

Title: Wednesday, August 30, 2006 Public Accounts Committee

Date: 06/08/30

Time: 8:31 a.m.

[Mr. MacDonald in the chair]

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. I would like to call this meeting to order, please, and welcome everyone in attendance on behalf of the entire Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Perhaps we will invite the individuals around the table to quickly introduce themselves.

[The following members introduced themselves: Rev. Abbott, Ms Blakeman, Dr. Brown, Mr. Chase, Mr. Eggen, Mr. Griffiths, Mr. Groeneveld, Mr. Johnston, Mr. MacDonald, Mr. Prins, and Mr. Webber]

[The following departmental support staff introduced themselves: Mr. Arsenault, Mr. Loo, Mrs. McCulloch, Mr. Wigston, and Mr. Wiles]

[The following staff of the Auditor General's office introduced themselves: Mr. Dunn, Ms White, and Ms Wilson]

Ms Pastoor: Bridget Pastoor, Lethbridge-East.

Mrs. Fritz: Yvonne Fritz, Calgary-Cross.

Mrs. Dacyshyn: Corinne Dacyshyn, committee clerk.

The Chair: Now, the agenda packages for this meeting were sent out over two weeks ago. If there are no questions, may I have approval of the agenda, please? Mr. Webber. Thank you. All those in favour? Seeing none opposed, I appreciate that.

Could we also have approval of the minutes of the May 3, May 10, May 17, and June 6, 2006, committee meetings as circulated? Mr. Chase. All in favour? Opposed? Carried.

Now we get to item 4 on our agenda, which of course is the meeting today with the Hon. Mrs. Yvonne Fritz, Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. I would like to advise that the committee is dealing with the most current ministry and the 2004-05 Auditor General's annual report, that fiscal year. We can also ask questions from the following reports: the Alberta Seniors and Community Supports annual report 2004-05, the Report of the Auditor General on Seniors Care and Programs, May 2005, the Report of the Auditor General – very busy guy – on Alberta Social Housing Corporation – Land Sales Systems, October 2005, the 2004-2005 annual report of the Auditor General, and the annual report of the Alberta government for 2004-2005 and portions of 2005-06 as well.

Now I would like to invite the minister to introduce the staff that she has behind, or do you have any staff, Madam Minister?

Mrs. Fritz: I do. I thought I'd introduce them when I – is this where I'm starting now to speak formally?

The Chair: No, but if you have other additional staff.

Mrs. Fritz: I do, and I'll introduce them during my remarks. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. And if they would like to assist at any time in any questions or answers, they are quite welcome to participate.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Proceed with a brief overview, please, of your department. Hopefully it can be contained within 10 minutes.

Mrs. Fritz: Okay.

The Chair: Before you do that, I should remind the committee that all members of the House, all MLAs, are certainly welcome to participate in the proceedings, but any visiting MLAs cannot vote in any procedures that we may have.

At this time for the record I would also like to welcome Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you.

Please proceed.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to be here with all of you for my first Public Accounts meeting as Minister of Seniors and Community Supports and specifically to address the 2004-05 fiscal year, which is what we're here about. I did serve on this committee for a number of years in the early '90s and into the mid-90s, and I know the importance of this committee, which is why we certainly paid due diligence before we came before you this morning. I'm looking forward to the questions because it will assist us in sharing with you what our department staff and the issues are about in the ministry.

As you had asked, Mr. Chairman, I would like to actually formally introduce my staff once again to you because it's not often that our staff are able to come before such an important committee. Many of you don't know my staff in a personal way, and I think it's important that I reintroduce them.

My deputy minister is Tim Wiles, who is sitting here to my right. I have my assistant deputy minister of the strategic planning and supportive living division, Dave Arsenault. Dave, the committee is meeting you for the first time here. Chi Loo is our assistant deputy minister of the seniors services division. Our assistant deputy minister of the housing services division, Robin Wigston, is here as well. A very important person along with others that are here with me today is our acting senior financial officer, Susan McCulloch. Dale Beesley, our financial manager with the income support for persons with disabilities division, is here. Jim Menzies, who is the executive director, financial services, with the persons with developmental disabilities program, is here. As well, our communications director, Jason Chance, and I also have June Lam with me, who many of you know from the Legislature as my executive assistant, who has been with me for a number of years.

As you said, Mr. Chairman, I know that my time is limited, and Seniors and Community Supports is a large ministry, so I'm going to give, really, just an overview of each area of the ministry and not in detail because I know that that's what the questions will be about.

The ministry was first created midway through the fiscal year that we're here to discuss today, and the latter part of 2004-05 was spent in a transition period from November through to the end of March. Even as the ministry changed, our staff continued to work hard to provide programs that were already in place and throughout the transition to incorporate new programs.

I think it's important that you know that many of the staff members that you've met here have had an opportunity to serve in leadership positions within the ministry and in various areas that we're here to discuss. That included, of course, being the acting deputy minister for some time during this period of transition.

Today I'll focus my remarks on the people our ministry served in '04-05, and those, as you know, are seniors, those who rely on our housing or shelter programs, and people with disabilities.

In '04-05 more than 40 per cent of all seniors received financial assistance from our Alberta seniors' benefit program, which many of you are familiar with. About 142,000 seniors received a monthly cash benefit to supplement the other financial benefits that they received from the federal government as well as their own pensions or personal savings. Enhancements to the program in '04-05 made our eligibility thresholds the most generous, and our monthly payments are the highest of any provincial program in Canada. The program also provided enhanced benefits to assist with the accommodation costs for more than 8,000 low-income seniors who live in long-term care facilities.

8:40

Our ministry also offers the unique special-needs assistance program, and that as well is the only program of its kind in Canada. About 26,500 low-income seniors received a total of \$33 million, and that's to assist them with unexpected costs to help them remain in their own homes and especially to remain independent in their own communities.

In October of 2004 health care premiums were eliminated for all Albertans over the age of 65. For those seniors who were still paying health premiums, that meant an annual savings of up to \$528 a year, which is more than \$1,000 for our senior couples.

Because we know that applying for benefits can sometimes be confusing for seniors and their families, we have an excellent information system to respond to their questions. It really is quite phenomenal. I visited this system when I began as a minister, and I was amazed because by then they'd already taken their millionth call. In 2004-05 our staff answered 156,000 phone calls to our toll-free information line, they sat down with more than 52,000 Albertans at our seniors' information services offices, and they responded to thousands of their letters and e-mails. In all that time, in the time I've been a minister, in all those interactions I've only had two complaints from seniors about the way that they were interacted with by our staff, which tells you the good work that the staff is doing.

Many of our seniors also benefit from our housing programs, such as our lodge assistance program. In '04-05 we increased the daily grant provided to seniors' lodge operators twice, and that was to help minimize any cost increases to about 7,800 low- and moderate-income seniors living in lodges and to ensure that lodge operators can provide quality housing for our seniors.

Our housing programs help meet the needs of many: our lower income Albertans and families, individuals with special needs or disabilities, and those who are homeless or require transitional housing. There are approximately 41,000 subsidized housing units in the province, Mr. Chairman. These units are for those who cannot afford rent on their own in their community. Most are operated in partnership with the community and with local housing operators.

While our housing programs are especially important in our high-need, high-growth communities, we've also taken steps to address the unique needs that we have in our rural communities as well. In '04-05 we allocated more than \$51 million to the Canada-Alberta affordable housing program, which I know many of you are familiar with. Alberta is recognized as a national leader in the support of this program and for committing matching funds to develop affordable housing throughout our province. Since this program was established in 2002, there have been more than 3,200 new affordable housing units that have been approved for development.

In '04-05 nearly \$16 million in operating funds helped keep more than 500 transitional beds and 1,600 emergency spaces open in 22

different facilities throughout our province. We also provided \$3 million to seven major communities in support of the provincial homeless initiative. Again, one of the main reasons these services have been successful is because of the partnerships with municipalities and not-for-profit organizations that operate the different facilities.

Before I move on to our disability programs, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to mention the office of the public guardian, which in '04-05 filled a decision-making role for about 1,800 dependent adults who were unable to make personal decisions for themselves. The office also provided information to nearly 8,000 private guardians throughout the province as well as those Albertans interested in creating personal directives, which is an important initiative.

When Seniors and Community Supports was created, programs for adults with disabilities was brought, as you know, under a single ministry. It gave the opportunity to better co-ordinate services that were provided in the area that we're addressing here today. An important part of responding to the unique needs of people with disabilities was our review of the assured income for the severely handicapped program, or AISH. This review was led by our colleagues Dr. Neil Brown, who is here today, Rob Lougheed, and Alana DeLong. They gathered input from more than 18,000 Albertans, which was a response that they had not expected. That was a great response from people. It led to significant changes, and it truly did renew the AISH program with what the voices of the community had said that they knew was very much needed.

Our next area, the persons with developmental disabilities program, or PDD, helped approximately 9,100 adults with intellectual disabilities to live, work, and participate in their communities in '04-05. As all of you know, this usually involves staffing support up to 24 hours a day in their homes, at work, or in community activity. One noteworthy item from '04-05 is that one-third of the people that PDD served benefited from employment programs. That's a third that benefited.

I'd like to also briefly mention that our program development for persons with disabilities in the Alberta brain injury initiatives helped connect Albertans with the services they need to live active lives in our communities. We also have the Protection for Persons in Care Act, which makes it mandatory to report abuse in publicly funded care facilities. Our staff investigated and made recommendations on more than 550 reports of abuse in '04-05, and these recommendations were used to assist with preventing abuse from occurring in the future.

Before I conclude, I'd like to briefly touch on our Auditor General's '04-05 annual report, which focused primarily on issues that related to our PDD contract management. I'm pleased that the Auditor recognized our efforts to address his concerns. The changes that were made to the structure of PDD following the legislation that was passed in the spring I really believe will further improve the overall accountability of this program.

I'd also like to mention that we've taken the recommendations of our Auditor General's report on our seniors' care very seriously. In response we established an MLA task force to consult on the new draft health and accommodation standards, and we have since then begun implementation processes for the new standards. The work is being done along with the Minister of Health and Wellness and our health profession and community-based partners and also included the investment of significant new funding, which falls outside the scope of the meeting that we're having today, Mr. Chairman.

Finally, we've also begun collecting and assessing additional information about the needs of the seniors receiving the Alberta

seniors' benefits in response to the Auditor's recommendations about measuring the impact of that program.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my remarks. I'd like to thank you for your attention. I hope that it's been informative. I know that it's a lot of information in a short period of time. It's important information, and I appreciate that you've considered what I've put before you today on behalf of my department.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Dunn, do you have anything to add at this time?

Mr. Dunn: Yes, please. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As you said, we've been busy at this ministry over the last year, so our comments cover the three reports referred to by the chair: our report on seniors' care and programs; our report on the Alberta Social Housing Corporation, a subsidiary under the ministry, that system for land sales; and the section of our 2005 annual report which starts at page 289. You are aware that we released a separate report on seniors' care and programs in May 2005.

Starting on page 53 of our 2005 annual report, we provide a summary of this special report, which included 13 recommendations made to the departments of Health and Wellness and Seniors and Community Supports. The key findings were that care and accommodation standards for long-term care facilities and lodges were not current and that monitoring was inadequate. Five recommendations, three of which were numbered, were made to the Ministry of Seniors and Community Supports.

Much of the public focus has been on the standards and issues connected to the long-term care facilities, and as mentioned by the minister, our special report also contained recommendations regarding what is known as services in support of living settings, referred to in our report as the seniors' lodge program and, as well, recommendations regarding improving the information to determine the benefits under the Alberta seniors' benefits program and to measure the effectiveness of that program. These other two matters, dealt with in our special report, have not received much public discussion to date.

You're also aware that in October 2005 we issued a report on the Alberta Social Housing Corporation's systems for land sales. We examined the corporation's systems for selling land in Fort McMurray and its land sales and grants from 1999 to mid-2005. In the report we made two significant recommendations to the corporation. Those are: to work with other ministries and the municipality to establish a long-term plan for selling land in Fort McMurray and to improve their systems for selling land to ensure that the corporation's objectives were met.

Also as mentioned by the minister, we've followed up on the Persons with Developmental Disabilities Provincial Board's and community boards' progress in implementing our recommendations on improving their contract management systems. There were serious problems with the quality and quantity of services provided by various service providers, and we reported that significant amounts were to be recovered from some of these service providers. We can now report that the PDD boards have made satisfactory progress in implementing those recommendations.

Those, Mr. Chairman, are my brief comments. As always, I and my staff will answer any questions directed to us. Thank you.

8:50

The Chair: Thank you very much. We will quickly proceed to questions. There are a lot of questions already organized on the list, so we will please proceed with Mr. Chase, followed by Mr.

Johnston. To all members, please keep your preambles brief and concise.

Thank you.

Mrs. Fritz: Mr. Chair, can I just ask a question? Is there a limitation as well on the answers to the question?

The Chair: I'm sorry?

Mrs. Fritz: Is there a time on the answers to questions like on the question?

The Chair: There is a flexible time, but we in the past have been very careful in not having long, extended answers. Answers also could be brief and concise. We've got, certainly, some flexibility, but there are a lot of members with a lot of questions.

Mrs. Fritz: Okay. And are there questions with supplementaries as well?

The Chair: Yes. I'm sorry. There's a question and a follow-up. If you would like your staff to address any of these questions or issues, please feel free to do so. The Auditor General on occasion also has something to add in regard to a question, other information. We are quite flexible here and very informal.

Mrs. Fritz: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Chase.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. When the Minister of Gaming was present, I asked about the ethics of cheque presentations where it appeared that money was coming straight from the local MLA and being presented to the constituency, and it was agreed by the minister that it was unethical. The department gives out a lot of money to a number of excellent organizations. Why are government MLAs 99 times out of 100 the only members invited to make cheque presentations even when organizations are located in opposition constituencies?

Mrs. Fritz: So are you saying that I've answered that before? You said that the minister said . . .

Mr. Chase: No. I'm saying that the whole cheque-providing process of this government is questionable. Why aren't local opposition MLAs included when presentations are given out in their constituencies from this department?

Mrs. Fritz: My understanding was that local opposition MLAs do go. They know their communities very well and know what is being developed in their communities. I don't know what area you are referring to with cheque presentations. What areas?

Mr. Chase: Basically, pick a constituency where an opposition or NDP representative is in that constituency, and my questions is: why aren't they involved and invited to the presentation of the cheque? Frequently it's a government member besides yourself who is invited to the presentation even though it's in the opposition member's constituency. What I'm saying is: why aren't we included when it's our constituents that we represent? But we're not invited.

Mrs. Fritz: My understanding was that you were involved. When you say that I'm presenting the cheques along with MLAs, the

practice of what I've done with the department – and this is from having been an MLA – is that if there is a cheque to be presented to a local community, we involve the MLA who is a part of having made the request for that development or whatever the cheque is for on behalf of the community. It's very rare, actually, that I go to these functions as well. So unless you can give me specific examples. Do you have any that you are referring to?

Mr. Chase: Well, I basically would have to go through the NDP, Alliance, and Calgary Liberal roll call to indicate the invitations that weren't extended.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, I'd invite you to follow up with me about that, and I'd be pleased to look into that for you. I don't know. Is this an item that is before Public Accounts today? Like, is this in my annual report?

Mr. Chase: Well, there is no sort of explanation or justification that I could find in the report for this procedure.

Mrs. Fritz: Okay. Mr. Chairman, if it's all right with you, I'll take this question under advisement.

The Chair: Yes.

Mrs. Fritz: And I'll follow up and look into it for you.

Mr. Chase: Thank you.

The Chair: Madam Minister, for any follow-up to questions that you have, if you could direct it in writing through the clerk to all the members, we would be very grateful.

Mrs. Fritz: Okay.

The Chair: Second question. Mr. Johnston.

Mr. Chase: My second question . . .

The Chair: No. I'm sorry, Mr. Chase. That was a dialogue. There were three questions in there. We're moving on to Mr. Johnston.

Mr. Chase: Oh, okay. Thank you.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Chair. My question will be from the annual report of Alberta Seniors and Community Supports for 2004-2005, page 49. Under strategy 7.1 the aim is to "review the AISH program in the context of other government supports and implement changes to ensure responsiveness to client needs and program sustainability." My question is: did the review proceed as intended?

Mrs. Fritz: Mr. Chairman, I know that Dr. Brown, who is here today as well, was a part of the review.

The answer is: yes, it did proceed as intended. It was on April 15, 2005, that we announced our response to the MLA AISH Review Committee's recommendations. As I told you in my opening remarks, there was input from 18,000 Albertans. Albertans were very thoughtful in how they responded to the questions, and that thoughtfulness really assisted with what the recommendations were that came through. I think I should mention to you, though, that of the 18,000 Albertans that responded, 10,000 people were actually AISH recipients. It's their experience of being a recipient that was helpful.

That AISH review was about doing, I really believe, the right thing for Albertans. I'm pleased with the outcome of the review, but it didn't come about just because of, you know, one minister or one department; it was because of the collective effort of so many that contributed to this, and that includes, I think, everybody that's been elected to government. Everybody was a part of this review, and it was very well done.

I don't know if that helps you, but, yes, they were implemented.

Mr. Johnston: Okay. My only supplementary is: have the recommendations been addressed?

Mrs. Fritz: The majority of the recommendations have been implemented, and that included the staged financial benefit increase to the maximum of \$1,000 per month as of April 1, 2006. One of the areas that we introduced – and I know that you're very familiar with this, too, because of the assistance I had from the Liberal opposition – was the whole area of personal income support benefits. That's through legislation. It was a new benefit for people. It's been very well received. It is assisting people in a way that even in our department we hadn't anticipated the goodness that would come of it, but it has for individuals on AISH.

People often ask along with that about the implementation. When the living allowance benefit increased to \$1,000 per month, one of the things that we in the department determined would be of assistance to our AISH clients, especially with the cost of housing, would be that our clients through their local management bodies and whatnot – we gave a direction to the management bodies and the organizations not to take that increase in the living allowance and raise the person's rent. I don't want to use the word moratorium on rents, but it was a very clear direction through the ministry from myself to people that they not increase the rent for AISH clients if at all possible.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Blakeman, followed by Dr. Brown, please.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I'm referring to the Report of the Auditor General on Seniors Care and Programs from May 2005, the first numbered recommendation, actually a key recommendation appearing on page 7, which was about essentially working with the regional health authorities and the department to update the service standards for all services in long-term care. My question is: what was the justification in the department at the time for not having in place province-wide standards? Did the department not identify a risk in not having province-wide standards?

Mrs. Fritz: That's actually a very good question. I was surprised, too, when I learned that standards were in place with the health authorities and with the different care facilities but that they weren't legislated. Having said that, I know that we've moved forward with it. I appreciated what the Auditor General brought forward, had great discussions with the Auditor and his staff in regard to how we could move quickly so that we would implement standards. We worked along with community organizations like the Alberta Senior Citizens' Housing Association, with other organizations, the long-term care organizations, and the regional health authorities. We took what they had in place, you know, because each area had their standards in place. We took all of that, put it together, and brought what we think are the very best standards that we could bring forward and did that along with Alberta Health and Wellness.

9:00

Ms Blakeman: Okay. Well, as a supplemental to that, then, one of the issues I see come up with government and all departments repeatedly is that something gets established and then never revisited or no regular review. So has the department put in place a mechanism to regularly review those standards and not let them go another 10 or 20 years before they're looked at again?

Mrs. Fritz: I agree with you that there should be reviews, and we have put that in place. I think we've had 29 lodge reviews. I think there are about 269 or up to 280 indicators that the reviews have to meet when the reviews are being conducted. Dave, if you'll just comment a bit further about that. I know that we've been very diligent about this because we do need measures, we do need outcomes, and that's what this is all about.

Ms Blakeman: But this is also reviewing the actual standards that you set in place to make sure they're still relevant.

Mrs. Fritz: Yeah. Once you begin at the front end, that comes out with it.

Mr. Arsenault: I think that we've made a commitment to review them annually. To look at what we did, we used the 29 lodge reviews as the pilot test for the standards and have worked with a number of organizations. We have made changes as we've moved along in putting the standards out. So I think there is a strong commitment to review on an annual basis and update with the key stakeholders that we're working with.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Dr. Brown, please, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The question I have is related to the document of the Auditor General on the Alberta Social Housing Corporation dated October 2005. There are a number of findings in there that the purposes of facilitating affordable housing to low-income persons and seniors and special-needs persons were not fulfilled because there was a failure to implement those conditions on the sales of land and so on. My question for the minister would be: what steps have been taken to rectify the situation so that land sales are put to the purpose for which that corporation was established?

Mrs. Fritz: I'm pleased to speak to this question, Mr. Chairman. I've met with the Auditor, met with his staff, met with the audit committee as well in regard to the process that was put in place through the Alberta Social Housing Corporation, which you know is a very important corporation for the province and through this ministry as well. What we did do with the Alberta Social Housing Corporation is ensure that we are having meetings. When we do any type of interaction at all, whether it's with land sales or whether it's with, you know, potential housing or whatever is necessary through the corporation, we meet. We have motions. We debate the issues. We vote just as in any other meeting, just as you do with this meeting. It's very formal.

With the land sales what was put in place is that I took what I determined to be an arm's length from government in the way that land would be looked at, Dr. Brown. It's arm's length. For example, with the land sales in Fort McMurray I asked two individuals to act independently in reviewing all the applications that came

forward from requests for proposals, to make the determination of what was best for the community and for the overall province in regard to the sale of the lands. You know, it went through a very formal process, through advertising and whatnot.

Then the decision that was made regarding who the successful bidder would be and why was brought forward by the individuals and by my staff who were part of this. We have Robin Wigston here, our assistant deputy minister of housing. That was brought before the committee, and the committee agreed with what was brought forward through Robin and the individuals involved.

I don't know if that helps you. It's just a very formal process.

Dr. Brown: If I could have a supplemental, Mr. Chairman. With respect to the specific instance of Fort McMurray, would it not be possible to enter into an agreement with the municipality of Wood Buffalo to transfer the land in that surrounding area for a dollar on the condition that it be used for these objectives of affordable housing and low-income housing and seniors and special needs and allow them to use any profits from the sale to put in the infrastructure necessary to get those developments under way in a timely manner?

Mrs. Fritz: Absolutely. It would be. It is possible. And that was your question: would it not be possible? I have had discussions with Mayor Blake, and she as well has been very involved with us in regard to lands that were put out for bid. Also, we've determined through the corporation that we are asking for affordable housing. Through bids that we have put forward, we've asked for people to come back in that regard. Could we give it to the municipality for a dollar and do just as you said, have the returns back again? We could. Have we had discussions through the corporation in that regard? We have. Have I discussed that with Mayor Blake and others in Fort McMurray that are involved in the decision-making regarding lands? Yes. But have we made a determination to do that at this point? No. I don't know if that's clear, but I think the Auditor might want to comment as well.

Mr. Dunn: I'll make a very brief comment to Dr. Brown's first question. The reason we put the table in on page 6, which shows the continuity of the ministers from 1999 to date, was that the last time that the board of directors – there was a board of directors which included outside advisers – met was during the period with Walter Paszkowski. Thereafter, when Minister Stan Woloshyn was there, essentially the minister and the deputy minister went it alone. They did not involve outside advisers and made their decisions on their own. That clarifies what you were getting at. Why was there not an outside challenge? That's what we referred to, that you had essentially a limited review by anyone else other than the minister and the deputy at that time.

The Chair: Thank you.

David Eggen, please, followed by Reverend Tony Abbott.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you. My questions are in regard to long-term care. I was curious to know how the basic service standard for long-term care residents was calculated for 2004-2005 and whether you consider this to be an adequate standard to serve the needs of long-term care residents in the province.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you. I'm going to refer that question to Dave Arsenault.

Mr. Arsenault: Can I seek a point of clarification, sir? I'm not quite sure of the question you were asking.

Mr. Eggen: I'm just curious to know how the basic service standard for long-term care residents was determined for 2004-2005. Do you, in your assessment, consider this to be an adequate standard to meet the needs of long-term care residents?

Mr. Arsenault: I think that for the year 2004-05 the standards were basically the ones that were developed by Health and Wellness and that were in place. I think that as the work went through that the Auditor General did and the follow-up work, clearly they needed to be updated. They needed to be expanded. The work that happened over 2004-2005 and into the following years then led to the announcement of the new standards in May of this year. That is the work that we've done on that.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. So based on the budget, from where we determined that there was, in fact, inadequate funding to provide a reasonable basic service standard, what adjustments are you determining to provide? Does it follow anything less than a basic service standard of four hours a day per resident and at least one registered nurse 24 hours per day in every long-term care facility?

9:10

Mr. Arsenault: I think that you're asking questions that are more directed at Health and Wellness. Our responsibility is the accommodation standards.

Mr. Eggen: Yes, but perhaps this is why we're seeing people falling through the cracks, because there is perhaps inadequate interaction between the two ministries. You know, if you're providing a standard of service for residents in terms of the facility, then don't you think that perhaps closer interaction and working together with Health and Wellness would in fact assist in providing these basic standards at an adequate level for residents under your charge ultimately?

Mrs. Fritz: I'd like to comment on that, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Briefly, please. Yes. Proceed.

Mrs. Fritz: I'll just wait to have your attention.

Actually, we work very closely with Health. I want you to know that. And by that I mean that right even from the level of our assistant deputy ministers, our deputy minister, financial people, we work very closely with Health. This is one of the most important areas that the ministries have dealt with in 2004-05, and especially because of what our Auditor put forward through his report, we took that very, very seriously.

I just really want to be clear. I appreciate that you've asked the question because that's what you're thinking, and I'm hoping that I can assist you today to know that we work closely, especially in this area of developing standards. In that close work that we've done with Health, I think that we've come out with something that is very good for Albertans in care. I know that you've had the health minister here as well. You've probably asked this question. I haven't read through those notes from Public Accounts when the health minister was here, but she would tell you the same, that this is an area very dear to us as ministers and that we do work closely together.

The Chair: Thank you.

Reverend Abbott, please, followed by Bridget Pastoor.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thanks, Minister, for

the excellent update and report. Certainly, you do have a wide-ranging ministry with a lot of very complex facets to it, and I think you guys are doing a great job there.

One of, I guess, the large parts of your ministry is working with persons with developmental disabilities. You mentioned that there were about 9,100 PDD recipients. I know that they must be located all over the province because I certainly have some in my constituency and do often get calls from them or from their advocates, and it seems more lately than during this fiscal year.

On page 57 of the '04-05 annual report for Seniors and Community Supports you do describe a performance measure used to assess the satisfaction by families of persons with developmental disabilities with the PDD-funded services. In addition to the PDD program, Seniors and Community Supports also includes a number of programs for disabled Albertans, including AISH and community support systems. I guess I'm wondering if you could comment on why there's only one measure for this goal when you're really doing several different things here.

Mrs. Fritz: That's actually a very good question as well. As we indicated, the PDD program was transferred to the ministry in November, and with the exception of PDD the programs had not developed specific public performance measures in their former ministries, so there were no pre-existing measures appropriate for use as performance measures.

I've learned this through the department and through the staff because we discussed this at length when we were doing our business plan: I understand that it can take one to five years to develop performance measures. I thought, especially as a former nurse – and the Member for Lethbridge-East would know as well. You're always developing performance measures in nursing. I just thought that it's something that you could do just like that, you could do it immediately, but you can't. It takes time.

There was insufficient time between November and March. That's not a long period as well, and there's a lot being done by the time you do your business plan, you take it through all the processes, and whatnot. You need to collect data. There's just a lot that has to happen. That's why the question that you've asked, the performance measure: there's only one. But this next go-around you'll find that there are more performance measures.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you. A supplementary: are you also, then, developing a performance measure that will I guess get results back from the clients themselves? What I'm wondering about are actual people with PDD or cognitive disabilities. Are you developing some kind of performance measure to see what their satisfaction levels are with the programs?

Mrs. Fritz: You mention cognitive disabilities. When we collect data from the community, we do it a number of ways, whether it's through telephone interviews or whether it's through surveys or whether it's through face-to-face contact, et cetera. But people with cognitive disabilities: it's much more difficult. I know through the department that you are working on ways in which to assist those clients with giving us back their experience through a survey method that would be appropriate so that we could develop a performance measure that would assist us overall.

You might want to comment on that, then, Dave.

Mr. Arsenault: Well, I think that what we've done is that we've been looking at the review of the Dependent Adults Act through the office of the public guardian. We did a number of innovative focus groups directly with dependent adults and have developed a method

that allows those individuals to come to the table and express their views on service and their views on their guardians. So we're using that as the basis to move forward.

Rev. Abbott: Great. Thank you.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Bridget Pastoor, please, followed by Mr. Lindsay.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. If the chair would indulge me just for a couple of minutes, I'd like to say to the madam minister that I would like to sincerely compliment you on what you've done with this ministry over the last two years. I think that it shows that there's compassion and understanding for the people that you're responsible for, and I also think that it shows an understanding of the department itself.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you.

Ms Pastoor: Having said that now, my question is: on page 90 of the annual report under supplies and services how did the department track the public dollars that have been given to private contractors to ensure that Albertans are really getting a true value for that dollar?

Mrs. Fritz: I'm going to refer that question to my deputy minister, Tim Wiles.

Mr. Wiles: Thank you. I think that as the PDD program has come into the ministry, that's an area we need to look at very closely. We've had some suggestions from the Auditor General to improve our contract management processes, and as we've started discussions with the chairs of each of the community boards as well as the CEOs, the whole area of dealing with private service providers and performance measures and ensuring that we're getting adequate value for money on that is an area we're going to explore. I think that at the time of this report and certainly before my time with the ministry it's an area that was in a state of evolution as the service provisions evolved within this area, and we're continuing to work on that. It's an area of importance for us as we go forward.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. My supplemental certainly falls right within some of your comments. My concern is that the residential programs that are operated by the community agencies – there was a huge discrepancy between what they pay and what the PDD operators are receiving because they're AUPE. This is just one area, but I think we can say that in various forms this is how it goes across the province. An agency may be paid \$13.24 an hour, but they don't pay benefits or sick days, and the actual worker is receiving \$11.70. However, if they had been hired by PDD direct operation, their hourly pay is \$15.89, the shift diff is \$1.75, and they have a 30 per cent benefit package. So they end up with \$22.93 an hour, and that is a huge discrepancy between those that are paid by PDD and those that are paid through the contract system.

I think that I tabled some letters a couple of days ago where, in fact, people were asking: please raise the wages because they cannot compete with the doughnut shops. To me this is a very serious problem with what you were speaking to, so I'd like a comment on that.

9:20

Mr. Wiles: I think that in Alberta's economy the labour market –

and this not a problem just unique to contract service providers in the PDD world. It applies to many businesses, and certainly it's an area we're aware of. I think last year at the third quarter we announced \$10 million that was explicitly directed by the minister to flow through to the front-line workers, and that has continued through into the current year. We know that as we go into budget discussions for the next year, the PDD folks are raising with us this issue, and we are going to continue to review and monitor that.

The areas where we are in the direct service provision are some legacy programs. The biggest chunk of it is in the Michener Centre in Red Deer, where we've got direct government staff providing services.

You know, I can't disagree with your numbers. There is a discrepancy. It's something we're aware of. How to manage through that is where we're again working with the community boards, and they've raised that with us as well, that it's an issue from their perspective as well. So I don't have an explicit answer as to how to address it. I think we've made some small steps already, and we'll continue to work on it as we go forward.

[Mr. Griffiths in the chair]

Ms Pastoor: Thank you very much. I'm delighted to hear that you at least recognize the problem.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Lindsay, followed by Mr. Chase.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Minister, for the excellent report on your '04-05 operations and also for the operation of your ministry. You and your staff are to be commended for a job well done.

My question today is also regarding performance measures. On page 39 of the '04-05 annual report you describe performance measures used to assess the satisfaction of residents living in seniors' lodges, self-contained housing, and family housing. A number of the performance measures used by the ministry involved satisfaction surveys. Can you comment on this approach? For example, are satisfaction surveys good indicators of quality regarding facilities and services provided? It seems that that may be somewhat generic.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you. As I mentioned, we do serve a number of people in the ministry, whether it's seniors or people with disabilities, a number of people. We do survey and survey often because the information that comes back to us is important. The data gathered helps us create a much better program for individuals because, as I indicated to you, it's the voices of the community, and we pay very careful attention to that.

When satisfaction surveys come back to us, though, what we look for in the quality of approach is that if the information is showing us that we need to improve in an area, we certainly will move forward with that. But what I've been actually pleased with is that people that have sent in surveys – and I would think that the deputy minister would agree with me – overall have been fairly satisfied with the service that they're receiving through the department.

When I gave my opening remarks, I did speak to you about the seniors' information line and the number of calls that come through. If you ever had an opportunity to visit this area of the department, it'd be one that I'd recommend that you go see. People are on the phones, and those phones are constantly, constantly working. It's from people that are seniors mainly – with the seniors' help line, of course seniors – but their families phone too. They're looking for information, and they're usually very upset. They will phone back

several times about the same issue. As I indicated, of the thousands of calls and the thousands of letters, not just a few hundred but thousands, we've had only two complaints throughout the year that I'm aware of, and that tells you that people are satisfied with the service that they're receiving. Even that's one indicator. I don't know if that's helpful to you.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you for that. My supplemental question regarding the same thing, I guess: in regard to the measures for quality of accommodation and service provided by housing operators, can you explain why the results and the target are lower for family housing than they are for seniors' housing?

Mrs. Fritz: I think I'm going to ask Mr. Arsenaault to answer that as well. Well, actually, maybe Robin.

Mr. Arsenaault: I hope so.

Mrs. Fritz: Okay. Thanks. I rely on Dave with policy.

Mr. Wigston: Historically the family housing results have always been lower. Is there a reason for that? I think part of the reason is that it's a more difficult population to look after. When you have, say, a hundred senior citizens living in an apartment or a hundred families living in the same sort of complex, it's a lot more difficult for a group to maintain that facility at the same level on a consistent basis. So you will get more concerns and more complaints coming back on things like maintenance, those sorts of things, because there is more damage, and there's more wear and tear on a facility when it's completely occupied by families as opposed to just seniors.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much.
Mr. Chase, followed by Mr. Groeneveld.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. AISH allowances have remained stagnant for years, well below the poverty level. The recent increase to \$1,000 a month with allowable earnings extended up to \$400 was quickly eaten up by inflation and rent increases. My question: why haven't AISH allowances automatically annually increased according to a market basket measure or the Alberta weekly wage, which determines our MLA increases?

[Mr. MacDonald in the chair]

Mrs. Fritz: That's a very good question, and I'm going to ask my deputy minister to answer that.

Mr. Wiles: I think that as part of the MLA review of the AISH program it was agreed in the accepted recommendations that we would review the AISH allowances every two years. The first review will be 2007. We've implemented the \$1,000 effective April 1, 2006, this year. That's where we're at in terms of the government's policy on AISH.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. A follow-up on the Lethbridge-East member's concerns, again with wages. Why haven't PDD workers' deplorable wages not similarly been raised annually as opposed to reviewed? Doing it every second year is hardly an improvement when it's strictly a review. I'm looking for actual increases.

Mr. Wiles: In the case of the PDD staff worker wages, the first point

I think we need to clarify is that the wage rates are actually determined by the employers, not by the government in those cases. Now, we obviously enter into contracts with the providers, and there are some increases built into those.

Again I'll refer to the \$10 million that was provided in the '05-06 fiscal year. That was directed to flow directly through to the workers. At the end of the day it's partially the employer's decision as well in sort of managing their business, how they're going to remunerate their staff.

I know that this is an issue that all the board chairs have raised with me, and we're in discussions again to review that and see if there's a quick solution, but in today's economy there are no easy solutions.

Mr. Chase: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

George Groeneveld, please, followed by Laurie Blakeman.

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good morning, Minister, and to your people. My question this morning comes from the very large bible that we have here that the Auditor General provided us with, very fine reading nonetheless. There were some comments, I guess, on pages 292 to 296. The Auditor General raises some concerns about PDDs' contracting process as well as the monitoring and evaluation of service providers. I guess I'd just kind of like to know: what has PDD done to continue fully addressing the Auditor General's recommendations here?

Mrs. Fritz: I'm sorry. It's page 290 . . .

Mr. Groeneveld: Page 292 to 296 is where the concerns are, yes, in the big book.

Mrs. Fritz: Okay.

Mr. Groeneveld: However, I don't think, you know, that it's specific. He had some concerns about the contracting process as well as the monitoring and evaluation of service providers. Obviously, he wasn't fully happy with what was happening there. I'm assuming that the department is addressing this issue somewhat.

9:30

Mrs. Fritz: We are. I can let you know the ways. I know through what you have here, what you indicated about the Auditor's recommendations, what we have done. I know that one is the implementation of conflict-of-interest guidelines for our PDD staff. That was important. Also, completion of the contract policies, including guidance on preparing business plans and on contractor selection. Training PDD staff on policies and procedures is to be completed by '06-07. Completion of new service provider contracts with amended clauses.

Is that the information that you're looking for?

Mr. Groeneveld: Yeah. I think you're right. I'll just go right to the supplementary because page 295 of the report probably partially answers the question itself, where it notes that resource constraints contributed to the delays in completion of audits of service providers. Is this still an issue, the dollar constraints? What action is PDD, you know, taking to ensure that the monitoring activities are completed probably in a more timely fashion?

Mrs. Fritz: Well, I know that new service provider templates have been put in place, and that's going to require service providers to

report on a consistent basis. For all PDD funding received, whether it's from contract or individual funding, there's going to be increased accountability as well through accountability reporting. That's a requirement. I think that that's critical through what we had heard from the Auditor, that the service providers are going to submit a general purpose financial statement along with their completed schedules for reporting on PDD programs on the revenue and the related expenditures.

There is also an increased emphasis on the regional financial managers, that they are to take a more active role in monitoring the functions of what is occurring within their areas. This is really critical as well. I'm pleased that that came through the Auditor's report. You have to appreciate that we're learning more and more too because of the ministry coming together within this area. Each regional board has their financial officer. They're reporting on what they're monitoring in their communities and the service providers that they have. That's a whole area that I know, as my deputy minister mentioned earlier in response to a question, is meeting frequently with the regional boards and with the chairs, especially with the change in the PDD legislation regarding having the regional boards become Crown agencies.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Blakeman, please, followed by George Rogers.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. I'm referring to the Report of the Auditor General on Seniors Care and Programs, pages 8 and 9, referring to two recommendations, key recommendation 3 and numbered recommendation 4. Both talk about joint efforts between the Department of Health and Wellness and the Department of Seniors and Community Supports, the first to assess the effectiveness of services in long-term care and the second around collecting sufficient information to make accommodation rate and funding decisions. My question is: how did the ministry calculate the accommodation rates? Was the ministry collecting enough information and the right information to determine the cost-effectiveness of the accommodation rates they were charging?

Mrs. Fritz: We were collecting information. At the time we thought that it was enough information, but we can always improve. We learned that through this report from the Auditor.

I'm going to ask Mr. Arsenault to comment on how that is happening.

Mr. Arsenault: The way that we're gathering the information is that we're working through the Long Term Care Association. We have agreed on a template of the information that we need to receive as it relates to costs. We also have a joint group that's looking at the inflationary costs in terms of the long-term care field, and based on the information that comes out of that, we'll be making a recommendation to the minister in terms of the actual charges for accommodation in long-term care.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. I think there's an ongoing question about whether there is a fairness between what's being charged to the individual for the accommodation portion and what they're actually getting. Part of what I'm interested in is: did you also now work in a review of those rates and the information that's fed into them in order to determine the accommodation rate? Certainly, the jump that we saw in 2003 was very unfair to people, where it was almost a doubling of the rate. We've now had no increase since 2003. We're three years further down the road. When is the next review that's going to give us some idea of whether the information

is valid? Let's face it; they didn't all get fresh fruit salads as promised. Two, when is the next increase coming, and how could it be put into an annual or a regular review format?

Mr. Arsenault: Well, I think that's what we're working on in gathering the data, so we're able to come forward with the cost and what increase would be needed. As we work with the Long Term Care Association and as we have that data, we'll be bringing it forward.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks.

Mr. Dunn: Mr. Chairman, if I may?

The Chair: Yes. Please.

Mr. Dunn: Ms Blakeman has referred to the summary, but really the detail is on pages 35 through 37 in the report. In there we do talk about the inconsistency amongst the various health authorities. We talk about a variation by bed of approximately \$10,000 per bed per year, that sort of stuff. So as much as Mr. Arsenault has just chatted about it, there was a lot of inconsistency, incompatibility, and lack of oversight and review from both the health side as to the costs – you talk about food and nutrition – and then from the accommodation side on rates. It needed a lot of work and oversight by the ministry over each of the RHAs because you can't have nine systems, which is what we were really commenting on.

Ms Blakeman: Province-wide standards. Yeah.

Mrs. Fritz: Also, I'd like to say that we've taken that very seriously. I don't want to leave the impression that we haven't. You're absolutely right; in 2003 that increase was unexpected by people. It was large, and with information that's been gathered, that was indicated here. It's based on what our Auditor has put forward in this report. We know the importance of it, and we are looking at it in great detail.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you.

George Rogers, please, followed by David Eggen.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Madam Minister, I'd just like to commend you on the sincere level of care that you've brought to this ministry, a ministry that serves some of the most vulnerable people in our society. I'd also like to state publicly that certainly any interactions that I've had with you and your staff on behalf of my constituents have been exceptionally positive, and I thank you for that.

My questions relate to page 49 of the Auditor General's report. Recommendations 1 and 2 talk about improving the measures used to assess the effectiveness of the seniors' lodge program. My question would be: what is being done to improve the measures used to assess the effectiveness of the seniors' lodge program?

The Chair: Just for clarification, Mr. Rogers, that's page 49 of the Report of the Auditor General on Seniors Care and Programs?

Mr. Rogers: On seniors care. That's correct.

Mrs. Fritz: In the lodge accommodation review we interview the families. We interview residents. We interview service providers. We ask for information back. We take what people have written to us on their own without even going through a survey. We take that

information as well in context with reviews. We hope that that is, you know, a way of assisting with the effectiveness of the programs.

I want you to know, though, that between 79 and 100 per cent of the residents, families, and service providers were satisfied with the lodges and the services that they provided. You know why that's important? We say this over and over again, but we can never lose sight of this. It's because of the change in lodges. It's because even 20 years ago the average age of people in a lodge was 65, whereas today the average age is 86. They have mobility problems. They have vision issues. They have hearing issues. There are people with hip problems. People in lodges are much frailer. So for us to have back the satisfaction rate that we do – and I mean this sincerely too – I think that that's a good measure.

9:40

Mr. Rogers: Thank you.

Are there any other measures that you're using to improve the lodge programs?

Mrs. Fritz: Well, because it's the accommodations, as well as what people tell us that they find that they need in the lodges, what I've had come back through all of you here – pretty well everyone in this room has written back to me or talked with me about this and about their lodges – is that the lodges do not have the capacity for the mobility changes that people have, meaning that the doors are, you know, not large enough. The bathrooms are small. People can't turn around in some of the rooms.

I have visited many, many lodges throughout this province, and I know the importance of the program that we have in place. It was the \$140 million program through RASL to assist with accommodation changes in lodges. I'm going to ask Robin to comment on that, Mr. Chairman, because this is a very important area for residents living in lodges. You know, people often talk about nutrition or whatnot – that's important too – but also accommodation overall and the changes that were needed in our lodges as they change with care and as they are older facilities.

Robin, if you would please comment on that.

Mr. Wigston: Sure. Last year we were fortunate. We received another \$15 million to provide upgrades and additional services to lodges, and those dollars were targeted to things like ramps, accessibility, some of the major required repairs that were going on or required in lodges. The province provided the dollars. If not, it would have had to have been the municipality that would have stepped up through requisitions to do that. So that was a very good start last year. That's on top of about, I think, \$140 million that was spent over the years to upgrade most of the lodges in the province. So we've done that. As well, we've started a special services grant, which is up to \$2.50 a day. For residents in lodges requiring special meals or special services, there's another \$2.50 a day going to the lodge operator to ensure that those persons have those services.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

David Eggen, please, followed by Ray Prins, who's been very patient.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thanks, Minister. I'm sure you've been noticing a similar phenomenon that we have in our New Democrat offices, and that's an avalanche of people with very grave and serious concerns about accessibility to affordable housing. We're experiencing a critical shortage of affordable housing in the province. I just wanted to ask you: in view of this critical shortage of affordable

housing do you think that your 2004-2005 budget provided enough funds to plan for adequate affordable housing here in the province of Alberta?

Mrs. Fritz: I know that that question is relating to 2004-05, but with your good graces . . .

Mr. Eggen: It takes time to build houses, right?

Mrs. Fritz: If I address it even over a four-year period, Mr. Chairman, if that's all right?

The Chair: Please proceed.

Mrs. Fritz: Okay. It was recognized even in 2001 about the need for affordable housing. There's a wide continuum of programs on housing within this ministry. In 2001 the federal government and the provincial government formed a partnership where they each contributed dollars towards housing itself. That was for affordability and at that time for low-income Albertans. Over the four-year period from 2001 till today the average per year was \$50 million: \$25 million from the provincial government, \$25 million from the federal government. So over the four-year period you had \$200 million allocated for affordable housing.

We mustn't forget that that's in partnership, and then, again, that extends to the community. We have our agencies and organizations who make application through the ministry of housing, and that application then goes through an approval process. The ministry recognizes that partnership in that people very much contribute to building the housing. So that \$200 million, you know, over the four years has now grown to approximately \$400 million for affordable housing. This year we have \$44 million in that same program, the Canada affordable housing program. We also have another \$44 million for maintenance and operations of our existing housing. That's \$88 million. Then we also have additional monies to assist the community further with housing, which is over a hundred million dollars this year for affordable housing.

Is that enough? That's your question. It's never enough. You know why? We heard this just recently through seven major municipalities, Mr. Chairman, as well as our agencies in the community that look after our people that require housing. Those are our homeless foundations, other good foundations that are in the community working hard. We heard from them that what they are doing now because of the economy – and we all know this about Alberta too – people are not preplanning before they come to the province. So there are people . . . [interjection] That's true. I'm looking here and seeing some people thinking: why would people not preplan? But they don't. They come, and they're surprised at the cost of the housing. They're surprised at the cost of living in Alberta, and it's a recognition.

So is this amount of money, a hundred million dollars this year, you know, up to \$400 million in the partnerships over the last four years – we've built what we consider to be an incredible number of housing units. Like, we've had over 3,200 housing units built. We have another 400 being built this year. But it's never enough.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Eggen: I have a supplementary, I think, yet.

The Chair: That was your supplementary.

Mr. Eggen: No. That was my first one.

The Chair: Well, this is a long question. Please proceed.

Mr. Eggen: It was a long answer. My question was very short.

Mrs. Fritz: It's an important question. Your question was important.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. I mean, we have the mechanism to plan for those things. That's what I'm saying. I'm looking for a solution, right? So perhaps I can ask the Auditor General another, just a slightly different angle.

You know, in view of the land sales report that we saw from last year, sort of revealing a sort of confused mechanism by which land was being released for sale for affordable housing, I'm just wondering: do you in your mind feel that this actually slowed the approval process and the construction of affordable housing in Fort McMurray and perhaps elsewhere in the province as well?

Mr. Dunn: I can't speak about the rest of the province because we haven't looked at that. But speaking specifically about our report on Fort McMurray, clearly we laid out in this report that there were a number of conflicting indicators up there as to whether or not the growth that has finally resulted was going to happen.

Certainly, when you look back to the period of 1999 through to the year 2003, there were a number of releases of property up there, and there was some tightening up of the real estate. However, it was clear to us from all the people that we spoke to and met with that when the Kyoto accord came in, there was a great deal of uncertainty that came around as to what amount of development would continue. Until that uncertainty was cleared, the housing basically was stabilized.

But from late 2003 to date, yes, it has been very explosive. And you've said some provocative words, words that we wouldn't use, but there was a great rush up there that the municipality, the province, and others were not prepared for because of the length of time it takes to develop suitable property. You must remember where we are. There's a very short building period up there, and it takes at least two years to get enough land ready. If I had a criticism of the private sector together with the public sector, it's that they all did not see the amount that was going to be coming at them and had an insufficient inventory of developed property – developed property, not built houses, just developed property – that you could put the houses on. You needed a two-year supply, and it was essentially nil.

Mr. Eggen: Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ray Prins, please, followed by Harry Chase.

9:50

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the minister for the excellent report. I can say, as well, that I worked with her quite a bit on the Seniors Advisory Council and, more recently, with the task force review. I've travelled around the province quite a bit and experienced a lot of the needs and concerns of seniors throughout the province.

Looking at page 31 in your report, it says, "Government policies, programs, and plans effectively anticipate and respond to the needs of current and future seniors." That's your goal 3. I guess in travelling around the province, we find that in Alberta we have about 10 per cent seniors. Some of the other provinces have more because their young people are over here. What we're anticipating is that

within 20 or 25 years we're going to be up to 20 per cent seniors within our population. So my question is in relation to this goal 3. To anticipate and respond to the needs of current and future seniors, are we doing enough to look after the needs that are going to come? There's going to be a kind of bulge of seniors coming up within a few years. That might not apply to this document here, but it does show that you're anticipating and planning for this. What are we doing to look after the needs, you know, two years, three years, five years, 10 years down the road when we have an enormous amount of seniors? When the baby boomers hit the seniors situation and even with the changing demographics in our lodges now, the needs are going to increase exponentially? Are we doing enough to deal with these things?

Mrs. Fritz: I think that we are anticipating and planning and doing it very well. Part of that is because of the good work of your committee, the Seniors Advisory Council. I know that you're aware of how we are moving forward for seniors in a number of areas for services that we provide. A particular one that you're interested in, based on your question, I would think, is housing, and I'm going to ask Robin to respond to that, about how we have the RASL program and things for growing areas.

Mr. Wigston: As far as anticipating the needs, we have started the rural affordable supportive living program, which targets seniors who have more needs than a standard lodge and may not be into long-term care. We've been fortunate to get some dollars through that program and continue to look to get more dollars for the future. It's an interesting dilemma, I guess, looking around the province because there are some areas that need that type of facility today, and some may not need it for 10 years. So the planning as you go forward is not easy, but working with local communities and local groups in those communities – they're the ones that tell us what the needs are, and they're the ones that feed the information to us when the projects and the funding are available.

Mr. Prins: Thank you. I guess related to that, are we doing enough to help educate future seniors – I guess those are people like ourselves – and seniors to plan financially to deal with the impact of some of these additional costs that they're going to incur when they become seniors? Are we doing enough, I guess, in a larger scale education program to help people to realize what their needs are going to be as they become seniors?

Mrs. Fritz: I think that's an area that we could improve on, you know, overall. But it is a responsibility of people as they plan for their futures. I mean, we're all individuals, and it is the responsibility of individuals to have their financial plan in place for their future. But we could assist. When seniors call us, what they're looking towards is what programs are offered through the ministry. Whether it's our dental program, for example, when they reach the age of 65, is there any – I mean, nutrition we hear about. But, as you know, oral care is very much a part of that. People with dentures and having just care overall for their oral health look to: is there a dental program available?

Of course, you're familiar with the one that we do have, which is that each individual within a certain income, which is a fairly moderate income, can have a \$5,000 dental program over a five-year period. That's up to \$60,000 per couple. You know, if you're earning \$60,000 per couple, that's \$5,000 each that they can access. So that's the financial kind of interest that people have in the department.

Mr. Prins: Thanks.

The Chair: Madam Minister, it's been the custom of this committee when time is very limited and if there are members still with questions to ask that we get the questions on the record and the minister and the department respond in writing through the committee clerk to the entire committee.

Mrs. Fritz: Okay.

The Chair: At the moment I still have three members who have indicated an interest in asking questions, and I would now ask them to please read their questions, both questions, into the record. If your department could respond in writing, we would appreciate it.

Ms Pastoor: Mr. Chair, I'm just not too sure which of the gazillion questions I've got here that I'll choose, but I will choose this one. What plan has the ministry got to distribute the funds, or how have they used that money that came into the ministry as a result of the dismantling of the provincial PDD board?

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you.

Ms Blakeman: Do your supplemental as well.

Ms Pastoor: Well, the supplemental I'm going to change if I may. I'd like the ministry to recognize that there is a huge move across the province to actually disband long-term care in itself and that that is shrinking. So some of the efforts that the deputy minister had talked about in terms of long-term care: I think that you should be looking at some of those things for designated assisted living, assisted living, enhanced lodges, lodges. There are a million things out there, and long-term care, I think, is going to be such a small number. I have lots of thoughts on that, but I think that that's to be noted.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.
Mr. Danyluk, please.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Madam Minister, first of all, I want to compliment you on the commitment and the dedication that you have afforded your ministry or individuals that are affected by your ministry. I want to say that your compassion and personality really fit the ministry. It's been a pleasure to work with you.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you.

Mr. Danyluk: Now, my question is, I would say, very precise. On pages 291 to 296 of the Auditor General's report there were six PDD community boards who were reporting expenses that included payments made to individuals whose disabilities did not meet the definition of developmental disability as defined by legislation. Our government gets accused on a regular basis of a cookie-cutter approach. In some ways I support the direction that may have taken place as the Auditor General may be looking at it from a different aspect, but I think we need to have that flexibility. I guess my question is: what has PDD done to address this situation?

Secondly, when does PDD expect to have all of the grandfathered individual issues addressed?

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.
Mr. Chase.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. In the 2005 grant blue book it indicates that Seniors and Community Supports provided a \$4,725,000 grant to 994552 NWT Ltd. Would the minister please provide some background on this company, such as what services it provided for seniors, the value for money received?

My supplemental: was this done through a competitive bidding process?

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Again, on behalf of the entire committee I would like to thank Madam Minister Yvonne Fritz and her staff and the Auditor General today for their time and commitment and patience with our committee. We wish you the very best as your proceed with your budget for next year and also the printing and publishing. I look forward to seeing your annual report later this fall.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, committee members.

The Chair: You're free to leave if you wish. Again, thank you.

Now we will proceed to item 5 on the agenda. That's Other Business. There has been an update on the delegate selection for the conference in Charlottetown that is going to occur in September, the Public Accounts conference, and members would be advised to note the changes that were made in the delegation at the June 6 meeting. I would also advise that the committee clerk is circulating a memo regarding a follow-up item relating to the delegation's conference report from last year. Are there any questions at this time in regards to that?

10:00

There were some changes at the last meeting. The motion that was originally moved by Reverend Abbott was questioned by other members of the committee. The motion that was presented by Reverend Abbott was voted on and supported by the committee, but it was changed.

The chair indicated a wish to select or appoint the Member for Edmonton-Calder to attend the conference, but the question of whether the chair could further delegate or nominate someone in their absence was questioned. The chair ceded. The chair of the meeting left. It was chaired by a government member, it was voted on, and it was decided that that person's name must come from a hat. The person selected by that process was Mr. Lindsay. I'm sure Mr. Lindsay will do a very, very, very good job representing us along with the vice-chair, Doug Griffiths, at the conference in Charlottetown.

So that's what happened, and that's who will be attending the Public Accounts conference in Charlottetown.

Ms Blakeman: So we now have a situation where the only committee that is set up to have an opposition member chair it – and traditionally we've always sent a member of the opposition and a government member to any of these meetings – is now going without a representative from the opposition?

The Chair: Well, in all fairness, since I've been chair of this committee, I have not attended any of those conferences.

Ms Blakeman: You haven't, sir, but you've delegated someone else from the opposition to go.

The Chair: No.

Ms Blakeman: Yes, you did. You sent me.

The Chair: In my time I cannot recall any opposition member indicating a wish to go. What we have been doing in the past is drawing names from the hat, and for any opposition member who has indicated an interest in attending, their name has not come out. It may have come out as an alternate, but it hasn't come out as the person who was the first out of the hat, so to say. So there has not been in my knowledge an opposition member go in the last number of years. I have felt that the money should have been used, instead of travelling, to have meetings outside session.

This year there was a motion from Reverend Abbott, as I recall, that either the chair, the vice-chair, or their designate go. I was quite willing to designate the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, David Eggen, and he had indicated in the opposition lounge that, yes, he would go. It was not satisfactory to the committee; therefore, the delegate now is Mr. Lindsay.

Mr. Griffiths: If I can comment, Ms Blakeman. Last year the 2005 CCPAC had four government members because no opposition members wanted to go. I agree with you: I think it's unfortunate.

I believe we've had a lot of discussion over the last couple of months about whether it's the chair and vice-chair designates that go or whether names should be drawn out of a hat. I've only been on this committee for two years, but I think there needs to be some clarification around the policy that the committee will have for sending designates. I think it's a worthy discussion about whether or not it should be assured that a government member and an opposition member do attend the conferences to ensure the professional development of all members. I think we should have that discussion, clarify that policy, and put it in writing so that this doesn't happen again.

Dr. Brown: Mr. Chairman, I made my views known with respect to the necessity of having some opposition members present at such conferences at the previous meeting. It's my recollection that there was, in fact, an amendment, which I proposed and which was passed, which stated that a member of the same party as the person unable to attend would be given preference in the selection. Now, in the present instance it appears not to have transpired, no disrespect to the Member for Stony Plain. I guess I'm asking whether or not that preference was made and whether or not there was anyone from the same party as the chair who had indicated their willingness to attend.

The Chair: Dr. Brown, the chair was challenged by a government member, and I'm obligated to cede the chair to another member. In this case it was the designated vice-chair, Mr. Prins, I'm recalling. I cannot recall this being discussed, your idea.

Dr. Brown: Well, the minutes which were circulated reflect that amended motion that I just related, the intention of that motion. I just read them this morning.

Mr. Prins: I think at that point no opposition member put their name into the draw, so that's why that happened that way.

Dr. Brown: Mr. Chairman, could we refer to the minutes of the last meeting on that point?

The Chair: We'll get the clerk read the motion.

Mrs. Dacyshyn: The motion that was passed following the amendment that Dr. Brown proposed was:

In the event that the Chair or Deputy Chair could not attend or would not attend the CCPAC Conference in Charlottetown, PEI in September, the alternate attendee be appointed using a lottery process, where interested individuals submit their names for consideration, with the attendee's name being drawn from those submitted, provided that preference be given in such a lottery to a person of the same Party as the person unable to attend the conference.

The Chair: George.

Mr. Rogers: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. With all due respect to yourself and other members here, I think it's really not productive to try to redo the decision at this point. The decision has been made. I think some very good comments made. I, too, am of the opinion that it's desirable for a lot of very good reasons that we have both opposition and government represented at these conferences. I would suggest that all members give some deep thought to something in their own way of thinking and their individual party principles that would allow that to happen.

I think Mr. Griffiths' suggestion that we have that discussion, whether we set aside 20 minutes towards the end of a future meeting, have that serious discussion and set the appropriate policies, will get us away from this discussion in the future and will get that desired result. But to go on trying to regurgitate what we've already decided: I say that we move on, look forward to the report from the individuals that attend, and have the discussion to put the policies in place so that we don't have a repeat of this, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you.

The Chair: I agree with you completely. I think we should take the advice of Mr. Rogers. That's it. It's not fair to Mr. Lindsay, and it's not fair to the committee.

Mr. Griffiths: If I may, Mr. Chair. You can tell me whether this is out of order or not, but I do believe that we should start now to have a discussion about a policy for the next time to clarify it. I would be happy to present a motion that indicates that one government member and one opposition member always be designated to attend. Whether it's drawn from a hat or it's designated by a party doesn't matter to me. But I would be happy to present a motion at this time that for future conference meetings one government member and one opposition member always attend notwithstanding any boycott by any particular party, to ensure that the professional development of members of this committee is spread evenly.

The Chair: The chair, at the risk of being overruled, is going to take the advice of Mr. Rogers. I think we should have a discussion of this. We've got lots of time before the next conference. We should have a discussion among ourselves, and I think we can come to a resolution to this process. I think we need to follow the advice of George Rogers.

If there are no other speakers at this time, I would like to conclude this item on the agenda.

Mr. Griffiths: Okay. Can we assure that this issue is on the agenda for the next meeting?

The Chair: Yes. Thank you. It certainly will be on the agenda.

Now, the date of the next meeting is Wednesday, September 6,

with the Hon. Mr. Rob Renner, Minister of Municipal Affairs, if the House is still in session. If not, it would be, I assume, sometime in 2007.

Mr. Rogers: Motion to adjourn.

The Chair: Moved by Mr. Rogers to adjourn. Thank you. All in favour? Opposed?

[The committee adjourned at 10:10 a.m.]