Thank you. I wanted to go back and talk to you a little bit about elder abuse. We kind of touched on it earlier, but we all know that this is really an important area. There have been a lot of issues raised in the media and so on about elder abuse. As noted on page 122 of the ministry's business plan, elder abuse awareness is a key strategy to support outcome 1. Outcome 1 is that seniors have access to programs, services, and supports that help them live safely and independently in their chosen communities. I definitely agree that supporting an increased awareness of elder abuse is important. Especially, local community models that address and prevent elder abuse are essential to helping seniors live safely and independently. I'm really pleased that in my own community FCSS has a huge elder abuse program. I've really seen the benefits of the program. Minister, what is your ministry doing to advance elder abuse awareness and prevention in Alberta? How does Budget 2017 support these efforts?

Ms Sigurdson: As you've said, it's a very important issue in our province, and we're committed to working with all Albertans to protect the safety and personal security of seniors in our communities. Since 2012 the ministry has provided more than 100 presentations to seniors and service providers to raise awareness about elder abuse and provide information about elder abuse resources. Between 2012 and 2017 more than 1,200 service providers have attended awareness and prevention training workshops to help them support individuals affected by elder abuse at the local level, and more than 200 service providers have also taken train-the-trainer sessions to allow them to deliver workshops in their sector or community all across Alberta. Since 2014-15 the ministry has provided grants to 26 communities or regions of Alberta to support efforts to develop or enhance the co-ordinated community response models that co-ordinate supports and services and increase the capacity to respond to elder abuse in communities throughout Alberta.

Ms McKittrick: Thank you. I am so glad that this program exists because I've had constituents who come to my office and have benefited from the elder abuse prevention program. On behalf of them I really wanted to thank you for that.

I'm so glad that we have a new Seniors Advocate. That's another thing that I've heard a lot in my constituency office. On page 121 of the ministry's business plan it is noted that the ministry "develops and delivers programs and services that assist seniors and promote safety and well-being for Alberta's aging population." Within this context can you explain what services the Seniors Advocate and her staff provide to Albertans given the office's \$940,000 budget?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Thank you for the question. Certainly, our government is committed to supporting seniors. We're one of only two provinces actually that has a Seniors Advocate. We're pleased to provide Alberta seniors with an advocate, Dr. Sheree Kwong See, who listens to many seniors contacting her office from all areas of the province, providing them and their families with information and resolution support. She reports directly to me and will provide

my ministry with an annual report outlining activities undertaken throughout the year. I can advise that the Seniors Advocate has had a positive impact on many Albertans, and I would like to share a few examples.

Preventing elder abuse, which we've already spoken about. A man from rural Alberta who was in a dangerous situation was helped by the advocate, who ensured that he had a place to go and followed him through the process to ensure that he remained safe.

Quality of life. A seniors' apartment complex that allowed pets wanted to change their policy and notified tenants that all animals needed to be rehomed or tenants would have to vacate the premises. A senior whose pets were a critical part of her life called the advocate in distress. The advocate worked with the property's management to implement a grandfather clause to allow current tenants and pets to remain in the building.

Accessible homes. Seniors contact the office for information on home renovations and retrofits to make it easier for them to stay in their own homes. Dr. Sheree Kwong See has visited 10 Alberta cities and towns in February and March to talk with seniors and interested Albertans about the roles and responsibilities of her office and to answer any questions. The Seniors Advocate has a website that is accessible to Albertans who can go there, and we invite people to do that.

Ms McKittrick: Thank you. I think this is really important work within the ministry, and I look forward to continuing to work with her as I support my residents who are seniors.

I wanted to go back and talk a little bit about the seniors' home adaptation and repair program. I wanted to thank you for launching it in my own constituency of Sherwood Park and then going back and seeing what had happened to the house and the residents and how pleased they were. I think it was a really good demonstration of a couple that wanted to stay in their house – they had invested beautifully in their garden and so on – and how the program enabled them to stay.

I understand that the program uptake has exceeded the anticipated number of applications, so I guess it's very successful. I'm wondering how your budget will accommodate the increased number of loans that were approved for next year.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes, it was great to go out to Sherwood Park to meet with David and Jill. Certainly, you know, they were able to benefit greatly from the program because, of course, Jill has MS, and she had trouble with the stairs. With just being able to have a chairlift to support her to go up and down, I mean, they think they'll be able to live there for 10 years further, so they were very pleased.

I'm really happy to say, too, that we had a terrific response to our seniors' home adaptation and repair program. Originally we estimated that about 545 households would receive loans in the first year of the program, but now we expect it to be more like 700 households. We have been receiving about five applications a day over the winter but expect this number to increase in the next few months as the weather improves. You know, people are sometimes more likely to do renovations in the summer.

The better than expected response from seniors shows that there is a strong need for this kind of a program and that we are on the right track to help seniors maintain their independence and age in their communities. We have added \$2 million to the budget for this program to handle the increased number of loan requests. The most requested repairs or adaptations are for roof repairs and replacements, windows, flooring, furnace replacement, and bathroom repairs and adaptations.

11:20

Ms McKittrick: Thank you. I'm so delighted that so many seniors within our province can stay in their homes. You know, it's more than just their home. It's where their friends live. It's where they know where to go shopping and so on. So thank you very much for the program.

I know that another component of the program, as outlined in the ministry business plan, is the need to increase access to safe, appropriate, and affordable housing. I'm aware that part of the SHARP program, or the seniors' home adaptation and repair program, was to make sure that seniors aren't taken advantage of by home repair contractors. I think that this aspect of the SHARP program is really, really important to make sure that as seniors get the loans, they can have the repairs done by good contractors who are not taking advantage of them. I was wondering how this aspect of the SHARP program is supported in the budget.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you. Certainly, as you've said, the SHARP program is to support independent living for Alberta seniors by helping them use the equity in their homes to make necessary home repairs and adaptations. The SHARP legislation includes consumer protection measures that give seniors greater security before they contract to do home repairs and adaptations.

As part of the approval process program staff review all home repair contracts and estimates to make sure that the charges are reasonable, you know, in line with other contractors' estimated costs. Contractors are required to advise seniors that SHARP is available and let them know that they can cancel a home repair contract if they are not eligible for a loan from the program, including a full refund if the money was paid.

Our ministry has taken extra steps to make sure that contractors are aware of and understand their responsibilities under SHARP legislation, and we have e-mailed more than 1,000 licensed prepaid contractors with details on the program and the consumer protections they need to honour.

Ms McKittrick: Then part of the work of the ministry is to make the contractors aware of the program and make sure that they're aware of the – I'm not sure if it's the right term – watchdog, that the ministry will be looking at the contracts with the seniors.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. That's correct.

Ms McKittrick: Okay. Thank you very much.

I wanted to go back to off-reserve affordable housing. I think this is really an important area that the government has done, and I think it's part of our overall commitment to the United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. I wanted to thank you for putting that within the budget of your ministry. Key strategy 2.4 notes a commitment to "develop and implement an affordable housing program to provide affordable housing options for off-reserve Indigenous populations." I was. . .

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt, but the time allotted for this portion of the meeting has expired.

I would now like to invite Mr. Smith from the Official Opposition and the minister to speak for the next 10 minutes. Mr. Smith are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Smith: That would be great if she's willing to.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Great.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Smith: I want to spend a couple of minutes here on seniors' transportation because I think it's a really important issue. Is there a line item for transportation for seniors in the 2017-18 budget?

Ms Sigurdson: If you look at special-needs assistance grants, line 2.2, as I said a little bit earlier, if someone has to travel to the big city for a medical appointment, funding for transportation needs can be applied for. So there is funding in that line item. We have enhanced it. We have increased it by about \$500,000.

Mr. Smith: Okay. I think we're both aware of the fact that many rural communities have significant problems with this. Transporting seniors to appointments, for shopping, for medical appointments is very difficult. I take a look at Drayton Valley, for instance, which is one of the communities. It's not simply Drayton Valley. I know that I've talked with Warburg, and I've talked with the people of Thorsby. It's across my constituency where it's costing seniors, you know, \$15 just to go downtown in a taxi because there is no bus service. There is no bus that they can use for transporting themselves anywhere. Is that \$500,000 increase – what's the total increase for helping seniors across Alberta deal with their transportation issues?

Ms Sigurdson: I just wanted to sort of talk, you know, a little bit generally before we go to the specifics if I could. What you're identifying is a very important issue, and I appreciate that. I hear that, too, obviously, across this province. That is one of the important factors when allowing people to be able to age in their communities because if they're shut in, then that's not good, of course, for anybody. They need to have access to medical appointments, be able to go grocery shopping. Many sometimes don't drive anymore, so how is that arranged? You know, many rural areas don't have transportation systems.

One of the things our ministry did in previous years was to create a transportation tool kit, where we invested, I think it was, approximately a million dollars with the University of Alberta researchers at the Medically At-Risk Driver Centre. They've created a tool kit, which is on our website, for municipalities, really, to help them know what the right questions are to ask to assess and to be able to create a program in their communities. We have some pilots across the province like Wainwright, for example, that has a handibus system. Many lodge programs, too, have minivans or buses or things like that. Certainly, that tool kit does support communities to develop some kinds of projects, and this is an area that we're looking at and continuing to support communities with.

Mr. Smith: I'm probably most familiar with my local community, but I think we both agree that this is across the province. This isn't just in my community here, but each community is probably unique in the direction that they're going to try to use to answer these issues.

In Drayton Valley we have the Drayton Valley Community Bus Association. Traditionally, they have purchased vehicles that are being used by the schools and community groups, that they can hire. They will take the hockey kids out around the province. As we've tried to deal with this issue, Minister, we've had conversations with the Drayton Valley Community Bus Association, with the town, with the home management bodies. We've come to the conclusion, for instance, in Drayton Valley that we can probably cover the operational and maintenance costs of a bus for seniors through the Drayton Valley Community Bus Association. They already have that infrastructure there.

The issue now is the capital for a bus for seniors, and it's never as easy as just – what grants would my town, for instance, be able to access that would cover the capital costs of procuring a bus for our seniors?

Ms Sigurdson: You know, these would be grants, for example, from the community initiatives partnership.

Mr. Smith: The community initiatives partnership?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. That's not in my ministry, though. It's with Culture and Tourism. But these are sort of local initiatives that do support initiatives such as this. Certainly, again, it's through Community and Social Services, the FCSS funding. Communities have that kind of for preventative supports. You know, this would certainly be . . .

Mr. Smith: I know that FCSS is working very hard in my community and have identified, I think, that their priority moving forward is to try and deal with the immediate homelessness – we'll get to that issue here in a second – that accompanies people that have come into our community and literally don't have a place to stay for the night. We have the housing management bodies that can find perhaps long-term housing, but it takes a while to get into that. So there's that issue there, that gap. But I'm not sure that FCSS has the capacity to do that and oversee buses. That was the nature of my question. This is the seniors ministry. Is there not a specific grant that we can apply for through the seniors ministry for transportation?

11:30

Ms Sigurdson: I mean, it certainly is about the municipality's priority allocations, as you've identified, in terms of the FCSS funding, and then the community initiative partnership is something that can be applied for by any community group. So it isn't about what the municipality is allocating. That may be a better bet in your community, it sounds like.

Mr. Smith: So there is no particular funding line or granting opportunity that is under your purview that would cover transportation?

Ms Sigurdson: Not in my ministry.

Mr. Smith: Okay. I'm wondering if that shouldn't be a consideration. I'm not sure why we would go to Culture and Tourism to procure funding for seniors' transportation needs.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, these are community initiative partnerships. There are a whole myriad of things that those qualify for, so that's an appropriate place to go. You know, this is something that, certainly, we're looking at in our ministry, and that's why we did increase funding in our special-needs assessments this year. We know there are needs in rural Alberta, and that's why we created the tool kit. We at this time don't have a grant program, but I appreciate your feedback here. In the interim these are other avenues for you.

Mr. Smith: Have you done any kind of study to determine how transportation in seniors' lodges and rural hospitals could combine for efficiencies? For instance, in Drayton Valley there is a bus that the money was raised for with regard to the hospital's foundation, but because of bureaucracy that bus will often be sitting in a garage unable to be used by anybody outside of AHS, yet it could be used, should we have the capacity, to allow the community bus association and AHS to actually work together and use that bus

efficiently. Would you be willing to work with Drayton Valley and maybe cut through some of the bureaucracy to see if that's an option for us?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly. We'd be happy to work with you.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Thank you. That may be a model for other communities.

Ms Sigurdson: It may be.

Mr. Smith: I'm just wondering: have you done any studies to determine how various communities could be working towards breaking through that barrier?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, with the research funding that we gave to the medically at risk institute at the University of Alberta, that was part of it. They did research about what rural communities need, and that helped them create that tool kit that is accessible to all Albertans on our website.

Mr. Smith: Since many of these seniors are going to be going to dental and doctors' appointments and those kinds of things, it would appear to me that there's some crossover there. If we could break through the bureaucracy, it might help all of our seniors. Maybe we can book some time, and maybe I can bring some people in from Drayton Valley to meet with you and see if we can't work through that, okay?

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you.

The Chair: It goes fast.

At this point I would like to invite Mr. Gotfried from the third-party opposition and the minister to speak for the next 10 minutes.

Mr. Gotfried, are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Gotfried: Yes, please.

The Chair: Go ahead, please.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Madam Chair. Minister, there are some things that concern me. We've got a baby boomer generation, people who are now ages 71 to 53. We have an increasing need for affordable housing to address what you describe in your business plan as Albertans most in need, which I don't think is just social housing. It's everyday families struggling to make ends meet. We've got what I would say is not a problem of silos; we have a problem of a continuum in both those markets, whether it's seniors' housing or whether it's affordable housing, which extends, really, from your ministry, independent people living independently, right up to long-term care, which, again, is under a different ministry.

You know, my concern is that we've got an opportunity here to look at this as a big picture, across ministries, and to do the right thing for Albertans. I believe we need to leverage public funding. We've talked a little bit about that leveraging and the opportunity to work with the private and nonprofit and faith-based sectors but also with the private sector in terms of increasing things like rental stock. I would suggest that we need to build new stock, retire old stock, and we need to be innovative, including doing some pilot projects in some areas which will meet the needs of a very different group of seniors. Again, 71 in today's world is a young person, and I would argue that we probably haven't seen them come into the system yet, which is going to be that other half a million people we're going to see over the next 19 years.

Minister, would you just take a couple of minutes to share with us your vision for how we're going to achieve these very, very daunting tasks of providing housing both for our seniors and also to meet the needs of affordable housing, again, not just what we traditionally look at in terms of social housing but meeting the needs of everyday Albertans?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, thank you very much. Certainly, I think your differentiation between sort of those younger seniors, as we're calling them now, like the baby boomers, and then older seniors – you know, being a senior has changed dramatically. People are living so much longer. I mean, I go to seniors' lodges all the time, and there are maybe one or two, maybe three of them sometimes that are over a hundred, and they're vital and engaged. It's quite cool to see.

So we're much healthier and living longer, and of course we're living independently, too. My own parents: my father is 87, my mom is 80, and they live in their own home in Mill Woods. I know that they're not unique. There is a large percentage of seniors who live in private dwellings. So that is why we are really wanting to support people. Seniors also are telling us: "We don't want to go into a lodge. We'd rather stay in our own communities, in our homes." That's why we did create the seniors' home adaptation and repair program. We're enabling people to stay in their own communities, in their own homes, so then the demands on that system of our housing or lodges is not as great, and we're certainly protecting and increasing the funding for special-needs assistance to support them in those communities.

I know that I told you before that I couldn't talk about that, but if we're going to slide over into Health a little bit, we are investing more in home care. That's accessible so people can age well in their own communities. Then, of course, the Alberta seniors' benefits program, which we're protecting, really, to support seniors to be as independent as possible for as long as possible. That's certainly part of it.

Certainly, our investment in our capital plan, the \$1.2 billion over five years: I mean, that is four times higher than the last capital plan by your government. So that shows our commitment to really supporting, and it's a move in the right direction. I appreciate your critique that this is, you know, a big bubble. We're increasing significantly. That is a significant increase. I'm very proud of our government's investment even in these very tough fiscal times.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. Thank you, Minister. You know, I'll move on to another question here. I appreciate your comments there, but it seems that we went from 2,612 housing units in the ASLI program to 2,000, many of which we have not seen yet.

I just want to touch very briefly on the carbon tax issue, that has obviously been raised here already. We've seen a very significant impact of the carbon tax and the minimum wage on the operations of many housing bodies and housing management bodies. I understand that you've talked about the \$57 million which, on a long-term basis, is going to mitigate some of those challenges, but we have a problem today. We have operators that are having to take off the salads on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays and take some of the recreation programs away on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. What are you doing today to ensure that we are not impacting seniors with some of the impacts of the carbon tax and minimum wage increases?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, you know, about 260,000 seniors will receive the carbon levy rebate, which is a maximum of \$300. So that will make a difference for them individually.

Mr. Gotfried: Just a quick question on that: is that carbon tax going to be taxable income? Does that show as taxable income?

Ms Sigurdson: No.

Mr. Gotfried: So if you're in a rent-geared-to-income rental situation, how is that going to help the housing management bodies that now are controlled on what they can charge those individuals? Even though those individuals are possibly getting the carbon tax, none of that is going to flow through to the providers.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, they're getting the carbon rebate.

Mr. Gotfried: But it doesn't affect their taxable income, which means that the housing providers can't charge them any more money.

Ms Sigurdson: Oh, I see. Okay. Yeah.

Mr. Gotfried: If they did, it could only be probably to 30 per cent of that anyway, because that's what their rent-geared-to-income is. So they're not being helped at all by that rebate, and I think that's one of the challenges.

Ms Sigurdson: The housing management bodies aren't.

Mr. Gotfried: That's correct.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. Gotfried: So do you have an answer to that?

Ms Sigurdson: So the housing management bodies: we work closely with them. We're going to be monitoring in the quarterly financial statements about how it actually is impacting. Instead of just projecting the impact, we'll actually figure that out.

Mr. Gotfried: Is it impacting the seniors? I mean, that's what I want to know. Is it impacting the seniors? Where meals are provided in some of those circumstances, is that impacting the salad that they're getting on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays and the recreational programs? We talk a lot here about the lifestyles and the lives of our seniors. Is it impacting them, and how are we going to measure that?

11:40

Ms Sigurdson: Well, this is what we are assessing and monitoring, and we will make sure that housing providers continue to provide excellent service to those seniors. We, you know, will be working closely with them to determine what supports they need. If there are changes, how are they managing it? Many of these housing management bodies do have contingency plans. How can we support them to allocate resources effectively? The energy audits and other programs will help them reduce their costs.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Minister. I don't care that that's helping their sustainability today. The \$57 million is a long-term plan about efficiency. So thank you for that.

I've got a couple of other questions that I'd like to move quickly to around the provincial affordable housing strategy. Obviously, we had an opportunity to address that through a private member's bill last session, but unfortunately it fell off the Order Paper. So now we've moved towards the provincial housing strategy. When will we see that? You've said the spring of this year. We're into the spring of this year. Can you give us a date or a commitment of when we'll see that provincial housing strategy?

Ms Sigurdson: It will be later in the spring.

Mr. Gotfried: So before June 22, I'm assuming, then.

Minister, within key strategy 2.2 you've talked about the Alberta Housing Act. Again, we don't have that in our hands. It's hard to implement. When will we see this released as well, the Alberta Housing Act changes and implementation?

Ms Sigurdson: It's all part of the provincial affordable housing strategy, so it will be around the same time.

Mr. Gotfried: Before solstice. Okay.

With respect to the provincial housing strategy there's the proposed future direction for Alberta's affordable housing system, under which there was mention of integrating affordable housing into communities. I couldn't agree more again. It kind of looks like the leveraging of the dollars. What innovative models are you exploring in this area, and have you spoken with any private, nonprofit, or faith-based organizations to integrate affordable housing into market communities?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, of course, you know, having inclusive communities, communities where everyone is included so that we don't have ghettos or walled communities, that kind of thing – certainly, we want to support good integration in our province. I meet with stakeholders continuously throughout the year. Certainly, through the provincial affordable housing strategy we've heard from many stakeholders specifically, but many times I meet with industry, nonprofits, and faith groups to discuss their interests and their concerns.

Mr. Gotfried: I appreciate that.

Minister, I have one last question to ask. Within the provincial housing strategy and with some of the private members' bills we are looking at comments around rent controls. Are you planning on putting in rent controls in your housing strategy?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, again, the affordable housing strategy comes out later in the spring, so I'd just invite you to wait on that.

Mr. Gotfried: So you're not willing to make any comment on that at this time.

Ms Sigurdson: I mean, we don't have any plans for that. We're talking about our public housing system, you know, and our strategy forward.

Mr. Gotfried: That's probably some good news.

Will you be removing any age restrictions as part of your strategy as well? If you could respond to that in writing, I'd appreciate it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

At this time I would like to invite Ms Luff from the government caucus and the minister to speak for the remainder of the meeting. Ms Luff, are you wanting to combine your time with the minister?

Ms Luff: Yeah. That's fine.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms Luff: I just want to pick up where the MLA for Sherwood Park left off before. I was excited to hear earlier in the meeting about the plans to have a listening tour regarding First Nation off-reserve housing. I had the opportunity to attend a band council forum for the Siksika First Nation in my riding in the fall. What I found interesting about that was that for the folks who had come to that

forum who lived in my riding, the main issue most definitely was off-reserve housing. It almost took over the entire meeting, in fact, because many, many First Nation folks move off the reserve in order to find, you know, educational opportunities and work opportunities, but they don't have that same housing support that they would have if they were living on-reserve, and that was a concern for many of the people at that meeting.

Given that it is a key strategy, I was just wondering if you could maybe tell us a little bit more about that listening tour and the plans to develop the off-reserve housing for indigenous folks.

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly. While engagement with indigenous communities and organizations is an essential first step in the development of our indigenous off-reserve affordable housing program, my ministry will be launching the listening tour with indigenous communities and organizations in May to better understand the affordable housing needs of indigenous peoples living off-reserve in rural and urban areas. The information gathered during the listening tour will be used to develop an indigenous off-reserve affordable housing program, and projects for this program are expected to begin in June 2018. Our government has committed \$90 million for capital investment over the next four years to increase the supply of affordable housing for indigenous peoples living off-reserve.

Ms Luff: Fantastic. That's great. I'm very excited about that.

I'm just going to move on and ask a few questions about the capital plan. I know many of us were excited about the large-scale commitment to build more affordable housing projects over five years. I know that in my riding, you know, there have been a couple of projects that have been approved for new design, including Valleyview seniors, which I know is in need, and I'm just curious about a couple of things. I know what's happening in my riding, and your ministry has been very helpful in making sure that we know what's going on in our ridings individually, but perhaps you could let us know the total number of projects that are under development in the 2017-18 capital plan. Also, how did you choose which capital projects would go forward, and who makes the decision regarding which capital projects will go forward?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly. Our government is making lives better for Albertans who need safe and affordable housing, and we're committed to building and reinvigorating existing housing. We're doing this by following through on our commitment from 2016 for the \$1.2 billion in affordable housing over five years. We are one year into this commitment, and over the remaining four years we have allocated significant capital funding for new housing supply in two areas, \$92 million for community and specialized housing. This funding provides subsidized rental housing for low-income families, seniors, and individuals with special needs.

In 2017-18 we continue to work on six projects that are already under way and plan to start on three new projects: many new homes in partnership with Habitat for Humanity, the Deer Lane affordable housing project in Banff, and the Fresh Start Recovery Centre in Calgary for men with addiction issues. I spoke already about the off-reserve funding. We do have 43 rural and urban projects under way in addition to five new projects announced in our capital plan 2017: Clover Bar replacement lodge, which is in Sherwood Park; Hillcrest Lodge, which is in Barrhead; Linsford Gardens, which is in Leduc; London Road Gateway, which is in Lethbridge; and the Londonderry project, which is here in Edmonton.

You also did ask about just how we, you know, assess which of these projects should be going forward. Priorities for capital projects are based on, really, four criteria: the age and condition of

the facility, the current need and projected demand in that community, the stage of preconstruction development, and also the organizational capacity. The age and condition and current need and projected demand are weighted more heavily. For maintenance projects one of the key factors in selecting a project is their environmental impact and how they may reduce carbon emissions, so those are prioritized. So that gives you a little bit of information about other projects in other communities and some of how we assess which are a priority.

Ms Luff: Awesome. Thank you.

And maybe just a quick follow-up. You know, I've spoken with Calgary Housing, and I know that they submit an itemized list of what they think their highest priorities are, and I imagine similar housing bodies around the province do a similar thing that helps you in the process.

Ms Sigurdson: Exactly. Yes. That's right.

Ms Luff: Okay. So if I can just move on to – where am I at here? In terms of capital I know that we've talked a little bit already about maintenance funding, and again I'd like to thank you for almost \$1.7 million in maintenance funds for social housing in my riding, which is much needed. You can tell. I hear from my constituents about the condition of the housing stock quite frequently, so it's great that we're investing in those maintenance and upkeep issues.

Performance measure 2(a) in the business plan does track the physical conditions of housing facilities. I'm just curious about how the progress is measured in terms of the physical condition of the housing stock.

11:50

Ms Sigurdson: We do have standardized measures that monitor that. I'm just going to get the proper name here.

Ms Luff: Perfect. Thank you.

Ms Sigurdson: The physical condition of our housing stock is tracked and targeted to help us make decisions on renovating or building new housing. Every five years each government-owned housing facility is inspected by Alberta Infrastructure against international standards, and this data goes into the facility condition index, that is used to help triage and prioritize housing projects. Over the next three years we expect to increase the facility condition index so that more than 97 per cent of the ministry's 36,000 housing units are in fair or good condition. I'm satisfied that this target is achievable, as the index currently sits at 96 per cent.

I'm proud of the many initiatives of us here in Alberta to improve housing, where certainly our investment of the \$1.2 billion over the five-year capital plan significantly is making a difference for Albertans, to make sure that they have the affordable housing that they need.

Ms Luff: Yeah. Fantastic.

I also just want to touch on – I was able to participate in consultations for the provincial housing strategy . . .

Ms Sigurdson: Affordable housing strategy.

Ms Luff: Affordable. Thank you. I'm like: why can't I get all of the names?

Yes, we did get a lot of really good feedback, and I was impressed with the sort of breadth of knowledge of the individuals who were at those consultations. A key part – you have spoken quite a bit about that, and I am excited for the release later in the spring, as I'm sure many other folks are. However, in terms of the regulations, you

were saying, you know, that the updates to the regulations kind of go hand in hand with the release of the affordable housing strategy. A lot of the focus in those consultations was on how we could maybe change the regulations to make affordable housing more flexible and more usable and more responsive to the people who use it. I'm just wondering if you can elaborate on what is being done to update those regulations and how this is going to facilitate access to safe, accessible, and affordable housing.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, you know, we had a targeted consultation about the regulations with housing management bodies and other stakeholders who are impacted to hear their concerns. We did have that pretty in-depth consultation with them to really inform the decision-making around the Alberta Housing Act regulations. And like the provincial affordable housing strategy, those regulations are connected with that, so, you know, details will come out later in the spring.

Certainly, I'm very excited about updating these. They haven't been updated since, you know, the late '90s, when they were first implemented. The world has changed since then, and we're very pleased to be able to modernize the housing regulations and really respond to many of the concerns that sort of have perhaps negatively impacted the ability of the sector to really provide the affordable housing that vulnerable Albertans need.

The Chair: Thank you.

I just wanted to clarify for the record that in the speaking rotation I went to the government caucus as there was no independent and/or other party member present at the time. I also indicated that the remainder of the meeting would be with government caucus; however, they had 10 minutes' time allocated.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Smith from the Official Opposition and the minister to speak for the actual remaining time of the meeting.

Mr. Smith: I think that maybe the best way of doing this, Minister, is just for me to read into the record some of the questions that I'd like to have answered, and if you have time to answer them, great. If not, then you could just get your answers back to me, okay?

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Smith: I want to talk about homelessness for a second here. I'd like to know what budget line covers homelessness in Alberta. In this budget is there money set aside to study the unique needs of rural homelessness? I attended the Alberta Rural Development Network the other day, and they had a speaker by the name of Mr. Jay Freeman, the director of housing and homelessness in Edmonton. He was saying that there is very little research on rural homelessness. So I'd like to know if in your budget there is any money to study homelessness and provide the data needed to start addressing the issue of rural homelessness.

Where in this budget will Albertans find money and therefore programs that can address the causes of homelessness: things like victims of violence, foster care and homeless youth, mental illness, immigrants, First Nations, chronic alcohol and drug abuse? Is there anywhere in the budget where we can see that you're starting to look at the causes of homelessness?

Mr. Freeman pointed out that there are barriers to housing for rural Albertans: social embarrassment, fewer social services in rural facilities, lack of transportation, the fact that they often have to relocate. Where in this budget do you begin to address those barriers and begin to build the pathways to help people in rural homelessness?

Alberta is one of the only provinces in Canada to have a 10-year plan for homelessness. The application of this plan is going to be really important. I'd like to know: how are we doing moving forward on this plan? Is this budget providing sufficient funds to move Alberta forward regarding homelessness? What metrics are you using to judge that we are actually winning this war against homelessness?

These are some of the questions that I've got with regard to homelessness.

There are a second group of questions that are just really one question. I realize that in outcome 1 of the business plan it states that "seniors [are to] have access to programs, services and supports that help them live safely and independently in their chosen communities." Many of the seniors in our province choose to live in age-restrictive housing, yet I believe that there's been a court ruling that's throwing that into some confusion. I'd like to know: what is this government doing to address the issue of age-restrictive housing? For many seniors this is going to be an issue, you know, your senior-plus facilities and that kind of thing. Okay?

Thank you.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Well, certainly, I'll begin with your questions on homelessness, which is, you know, a deep concern to our government. There are many services and supports that are needed to serve a homeless population. Of course, we want to make sure that they're well housed. My ministry really focuses on affordable housing. Usually it is about income. You know, there's sometimes a need for services also, but it is mostly about people not being able to afford market rent, so they need to have lower income rent.

Minister Sabir is responsible for the homelessness file. Next year, in 2018, the 10-year plan to end homelessness is complete. I know that he's looking at and assessing with, you know, his ministry and

community stakeholders about the way forward. Certainly, we do connect with Minister Sabir regarding that, but he is the lead minister on that. So I'd just commend you to speak with him directly regarding that.

Certainly, in terms of rural Alberta, you know, 62 per cent of our capital allocation is actually going to rural Alberta. There is a significant investment in rural Alberta to ensure that seniors and people living in community housing are supported well. We see this as a priority. That's why we're also protecting our other programs like our special-needs assistance to help with the costs of various things, our SHARP program, and also, you know, just making sure that seniors have the support to be able to age in their own communities, as you've said. That's important. Certainly, our government is committed to that.

Then your last comment was just about the Alberta Human Rights Act. You know, the Elder Advocates recently brought ageism forward and wanted to include that to make sure that people 65 and older are not discriminated against. We have a one-year window. Of course, Minister Ganley from Justice will be leading that, to look at our current legislation. Like you say, there are facilities that seniors do choose, and they want to be in a facility that is age restricted.

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

I'd like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet next on Tuesday, April 18, 2017, from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. in the Rocky Mountain Room to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Children's Services.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

