



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Seniors and Housing
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, March 17, 2021
9 a.m.

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The 30th Legislature
Second Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Ministry of Seniors and Housing

Hon. Josephine Pon, Minister

Darren Baptista, Executive Director and Senior Financial Officer, Financial Services

9 a.m.

Wednesday, March 17, 2021

[Ms Goodridge in the chair]

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

The Chair: Good morning, everybody. I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everybody. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors and Housing for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2022.

I would like to ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. My name is Laila Goodridge. I am the MLA for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche and the chair of this committee. We will begin, starting to my right.

Member Ceci: Yep. That's me. Joe Ceci, deputy – I don't know if I'm the deputy chair of this committee.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah, you are.

Member Ceci: I am? Okay. Deputy chair. That's why I'm here. I'm from Calgary-Buffalo. Good morning, everyone.

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

Mr. Turton: Morning, everyone. Searle Turton, MLA for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

Mr. Amery: Good morning. Mickey Amery, MLA, Calgary-Cross.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

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

Ms Sigurdson: Good morning. Lori Sigurdson, Edmonton-Riverview.

Mr. Huffman: Good morning. Warren Huffman, committee clerk.

The Chair: Now we will go to the members who are participating virtually. When I call your name, please introduce yourself for the record.

Mark Smith.

Mr. Smith: Good morning, everybody. My name is Mark Smith, and I am the MLA for Drayton Valley-Devon.

The Chair: Jackie Lovely.

Ms Lovely: Good morning, everyone. Jackie Lovely from the Camrose constituency.

The Chair: Brad Rutherford.

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

The Chair: Shane Getson.

Mr. Getson: Good morning, everyone. Substituting for MLA Glasgo, MLA Shane Getson from Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland, as you can tell from behind the screen. If there is any doubt, it is God's country.

The Chair: Due to the current landscape we are all in, all ministry staff will be participating in the estimates debate virtually.

Minister, I would ask that you please introduce yourself and the officials you have with you in the room.

Ms Pon: Good morning, everyone. Thank you, Madam Chair. It is Josephine Pon here, the Minister of Seniors and Housing. Thank you so much for this opportunity to share my estimates with the team here. I would like to introduce my team here: Susan Taylor, our deputy minister; David Williams, the ADM of housing division; Evan Romanow, ADM of seniors services division; and Darren Baptista, senior financial officer. I also have my deputy ministry officer here and my chief of staff, Shannon Gill, and my press secretary, Natalie Tomczak, and also my senior policy adviser, Dylan Topal. This is my team here.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

At this time I would like to note the following substitutions for the record. We have Member Ceci for Mr. Carson and filling in as deputy chair for Ms Sigurdson; Mr. Turton for Mr. Neudorf; and Mr. Getson for Ms Glasgo.

Now, before we begin, I would like to note that in accordance with the recommendations from the chief medical officer of health, attendees at today's meeting are advised to leave the appropriate distance between themselves and other meeting participants. In addition, as indicated in the February 25, 2021, memo from the hon. Speaker Cooper, I would remind everyone of committee room protocols in line with health guidelines, which require members to wear masks in committee rooms and while seated except when speaking, at which time they may choose not to wear a face covering.

There are a few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by the *Hansard* staff, and committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. Audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Those participating virtually are asked to turn on their camera while speaking and to please mute their microphone when not speaking. Members participating virtually who wish to be placed on the speakers list are asked to please e-mail or send a message in the group chat to the committee clerk, and members in the room are asked to please signal to the chair. I would now ask that everyone set their cellphones and all other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for the consideration of the main estimates. A total of three hours have been scheduled for consideration of the estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. Standing Order 59.01(6) establishes the speaking rotation and speaking times. In brief, the minister or a member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of her comments a 60-minute speaking block for the Official Opposition begins, followed by a 20-minute speaking block for independent members, if any, and then a 20-minute speaking block for the government caucus. Individuals may only speak for up to 10 minutes at a time, but the time may be combined between the member and the minister. The rotation of speaking time will then follow the same rotation of the Official Opposition, independent members, and the government caucus, with individual speaking times set to five minutes for both the member and the ministry. These times may be combined, making it a 10-minute block. One final note. Please remember that discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not speaking times are combined. If members have any questions regarding speaking times

or the rotation, please feel free to send an e-mail or a message to the committee clerk about the process.

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. Is there anyone opposed to having a break? Hearing none, we will schedule a break near the midway point.

Ministry officials, at the direction of the minister, may address the committee. Ministry officials are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit, appropriately distanced, at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

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

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

The vote on the estimates and any amendments will occur in Committee of Supply shortly this afternoon. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting that they are to be moved. The original amendment must be deposited with the committee clerk, and as a courtesy an electronic version of the signed original should be provided to the committee clerk for distribution to all committee members.

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

Ms Pon: Thank you so much, Madam Chair. Good morning, everyone and members of the committee. I'm pleased to be with you today to present the 2021-22 estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing.

As we all understand only too well, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives in many cases and our abilities to earn a livelihood. Alberta's government has responded to protect lives and livelihoods; they go hand in hand. As the pandemic continues, we are here for Albertans every step of the way, and we are here for seniors.

Alberta's government allocates about \$30 million to protect residents and staff in seniors' lodges during the pandemic. The funding ensures that seniors' lodges have the resources they need such as staffing, cleaning materials, and PPE. These resources and supplies help to keep residents of these facilities safe and healthy during this pandemic. We will continue to provide appropriate support and resources.

We all appreciate the critical work seniors' lodge operators and their staff are doing to keep the seniors in their care safe and also to contain any outbreaks. Earlier this year our government thanked and recognized up to 5,400 lodge workers for their hard work and dedication with the critical worker benefit, a one-time payment of \$1,200. As our vaccination program rolls out, we continue to work with lodge operators on solutions to protect our most vulnerable.

My ministry's 2021-22 operating budget is \$673 million, an increase of \$6 million, or 1 per cent, over 2020-21. We have about 250 staff. The ministry's programs and services support the safety and well-being of seniors, a population that now is about over 665,000.

Seniors and Housing's budget focuses on support for seniors and Albertans who are most in need of affordable housing. It is our commitment to maintain the seniors' benefits for the most in need.

In housing we are working to transform the province's affordable housing system to address the growing demand and improve accessibility for Albertans in need.

I will now take a few moments to discuss the specifics of my ministry's estimates. In 2021-22 Seniors and Housing will provide \$464 million in seniors' financial assistance programs. The financial impacts of the pandemic include lower incomes, ranging from reduced work hours to job loss, and also drawing on retirement savings earlier than planned.

9:10

In light of this, we paused plans for Alberta seniors' benefit program changes for new applications, something that we announced in Budget 2020, and nothing has changed. The current benefits calculation will be continue to be used. Our Alberta seniors' benefit provides an average monthly benefit of \$144 to over 165,000 seniors. Alberta's most vulnerable seniors will continue to receive one of the highest income supplements in the country.

Our government will also provide stable funding to our two loan programs, the seniors' home adaptation and repair program and the seniors' property tax deferral program. These programs support seniors who wish to maintain a home in their chosen community, something that is so important to the quality of life of many older adults. This is also our platform commitment. We are also making a modest increase to the special needs assistance for seniors program and the seniors' home adaptation and repair program grants to address growing caseloads.

Now I will take some time to talk about our commitment to provide safe, stable, affordable housing for seniors and Albertans with low income. Building on the 1,200 units that have been completed in the past two years, capital plan 2021 allocates \$238 million over three years to provide 1,800 new and regenerated housing units and to maintain the 26,700-unit provincially owned portfolio. Of the 1,200 completed units, over 500 are seniors' lodge units and are in projects that are a mix of lodge and seniors self-contained.

About 110,000 Albertans currently live in more than 58,000 government-subsidized housing units. In 2021-22 the Alberta Social Housing Corporation will spend \$49 million on maintenance in the affordable housing system. Budget 2021 would allocate less capital funding by \$66 million over 2020. That's because the projects under way are being completed, and we are working on the recommendations from the Affordable Housing Review Panel, which I will discuss in more detail in a moment. In the meantime all previous capital funding commitments are being honoured.

As I mentioned, 1,800 units for seniors, families, and people who need supportive housing are moving forward. In addition, there are projects for about 500 shelter spaces under way in Edmonton and as well in Red Deer. All these activities will create more than 1,700 jobs. We continue our commitment to the indigenous housing capital grant program, allocating about \$30 million over three years. We continue to review innovative community options to enable people, including seniors, to stay in their chosen communities. We are also examining the mixed-income model for housing and partnerships with private providers. This will allow us to provide more housing options for Albertans in need while making taxpayer dollars go further.

We know how important it is for Albertans to have access to safe and stable affordable housing. The last year has reinforced that fact. Our government will add \$16 million into rental assistance. To ensure Alberta's rent supplement programs meet the needs of Albertans during this pandemic and beyond, my ministry has conducted a program review. We have nearly completed the review,

which will ensure that we make the most of available federal funding. I look forward to announcing the details soon.

Alberta's government is developing an affordable housing plan to better meet the needs of Albertans in these challenging times. The plan was one of the 19 recommendations accepted by the government from the Affordable Housing Review Panel's final report.

Our new plan will define a vision for affordable housing and map out how we act on the panel's recommendations. The panel stated a need to redefine the government's role, tap into committee expertise, expand partnerships, reward innovations, and to simplify the system.

The goal is to transform the affordable housing system and to offer flexible, fair, and inclusive housing options which meet the needs of Albertans now and in the future. This supports our commitment to ensure that Albertans are getting the most value for their tax dollars. We continue to work closely with our federal, municipal, nonprofit, and private-sector partners on innovative housing solutions for Albertans who need it the most.

Ninety-two per cent of our ministry's budget provides financial or housing support to seniors and Albertans most in need. Alberta's government will continue to support vulnerable Albertans, especially seniors, during the pandemic. We will maintain the seniors' benefit for those most in need, and we will provide affordable housing.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the estimates for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Wonderful timing on your speech.

With that, for the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Do members and the minister wish to share their time?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

The Chair: Minister?

Ms Pon: Yes, I do.

The Chair: Fantastic.

We will move to Ms Sigurdson from the ND caucus to start out.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, good morning, everyone. Nice to see you, Minister, even if you're, you know, only virtually here.

I guess that I just want to start with a few comments myself. Whenever we think about any programs, we always ask the questions: who benefits, and who are we serving? That's really top of mind for me. I think that it's very important to keep that in mind, about what populations we're serving. Of course, also, you spoke about this already, Minister, just the challenging times we're in. Obviously, it's a pandemic, and we know that for seniors, which is one of the significant populations of this ministry that's served, I would say that they are the most negatively impacted of any demographic in Alberta. We know that 1,200 Albertans have died in continuing care due to COVID. We know that the pandemic exacerbated already-existing issues: social isolation, elder abuse, stress for caregivers.

We know that the seniors population is growing very quickly, the quickest growth of any group or demographic, again, in Alberta. As you said, there are 665,000 seniors, approximately, and that's going to, you know, be over a million in about 10, 15 years. We also know that senior men tend to still die younger than women. I mean, that gap is closing, but a lot of seniors are women. On average, we know

that seniors live to about 84. We're living longer, healthier lives, so that population is becoming even larger.

In terms of housing we know that single seniors are, again, a group that is high needs in this area, and that is another area that the ministry serves in terms of housing. We know that female-led, lone-parent families, indigenous families, Albertans living with disabilities and mental health challenges have high needs for affordable housing. I guess that something that guides me and, I guess, probably even got me into politics in the first place is that I wanted a fair and just society. We know that the true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members. I think your ministry is poised and does serve vulnerable members, and making sure that that is done is crucial, you know, for us to be having a just society.

9:20

Certainly, in the budget documents it talks about the three fiscal anchors that sort of underpin the work and that kind of flow from the MacKinnon report, that we got some time ago. You want the debt-to-GDP ratio to be under 30 per cent, 30 per cent or lower; you want to move expenses in line with comparator provinces; and then after the pandemic you want to get back on track with the path to balance. So those are the three fiscal anchors that are identified.

However, there are missing pieces, Minister. The missing piece is that you're only looking at expenses; you don't look at revenues. That's kind of a big hole in the government's budget documents. We collect \$13.3 billion less in revenue than the next-lowest tax jurisdiction. That's a lot of money. We certainly could redistribute the wealth in Alberta. We know that there was a \$4.7 billion corporate handout that certainly gave money to big corporations, and we know that we have the greatest inequality of any province in Canada.

These are all deeply concerning to me because I feel like there's only one side of the ledger that's being looked at, and that creates a skewed view. You're being directed to make decisions based on that. Those are faulty decisions because of that.

The Chair: Ms Sigurdson, I would just remind you that you must flow your questions through the chair and not directly at the minister.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. My apologies, Madam Chair.

So I just wanted to say a few opening remarks about, I guess, some of the concerns I have with how the budget documents were created.

I'd like to start, actually, with some questions now. Looking at the strategic plan, Madam Chair, on page 9, objective 3, supporting Albertans most in need, the third bullet there says: "support seniors with low income most in need; promote healthy aging in seniors' chosen communities; and work with other ministries . . ." Anyway, you can see that. This is phrasing that you've used repeatedly since you've become minister. I just want you to please help me understand what it is that you mean when you say: seniors most in need. What does that mean? Do you quantify that? Let me know what that means.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Sigurdson. Again, I'll just very quickly remind you to make sure that you're flowing your questions through the chair and not directly at the minister.

Minister, for a reply.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's good to see you as well, MLA Sigurdson, virtually. It is important for my seniors ministry to serve the seniors most in need. The definition of seniors most in need in terms of housing as well as services: what we focus on right

now is the seniors who are low income and which are most in need of the different kinds of services or housing. The Alberta government wants to look after the seniors most in need and has provided \$8 billion in services and supports to Alberta seniors each year.

We are maintaining the seniors' benefit for those most in need, as I mentioned, ensuring that vulnerable seniors can count on this stable source of income. I'll remind you that Alberta's most vulnerable seniors will continue to receive one of the highest income supplements in the country and also that our seniors' benefits are one of the reasons Alberta has the lowest senior poverty rate in Canada.

For the people that are seniors, we offer a number of different supports for the seniors in Alberta, including the Alberta seniors' benefit, special needs assistance for seniors, supplementary accommodation benefits, the seniors' home adaptation and repair program, seniors' community grants, and the seniors' property tax deferral program. We identify all these services that serve the purposes of all the seniors who need these services.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.
Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. In your comments, through the chair, there's no definition. I mean, I understand the programs that are being provided, but there is no definition. I guess that's my question, and that was not answered. Certainly, we have a market-basket measure, a low-income cut-off, a low-income measure. These are sort of accepted measures. Statistics Canada uses them. You're just saying "in need." It kind of feels like it might be arbitrary. There's no sort of definition of it, and that was my question.

I just want to refer to the annual report of the ministry. Actually, we have lost some ground in Alberta in terms of a comparison of your performance indicator. Seniors' income relative to the population is less. It's gone down for Alberta compared to Canada, and that was an indicator your ministry indicated. Even though you seemed to indicate that seniors in Alberta are better off in terms of median income and comparators, Madam Chair, it is actually different in Alberta. We have a different measure because we have higher incomes in general. Of course, we know that relative poverty rates, relative incomes are what's most important to look at, not absolutes. I just wanted to make that point.

It sounds like there isn't one. I just did a little bit of arithmetic myself. I looked at the special-needs income thresholds, and you get no support if your income is over \$28,785. I figured out that in terms of, like, a 40-hour workweek, 52 weeks a year, actually it's only \$13.84 an hour, and that's, of course, significantly lower than the minimum wage, which is \$15, and the living wage, which is \$16.51. These are quite low measures. I just, I guess, wanted some assistance in understanding why those were chosen, but because the minister has not been able to respond to that, Madam Chair, I'll just go on to the next question I have.

I want to go to the fiscal plan, page 109, and it's along the same lines. Let me just find it here. There's a nice, big chart completely explaining what you have shared with us, through the chair, Minister. One of the things I remember so distinctly from last year's estimates was how much you stressed that the Alberta seniors' benefit was being paused, stopping the indexing, and now I don't really see any documents explaining that. It's, like: no, that's been a cut now. I just wonder if you could speak to that because you had made it very clear. I think I had said a cut, through the chair, and

you corrected me. This pause is happening again this year. Has it become a cut? Madam Chair, that's a question for the minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Sigurdson.
To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Let me emphasize again that we paused the benefit, not cut it. Once again, in this year's budget we increased the ASB program, reflecting the anticipated caseload. That increase enabled eligible seniors to continue to receive the monthly income and supplement. As I mentioned, again, the ASB in this year's budget hasn't been cut or changed. The increased caseload that we anticipate is due to the increasing number of seniors in our province, and COVID-19 has also made a financial impact on older adults. We understand that that range is because of reduced work hours, through job loss, or drawing their retirement savings earlier. That's why we want to continue to make sure that we provide the necessary support to those seniors that financially require it and, again, make sure that the most in need are earning a stable income.

9:30

Again, the pause for the ASB changes: once again, the most vulnerable seniors continue to receive the most, highest income supplements in the country, and our seniors' benefit programs are one of the reasons that Alberta has the lowest senior poverty rate in Canada. We understand and we recognize the need to support our most vulnerable Albertans, particularly during the pandemic. Seniors have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. We will continue to support the seniors most in need, and you can find that in our budget.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair. The Alberta seniors' benefit line item has certainly increased, but that's because of, as we talked about – both the minister spoke about this and I spoke about this – the very fast-growing seniors population in Alberta. It's the aggregate number that has gone up because there are more seniors. The individual seniors: even though the budget line has gone up, it means no more money in any senior's pocket. It's just to ensure that the growing population of seniors – I just want to make that very clear. There is no big change there.

Just a quick question, through the chair to the minister: if it's still paused, when is the pause going to be lifted for the indexing of ASB?

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. For the estimates we are talking about the 2021-22 budget, and I would like to focus on this. Once again, for 2021 the Alberta seniors' benefit program was increased by \$23.4 million, so we increased the caseloads with no changes to the benefit. As you can see, the three-year business plan on page 93 is showing that the entire Alberta seniors' benefits increases by \$65 million over the next three years. That's our commitment to ensure that our seniors are supported through this difficult time.

I may have mentioned, Madam Chair, that I am proud to serve as co-chair of the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors Forum with the federal Minister of Seniors. Through this forum I continue to advocate for older Albertans and Canadians to make sure that we maintain needed support for aging

safely and independently. Alberta renewed commitments in Budget '21 to offer this high-level financial assistance and help keep the poverty rate for seniors the lowest in Canada.

The Chair: Minister, thank you.

Ms Sigurdson would like to reply. Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. I'd like to move on now to page 110. Right at the top of that page in the fiscal plan it talks about, you know: Budget 2021 "provides \$16 million reinstatement to the Rental Assistance program." This comes after the previous cut of 24 per cent and a period of time when people did not have access to the funds during the pandemic, Madam Chair, and that's a really tragic thing. Certainly I, like many MLAs, heard from people who were going to lose their housing and be precariously housed during the pandemic and move into homelessness. At that time we did not have the opportunity to have this program, so I'd just like the minister to say how long applications for the rent supplement program were closed for, and when are they going to be opened?

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. We are proud that we have about \$68 million in rental assistance. That provides financial assistance to eligible households, and they are in the rental housing from private landlords. We also, as the private member mentioned, injected \$16 million into rental assistance to support more Albertans who are in need of housing, particularly during the pandemic. Last year has reinforced just how important it is, we understand, for Albertans to have access to safe, stable, and affordable housing. The rental assistance program: that's being reviewed to ensure that it meets the needs for Albertans during these difficult times and with the increases of funding so that we will be able to support more Albertans who are in need of housing. The program just closed in October 2019, and under our Affordable Housing Review Panel last year – the reviews are very comprehensive and detail our review on the affordable housing as a whole.

We are looking for the long term. We are looking for solutions, and that's why I'm pleased to share the affordable housing review by the end of December. We are working very, very tirelessly to create the strategic plans on this affordable housing, and that's why we're looking at those that provide better affordable housing and a program that serves more people. We'll continue to do that and increase in line with the recommendations and also the Affordable Housing Review Panel's final report. We're going to present the strategic plans sometime mid-year this year.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

To Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair. Well, despite some of the comments of the minister that we just heard – in fact, the cut to the rent supplement program from the 2019 budget meant people did not have this \$16 million. This is, like, a recurring theme, it seems, in the choices that this government is making, that we're supposed to be . . .

Ms Lovely: Point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: All right. Point of order to Ms Lovely.

Ms Lovely: Under 23(h). Yes. I just find that these are allegations made against the minister, and I personally find them unfounded.

The Chair: Thank you.

Member Irwin.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Madam Chair. No. The member is actually doing a really good job of pulling together themes, and I can certainly say that she's been quite respectful, so I would like her to be able to continue. Please find that it's clearly not a point of order.

The Chair: I appreciate the arguments on both sides. I will tend to side with the Official Opposition on this one and do not find this to be a point of order, but I will remind all members to ensure that they are directing all of their comments through the chair and not directly at one another.

Thank you.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. As I was saying, this \$16 million: 24 per cent was taken out of the budget back in 2019 for the rent supplement program, so there's been years of the support not being available. Of course, I completely agree with the words that the minister is saying, that we absolutely need to support people, but the actions and her words are incongruent because that funding was cut. Now it's being reinstated, so we're just sort of back to status quo before, you know, the pandemic. Throughout the pandemic it would've made such a huge difference to so many people I know that I've spoken with personally. It would've made a difference to their lives.

On top of that, we know that there is federal funding for the rent supplement program, the Canada housing benefit, that seven of the provinces – and I know there are others on the cusp of signing agreements. Alberta had reported in their annual report last year, Madam Chair, that they would be signing an agreement in April of 2020. Well, that still has not happened, and that means that funding – it was matching dollars for Albertans – could not be in people's pockets so that they could have good housing during the pandemic. I feel like this is just such a tragedy because I know the challenges and the suffering that people are experiencing. Maybe, through the chair, Minister, you can explain to me what's going on with the rent supplement program and the Canada housing benefit. Why hasn't the UCP take advantage of this program? It's federal dollars being left on the table. People are suffering. They're in a pandemic. We need that money. Why has not an agreement been made?

Thank you, Madam Chair.

9:40

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Sigurdson.

With that, on to the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's correct that our government and the federal government continue to work together to provide quality affordable housing that meets the needs of Albertans. According to 2019, yes, there's a 10-year bilateral agreement between us and the government under the national housing strategy. We invested \$678 million to protect, renew, and expand social and community housing, and it's matching dollars. It's very important to support and prioritize all the related projects for repair, construction, and affordability.

As I mentioned, our governments are matching dollars, so we contribute \$339 million in this federal funding. We will continue to anticipate that Alberta will receive our full federal funding allocations. My ministry has offered to reach an agreement with Canada Mortgage and Housing, keep in contact, and also make sure that we have that agreement for the Canada housing benefit as well. The federal government announced that with the new Canada housing benefit, Alberta will receive an additional \$222 million

under the CHB that we can utilize for the rental assistance program. We made a commitment to working with the federal government, as always, and access the programs that will allow Alberta to receive this \$222 million of federal funding for most supplements provided directly to the tenants. We are continuing to work hard for Albertans.

The Chair: Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. I mean, but the point is that that agreement has not been signed. The Canada housing benefit is not coming to Albertans. It was back in April 2020 when that agreement was supposed to be signed. I know that people are personally getting letters saying that they're going to be kicked off the rent supplement program on March 31 of this year. The minister is saying: yes, of course we're going to work with them, blah blah blah. But there's months and months and months where things haven't been done. The money isn't flowing to Albertans. This is a problem. I'd like to know when that's going to happen.

I'd also like to go to page 191 of the estimates and look at other transfers from the government of Canada. It shows that the budget has gone down about 9 and a half million dollars or something like that from what we used to receive from the federal government, and I'm just wondering if this is because the government has been so slow to get these agreements signed, through the chair to the minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Sigurdson.
To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. As I mentioned before, we are working very closely and regularly, myself and my team, to keep in contact with the federal minister and discuss all the funding and all the other issues so that we do have the pre-existing agreement and that we have the agreement in place and we have a plan to execute and utilize all the funding from the federal government.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
To Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, Madam Chair, that remains to be seen because we haven't got an agreement. That funding is not coming. It's not in Albertans' pockets during a very difficult time. That is a tragedy, and I really do want to say, through you to the minister, how important it is that that agreement be signed so people can have the supports.

I'm going to turn now to page 136 of the fiscal plan. It just indicates that \$10 million was not dispensed last year. I'm just wondering what projects were not built, what was delayed. I know you've said very clearly, Minister, through the chair, that you care very much about this file, that you want to make sure Albertans have the housing they need, yet you're not spending the money that was allocated in your budget. I wonder why that is, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Sigurdson.
To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. This unused funding: it just will be carried forward. It's just because COVID-19, unfortunately, has changed the world and has changed our lives. Especially in trying to move on some of the projects, some of the programs, it creates more difficulty during the pandemic. We are going to continue to look for opportunities to start any projects and programs that we have in place. We forecast this at about \$206 million, and I remind you that if you refer to our budget, we have allocated \$230 million over three years for affordable housing.

We are planning to build 1,800 more new and regenerated housing units and also 500 shelter spaces and create more than 1,700 jobs and maintain, of course, the 26,700 in the provincially owned portfolio. We were already building in the last two years, before the pandemic, and we already have completed 1,200 units. So this is what we have been doing and making progress on. We are hoping that the COVID-19 pandemic is over very soon and, again, that we can start more projects and build more houses. As well, we have \$95 million allocated for CMR, capital maintenance and renewal, of affordable housing.

We understand that building housing and maintaining it is important. Making sure that all affordable housing and seniors' lodges can be a safe place for seniors and Albertans is important. Also, in total, \$30 million is also for the indigenous housing capital program, and I was pleased to make an announcement yesterday as well in an indigenous community. Even during the pandemic we still have lots going on, and we're looking forward to moving forward even faster after the COVID-19 pandemic is over.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
To Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. Okay. So what you're saying is that due to COVID that \$10 million could not be allocated because of the difficulties with that, but you're assuring us . . .

The Chair: Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Through the chair. Madam Chair, to the minister: that \$10 million will still be in your budget going forward. I appreciate that.

I'm going to look at page 141, Madam Chair. It's family and social supports and housing capital plan details. It has different categories: family and community housing development and renewal; indigenous housing capital plan; long-term governance and funding agreement, infrastructure and housing for Métis settlements; new housing supply, affordable and specialized housing; seniors' housing development and renewal. Certainly, these are all within the minister's allocations. But what's strange to me is that when I look, you know, there's the estimate, the target for '22-23, '23-24, and what happens for three of those categories is that there's nothing, no target in that year. I just would like the minister to speak to that.

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Pon: I'm just reading, Madam Chair. If you can just give me a couple of seconds here.

Once again, the housing capital plan is dropping maybe a bit, and that's because the housing system is very complex, and transformations will take time. We expect the results of the affordable housing review implementation strategy to be available later this year, so we will answer some of the questions. We're also working to expand the use of P3s and also partnerships to leverage other sources and other funding that is from the private sector, civil society, municipalities, and the federal government. This will allow us to provide more housing options for Albertans in need while making taxpayer dollars go further.

9:50

We are continuing to invest in affordable housing. We understand that this is critical. We will continue to do that. Also, we have partnered with – the aboriginal housing funding, as I just

indicated, is not in ours. Also, the long-term guarantee agreement is not with the ministry as well. So I just wanted to clarify that.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

To Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. The minister seems to be indicating, Madam Chair, that under the UCP government we're going to get out, that we're not going to be actually funding affordable housing in our province quite quickly. What we are funding – we can see in the line item indigenous housing capital plan that it says that over three years there's going to be \$30 million. Well, I mean, we need sort of a reference, I guess, to look at that. Our capital plan, when we were government, was \$120 million. I mean, this is a significant reduction and certainly does not meet the need in the indigenous community.

We know, Madam Chair, that this is one of the high-needs groups, that I identified in my opening remarks, that really need support. There is significant support from the federal government in this area. So I'd just like the minister to really, you know, be accountable for this. Why is there so little in this budget line for indigenous people in Alberta? We know that they have very significant issues in being well housed. Why is there such a minuscule amount?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Sigurdson.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Yes, the capital plan for 2021 will be meeting the same level of funding, which is continuing to allocate about \$30 million over three years for the indigenous housing capital program, which is to help accessibility to affordable housing for indigenous people in need. I'm so proud that we just yesterday announced \$1.3 million in funding for four IHCP projects, 70 new affordable seniors' housing units. We will build in Edmonton, Calgary, Victor Lake and surrounding area. Correction. Sorry. I meant to say \$13 million.

This program and also that large share – we also allocated over \$10 million to the organizations, which are First Nations and Métis organization housing partners, working together for private housing and to provide more stable housing for indigenous people. We will continue to do that and all the construction projects so that, in total, we have provided about \$23 million so far to indigenous people, the community. We are so proud of working with them. However, we will continue to review all the applications and things. We designed the program last year, and it's quite well received. I would remind the member, Madam Chair, through you, that the previous government didn't build even one unit in indigenous communities. We spent a total of \$23 million in building affordable . . .

Ms Sigurdson: Madam Chair, there are many other questions that I need to get to, and she's just talking points right now.

The Chair: Ms Sigurdson, while you might not like the answer that the minister is giving, the minister has the right to give an answer.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I'll try to follow it.

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: I'm finished. I'd just remind everyone that we've already, so far, spent \$23 million on building affordable housing units for seniors and for the indigenous community. We are so proud to do that. We will continue to do that, considering that the previous

government hadn't built one unit in indigenous communities in their four-year term.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now to Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, Madam Chair, I just take exception to the last comment. That is completely false, and I just want the record to show that certainly we invested in indigenous housing and worked hard to develop our program, which I think was an excellent program, with the indigenous community.

Turning to pages 180 and 181, schedule 16, schedule 17, and schedule 18, the capital plan, capital grants, and capital investment, you can just see that we're falling off a cliff. You can see estimates under Seniors and Housing: \$141 million next year, \$69 million the next year, then \$29 million. In schedule 17 there's \$51 million, \$35 million, \$10 million, and in capital investments, schedule 18, \$90 million, \$34 million, \$19 million.

Okay. So there's a big change happening in affordable housing in the ministry, Madam Chair. Even though I know that the minister does talk about the affordable housing panel's report, they've already made the decisions. It's clear in the documents here. I'm just asking her to please, you know, be honest with Albertans in that you are privatizing affordable housing, that you're going to have a big sell-off, that that's what's going to happen. Just tell us straight.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. As I mentioned, we are so proud to work with the private sector, nonprofit organizations, and three levels of government as a partner and in partnership; this is not privatization. The housing system is complex, and I mentioned that. We also want to acknowledge that we expect to use P3 partnerships to leverage our source of capital for the funding. This is really important as we are trying to maximize our funding and to build more affordable housing for Albertans. This will allow us to provide, you know, some more housing options for Albertans while making taxpayer dollars go even further and to maximize those dollars.

In terms of the affordable housing . . .

The Chair: Just really quickly, we're in our third 20-minute block.

Ms Pon: Thank you for the reminder, Madam Chair.

The government accepted all 19 recommendations of the experts on the Affordable Housing Review Panel. The final report was submitted in December. There was a press release, and it is posted on our website. The panel identified really clearly the need to redefine the government's role and to work with the community and private-sector organizations to deliver more value for this government's spending, to control spending but maximize the usage of the capital and provide more affordable housing that Albertans need.

Work is under way on the strategic plan that outlines the recommendations for the affordable housing system and also including the real estate asset management plan. The plans we made are for how we are going to act on the Affordable Housing Review Panel recommendations and to ensure the system's ability to respond to the needs of Albertans and to make sure of financial sustainability. That's very important, and that's why we have the very comprehensive details of the affordable housing review from the 10 experts who created that report and provided 19 recommendations to create a long-term, detailed plan for affordable

housing, how to transform it, of course, though it takes time. I'm excited to be looking at the strategic plan sometime this year and to share it with the members.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
To Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's clear, then, that this government is moving away from public housing, and it is going to be a big sell-off.

The minister talked about the real estate, sort of the asset management piece of it. Actually, I have the information from the RFP that went out in January asking for people to do this work for the government. Some of the aspects of it say: develop means of classifying, describing its current state by program, create a report summarizing the Alberta Social Housing company's real estate asset portfolio, develop a process and criteria to identify the highest value properties, identify the top 50 most valuable properties owned by ASHC and those with high opportunities potential.

10:00

Okay; so it is the big sell-off. It's very clear that this UCP government is planning to sell off public housing in our province, so that will create a very different landscape. This RFP went out in January 2021. I would just like to ask the minister: who got this contract?

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. I want to respond to that real estate asset management report first. This is very important. This is part of the panel's recommendations on unlocking the existing equity in the building sector capacity. We are creating a strategy, as I mentioned, for the government on real estate assets. I realized when I took over this ministry that some of the properties had been empty for years, and we were paying the loss on operating expenses, but we weren't utilizing them. That's why it's time for us to maximize taxpayer dollars and control spending, and that's why we had the affordable housing review. Also, asking to have the real estate assets managed controls spending, operating, generates more capital for affordable housing, and probably will provide funding in the future so that more programs will be serviced.

Ms Sigurdson: Madam Chair, no answer was given regarding who got the RFP, but the minister is justifying, so it's very clear that the government is planning to sell off these properties. What the minister is indicating is that they're just empty, you know, that nobody lives in them, sort of suggesting that it's not a concern. But, I mean, one of the key issues is that these units need maintenance and renewal funding. Certainly, when we were government, it was \$1.2 billion we invested in our capital plan and increased maintenance and renewal significantly.

This government immediately cut that \$53 million last budget, and certainly many of the housing management bodies have old stock that needs to be refurbished, but after many, many years of consecutive Conservative governments this funding was not invested, and it created this state. The fix for this isn't just not funding them and selling them off; it's to fix them, you know, or regenerate them, or renew them. That's not the answer, so it's completely going in the wrong way.

There's another concern. I just wonder if the minister, through you, Madam Chair, knows about the concept of financialization. It's something that's kind of new to me, and I sort of learned about

it towards the end of my time as minister, and that's when housing is not just a public good, but actually it's a commodity. It's seen as an investment, a vehicle to increase wealth. What's happening when there are big sell-offs – and we see this, certainly, in seniors' housing like AgeCare. Eighty per cent of five facilities in Calgary were sold last January, and guess what? The owners are a big investment company, and it becomes about making a profit. It's very dangerous to go down this road, so I just want the minister to be very clear about that, that she is moving towards a financialization situation, and that means it's not a public good. Albertans will have less support . . .

Ms Lovely: Point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Ms Lovely.

Ms Lovely: Under 23(h) I just find the member is making allegations once again against a member.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Lovely.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Madam Chair. Again, there were no allegations made against the member. There was nothing direct towards the minister. The member, Ms Sigurdson, was being respectful in her analysis and quite appropriately pointing out where this government has failed.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Irwin. I would just remind all members to ensure they're being respectful, but I do not believe that this was a point of order.
Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to move on to estimates, page 187, section 2, seniors' services. I'm just going to read a little piece from the annual report. It's about the Seniors Advocate. The office of the Seniors Advocate

provided resolution support to seniors and identified systemic issues, to forward recommendations to the Minister to improve seniors services and programs. As part of Budget 2019, the [office of the Seniors Advocate] was consolidated with the Office of the Alberta Health Advocates under the Ministry of Health, which demonstrates a balance of fiscal discipline while maintaining support to seniors.

I'd just like to ask the minister. I know that the Seniors Advocate – it's been told many times – is still working within the Health Advocate's office. What has she heard about the casework, and what has she heard about the larger systemic issues? There have been no reports. The last advocate . . .

Mr. Amery: Point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Amery.

Mr. Amery: Standing Order 23(b). The member is speaking to matters other than the question under discussion. The member has just finished stating that the Seniors Advocate has been moved into the Health department, so there would be no need for the minister to comment on this. We're in a Seniors and Housing estimate discussion. There's no need for the member to continue questioning about something that falls under the Health ministry.

The Chair: Thank you.
To Member Irwin.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Madam Chair. Again, this is absolutely not a point of order. There have been multiple times, including in the Chamber, where the Seniors Advocate has been

discussed by the Minister of Seniors and Housing. It's absolutely relevant. It's still mentioned multiple times, and given the name "Seniors Advocate" it's quite relevant that the member could be asking questions related to that role.

The Chair: Thank you.

After hearing the debate on both sides, I believe that it is important to remind everyone that we are here to discuss the budget estimates and the business plan, and I believe that those questions are straying away. Unless you can tie it back to a line item in the budget or the business plan, I would just urge all members to keep it tight. But I do not find this to be a point of order.

Ms Sigurdson: Madam Chair, I guess I would just – I read specifically from the annual report. Isn't that part of the budget documents? This is a relevant thing. It's identified in the report. I mean, this is for the last fiscal year. I would say so.

The Chair: I do not believe that the annual report is included in part of the budget estimate conversations.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, that's not my understanding, Madam Chair, respectfully. Anyway, I will go on.

The Chair: I will get clarification, Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: If we go to 2.1, program planning and delivery, it's down about a million dollars. I know that in Seniors we're not talking about multimillion-dollar or billion-dollar things like in other ministries. But these programs are crucial to Albertans, and they mean a lot, so any cut is significant. We also see in this 2.4 that seniors community grants is \$900,000, and I just want to again create some context because that was about \$2 million in the last budget that the NDP government had. It's down significantly, yet it's during a pandemic. Community organizations need the support during this time. We know that some of the initiatives like ageism, elder abuse are funded through these line items. I guess I'm asking the minister to sort of explain why it is still such low dollars. Why has it gone down even another million? It already had been reduced significantly.

10:10

If, you know, as the UCP government does say, we want to support civil society, why are you not supporting civil society? Why is it less and less and less? Words saying that you care about that aren't enough. We need funds for people. Again, we know the populations that we're serving here. We're serving seniors, that have contributed to Alberta throughout their lives and deserve to retire in dignity, so I really question the minister, through you, Madam Chair, about why this is not a more robust budget in this regard.

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. I would like, if I may, through you to the member, to just answer the last questions that I didn't have a chance to answer. She did ask me who we did appoint, hire, for that real estate asset management report, and I would like to respond back that for the strategic plan for the ASHC we have hired and appointed Colliers as our agents to work on this plan.

Referring, through you, Madam Chair, to the private member's questions about the grant for seniors: yes, this is important. That's why our team and myself are working very hard looking for different opportunities. They're working through the federal government, municipalities, and also trying to maintain the services

and programs for seniors that will protect them and make sure they're safe and healthy.

Let's go back to aging well. We want to make sure that seniors can stay in the community they've chosen, close to their friends and family. Also, this funding, aging well, helps local organizations improve the lives of seniors by funding in the community the basics initially that remove the barriers and help seniors stay in their homes and engage as a community. We understand that that's really important, so we continue their funding at this moment. Also, this year's funding will continue to support and respond to the need for delivery to senior populations, prevention of elderly abuse. Also, it is the final year of funding for the AWIC grant recipients.

Also, the ministry provided grant funding from 2020-21 to engage senior service organizations across Alberta, enabled to make sure they develop that website called CORE, collaborative online resources and education, online knowledge, something we established in May of last year. We are so proud that CORE is well received by the nonprofit organizations, particularly organizations serving seniors. Within less than a year over 600 organizations have joined in this CORE program. This platform, CORE, is also supporting innovative partnerships between the community and organizations, and it will make sure that with us working together, we make a difference for seniors, particularly during this pandemic, COVID-19.

We understand that sometimes it's difficult for seniors to connect with the outside because of the health guidelines, so CORE Alberta is really helpful, and seniors can go online with family or find more information and then share it with people. This is one of the strategies that we've focused on and will continue doing during the COVID-19 pandemic to keep in touch, interacting with seniors. The CORE platform has a community base, of course, of senior service organizations and co-ordinates their efforts to address the needs for seniors in Alberta during COVID-19, as was previously mentioned.

Other than that, my team is also working on a few initiatives with nonprofits.

The Chair: Minister, you have moved on to something new. Fantastic. I will let you finish your thought very quickly, and then we will go back to Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. As I say, protecting seniors so that they are safe and healthy and making sure that they interact and keep in contact with the outside world is important. We will continue to work with and allocate some funding to the nonprofit organizations which are serving seniors' organizations, to make sure that we manage that.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. Just let me say that I have no doubt that the public servants in the Ministry of Seniors and Housing are working very hard during a very difficult time to serve seniors the best they can with significantly reduced budgets and that people in the sector, you know, the nonprofit sector, people who are serving seniors in the community, are also doing the same. Unfortunately, despite the minister's comments that she is concerned, her fiscal plan, the estimates don't really indicate that. So it is a continued concern of mine that people are being asked to do more with less continually by this government and especially during a pandemic, when that grant number should be much higher, and it's not. It's significantly lower than it was when the NDP government was in. I guess your words, Minister, through the chair, and the actual budget are sort of not congruent.

Madam Chair, I'd like to just talk a little bit more about 2.1, or perhaps it's 2.4. I mean, one of the programs that was so helpful in the city of Edmonton was the Sage program, that had a health centre there that helped complex seniors. It had social workers on staff. It had nurse practitioners. Unfortunately, during a very difficult time that program was closed, and it was to do with funding. I know, you know, as many programs are throughout Alberta, throughout this ministry, too, it's other ministries that are involved with that program, so I understand that. Sometimes Seniors and Housing is involved, sometimes Health is involved, sometimes CSS is involved, so you have to work collaboratively. I'd just like to ask the minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Sigurdson. I'll let you very quickly finish your thought.

Ms Sigurdson: I'd just like to understand her advocacy role within government with those other ministries because, you know, Health decided not to fund that, and what did she do?

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, we move on to our first block with the government caucus. Do the members and the minister wish to share their time?

Mr. Gotfried: Yes, please.

The Chair: Minister?

Ms Pon: Yes, please. Thank you.

The Chair: Fantastic.

Now we go to Mr. Gotfried.

Mr. Gotfried: Great. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister and her staff for joining us today in committee. I first wanted to start out by saying how important it is during these very difficult times. A lot of learning has gone on in our seniors and affordable housing sector during this time period, and it's extremely important that we have the focus and the partnerships. I'm so proud of the work that's been done in our communities by so many people in the seniors and affordable housing sector and the civil society groups and so many in the independent private sector, in the nonprofit and faith-based sector, and, of course, in the public sector as well. Minister, thank you for your oversight of those, through the chair, of course, as well.

Certainly, the opportunity for us to look at partnerships, I'm very interested as we go forward, how we can look at that, not only our investment in the public side but also the independent and private, not-for-profit, and the faith-based sectors, that are so huge and so important, particularly in the future as we face the growth of the baby boomers as a demographic and the demand that will come from that and the need for capital. I understand that with the partnerships that you've already hinted at, we'll be able to leverage public and taxpayer dollar investment to ensure that we have the capital brought forward for that. Also, of course, I think the thoughts that we have around innovation, not only in the building forms but the tenure and the mixed-income models that we see that are being so innovatively used to use public lands and so many other things – I'm very grateful for all the work that you and your team are doing, Minister.

10:20

I'm going to move just into some quick questions here, Minister, through the chair, as well. On page 89 of the business plan in the ministry fact sheet it identifies supports for Alberta's recovery plan, which, of course, is so important for us through the protection of

health, safety, and quality of life of our valued seniors. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on all of our lives, but perhaps the impact is most strikingly evident for seniors who are receiving care either living on their own or in contracted congregate living settings. They've really suffered the largest impact in many ways because of their vulnerability during this time. Through the chair, can the minister outline actions taken to support seniors through this pandemic and how it is informed in the budget priorities for this fiscal year.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gotfried.

Now to the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you so much. Through you, Madam Chair, to the member, MLA Richard Gotfried, thank you so much for your kind words. The Alberta government's focus, of course, is on protecting the health, as I mentioned, and well-being of our seniors while we continue dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the start of the pandemic we have taken real quick actions to protect the health and safety of all our province's seniors. We are working really closely with Alberta Health and the Minister of Health, working together to monitor and make sure that we keep our Albertans and our seniors safe.

In terms of the budget, the Alberta government in the last year allocated about \$30 million to protect the residents and the staff in the seniors' lodges during the pandemic. This \$30 million is to make sure that the seniors' lodges have enough PPEs and staffing as well as cleaning materials to make sure that the environment, the facility, is clean. In fact, I can't say enough about all the workers in the seniors' lodges, the operators and the staff, who are working tirelessly and doing a great job to keep the seniors in their care free and safe.

My ministry also continues to support the seniors' lodges in complying with public health care orders, which includes providing possibly about \$2.5 million, as I mentioned. The \$30 million and the \$2.5 million each month to the seniors' lodges across the province: the funding is also included in my ministry's budget. It is accounted for at the GOA level and would be accessible through the \$1.2 billion of COVID-19 contingency funding on page 98 of the fiscal plan.

So, to summarize, my ministry is constantly in contact with the seniors-serving organizations and the housing operators to ensure that they get a real update constantly and guidelines on how best to implement the public health orders and to provide supports to responding to any challenge and to listen to immediate needs. As always, we monitor very closely the seniors-serving organizations and housing providers. We do have biweekly meetings happening every month since the pandemic started.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Gotfried.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister, through the chair, as well. Thanks so much for that information, Minister, I know that it's been a really challenging time because many of the housing providers in the seniors' sector have now had to meet the highest standards of the public health measures and public health emergency and protection, so it's gone from quality of life to protection of life. We've seen some incredible work. I've been blessed to be involved with some of that as well and seeing some incredible collaboration between your team and also with Alberta Health, obviously, with the health issues that are being addressed.

I see the ministry's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been identified as objective 1.1 on page 91 of the business plan, and I'd like to ask, through the chair, for the minister to elaborate on how she has and will continue to work with other ministries to support not only the housing needs but the health, safety, and well-being of seniors through the COVID-19 pandemic, of which we may have a few months or longer ahead of us. But it seems to be a very critical time, so I'm very interested in what the plan is with respect to the collaboration with other ministries.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Yes, we will continue to co-ordinate with Health to support Albertans, particularly for seniors on these health emergencies. Health is leading these matters. We are pleased and continue to support Health in these matters. We are also staying connected, as I've mentioned, working closely with the federal, the municipal, the nonprofit, and profit partners to protect Alberta seniors, as always, from the effects of COVID-19. You are right, private member, that it is not an easy time. One thing that this government is really focused on is lives and livelihoods, which is also protecting our seniors.

We also make sure that we have regular meetings with the stakeholders and the network, and we are also leveraging supports for the vaccine rollout. We're so excited that Alberta Health has announced the different phases of the vaccination plan. We are pleased to see that it includes seniors' lodges as well and the vaccination plan for seniors and the staff. We will continue working with Health, and we will make sure that all the seniors' lodges and housing providers practise the best implementations of the public health orders, and we will make sure to provide support and also respond to the challenge.

As I've mentioned, it's very important that we have a regular meeting, regular updates with all those people that work in the front line. I did mention that in my previous conversations, and we are so proud to continue to get very good feedback from our CORE Alberta knowledge hub, which is a collaborative online resources and education hub. We currently have 600 members, and it continues to grow. In this hub we continue to ask people how we can improve, and they absolutely like the information found in this hub, on this website. This is the website that we are offering for seniors, for Albertans, or senior-services organizations to exchange the best practices, offer all the updated information, keep in touch with our seniors about what's going on. This is what we consider CORE Alberta. It's a social connection, wellness, and mental health discussion group that has been developed as a hub to make sure that we connect with older adults and maintain their social connections to others. Also, more importantly, we help them to maintain positive mental health.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Gotfried.

Mr. Gotfried: Great. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, through the chair, to the minister as well.

Minister, again through the chair, the work that I've seen done through the pandemic has been extremely encouraging, the collaboration, obviously. We have our contracted care services that are through Alberta Health, but the licensed supportive living operators have had a great opportunity to work with the Alberta

Health people during this very challenging time. So I'm very encouraged to see that. You had referenced some of the associations, from the Alberta Continuing Care Association; ASHCHA, the Alberta Seniors Communities and Housing Association; Christian Health Association of Alberta; and the Seniors Housing Society of Alberta. All of these organizations represent across the spectrum, from lodges in licensed supportive living, some into the contracted space. It's really encouraging to see that, Minister, that kind of collaboration.

Once again on page 89 of the business plan you identified the ministry's continued development of policy and programs in response to emerging challenges and opportunities, particularly of an increasingly demanding and progressively aging population, as the number of Alberta seniors, what I guess we could call the baby boom phenomenon, is expected to increase our 65-plus population to over 1 million people by 2035, almost a quarter of Alberta's population.

10:30

In fact, under outcome 1 on page 91 it was identified that there were already 665,000 seniors in Alberta as of December 20. Through the chair, can the minister explain how the ministry is going to address this significant demographic shift to ensure seniors' programs are targeted, affordable, sustainable, and accessible to all Alberta seniors in the future? And if the minister could point out the line item associated with these initiatives, that would be sincerely appreciated.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Member, through you, Madam Chair. Yes. This is very important. We anticipate the increase in caseloads in the coming year due to the increasing number of seniors in the province and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on older adults who have been left unemployed, we understand, and who also have incurred increased costs and who may be forced to draw on their retirement savings plans. That's why our seniors' benefit has been changed this year. We understand that. We want to make sure those seniors with the lowest income have a stable income every month.

You're right, Member, through you, Madam Chair. The number of seniors is growing rapidly in our province, with 4,000 people that turn 65 every month. We are maintaining seniors' benefits that will continue for the most in need and will ensure that vulnerable seniors can count on a stable income, as I mentioned. At the same time we want to make sure that we are planning for the future and sustainability for this program as well.

Alberta's seniors' benefit program is a regulated program, and all eligible seniors can apply and will be provided some benefits. Alberta's most vulnerable, as I mentioned, and most in need will continue to receive one of the highest income supplements in the country. Our seniors' benefit programs are one of the reasons why Albertans have the lowest poverty rate in Canada.

Through you, Madam Chair, to the member. He did mention the line that we indicated about the Alberta seniors' benefits. The line items for the program planning and delivery are under line 2.1 in seniors' services and line 3.1 in the Alberta seniors' benefit.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we're moving on to Mr. Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair, and good morning to the minister and the officials. Thank you for being here this morning to provide us with the summary of your estimates and business plan. To the minister. We've had a number of discussions over the course of the past year and in particular in the Seniors and Housing ministry because of my involvement with the work that you've been doing and the close relationship that we've had with respect to developing ideas and programs and policies relating to affordable housing, one of those things that I'm particularly proud of doing this past summer.

Having said that, Madam Chair, this government has focused and emphasized significantly the work in relation to easing regulatory burdens and making things easier for those operators within the Seniors and Housing ministry to conduct their business without the barriers and challenges that many face when dealing with government. I think that applies across the board, and it certainly applies in the Seniors and Housing ministry as well.

I remember that in the estimates of last year, Madam Chair, we spoke about some of those regulatory burdens. We commonly refer to them as red tape reduction. Certainly, we continue to talk about those as they form an important part of encouraging and stimulating operators within this ministry to be successful.

Madam Chair, to the minister. I remember that we spoke about this last year, and I continue to ask about it this year. In the business plan it says that the ministry is continuing "to identify opportunities to reduce regulatory burdens, and make it easier to access and navigate seniors financial assistance programs through innovative digital transformation initiatives." Key objective 1.3 on page 91 of the business plan is even identified as "[identifying] opportunities for red tape reduction, digital transformation, and program effectiveness."

Having said that, through the chair, could the minister please give an update on the work done so far and the digital transformation work that is currently in development?

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the member, MLA Amery. First of all, I would like to express our appreciation for your fantastic work on helping us on the affordable housing review. You were the chair of this panel, and great work has been done. Now we are going to the next step for our strategic plan, so thank you again.

Thank you for these great questions. I can spend two hours just on this and talk about how my team is working so hard to make sure that we reduce red tape and do more things more efficiently and effectively. We are committed to reducing government red tape by one-third. This will save time, money, resources, and make it easier for Albertans to access seniors' and affordable housing services.

The senior-serving organizations and our affordable housing partners are helping us identify the unnecessary red tape in my ministry. My ministry has established two committees, one for seniors, which includes MLA Lovely in my committee, as well as my Housing Advisory Committee, including MLA Getson. Thank you to both of the MLAs for providing such valuable feedback and suggestions through these two committees. We have completed a number of measures and assessments in making government more efficient. That included a couple of things.

Also, like I said, I can spend two hours on this, but I'll make it quick. Let me share with you our success with my team on this to make things more efficient.

Number one, automatically enrolling AISH recipients in Alberta's seniors financial assistance programs. Once they turn 65, they automatically enrol.

Online claims, which are for the special needs assistance for seniors program so seniors don't have to fill out all the paperwork anymore, and online repayments of government's responsive home equity loans through the senior's own financial institution. So, again, paperless now.

Uploading digital documents directly for the seniors financial assistance programs, and I will just remind you and give you the number from 2020-21 . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we conclude our first 20-minute block for government members.

The time is now 10:39, and we will move to a very brief five-minute break. I would ask that everyone be back here at 10:44 on the dot.

[The committee adjourned from 10:39 a.m. to 10:44 a.m.]

The Chair: All right. Fantastic. That concludes our break for today.

We now move on to the five minutes of questions from the Official Opposition, followed by five minutes of response from the minister. As mentioned, 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. Please remember that discussions must flow through the chair at all times regardless as to whether speaking time is combined or not.

Member Irwin.

Member Irwin: Thank you. We can continue to share time, you said? Is that correct?

The Chair: Minister, would you like to share time?

Ms Pon: Yes, please, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Fantastic.

The floor is yours, Member Irwin.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. I've shared with this minister a few times the desperate need for housing in my riding of Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood and, in fact, across our province as well. In the past when I've shared, the need was certainly dire, and now in the midst of a pandemic it's really just, you know, laid bare the inequities and the issues that we face across our province.

I want to just talk a little bit about housing. Specifically, I'll note outcome 2 on page 92 of your business plan: "Make housing affordable and accessible for Albertans". Of course, I fully understand that homelessness is not directly in your portfolio, but I think we can all acknowledge that you can't possibly understand housing without understanding homelessness as well. You know, I can't ignore the fact that many seniors struggle with housing and houselessness. I think of Operation Friendship Seniors Society in my riding, which is a nonprofit organization in the McCauley neighbourhood that does incredible work, but they're really facing a lot of pressures serving unhoused seniors. As I said, the need continues to climb. I mean, I'm really talking about a lot of the visible houselessness, right? We know a lot of houselessness is hidden. I talked about this in the Chamber as well, that this government really had an opportunity in this budget to take a strong stand on housing and homelessness, but instead, unfortunately, there were drastic cuts made, about 22 per cent to the services reaching houseless folks.

I want to just talk a little bit about supportive housing. We know that supportive housing works. We've seen movement on this from municipalities and from the federal government, but we've not seen any movement from the province. In fact, the city of Edmonton had a small ask in this budget, only \$6 million in fact, but sadly the UCP denied that. Supportive housing doesn't just save money; it saves lives, too. So I want to ask the minister through you, Chair: have you been advocating for supportive housing?

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. If I may, I just want to have one more quick comment, to apologize to MLA Rutherford, who is also a member on my ministry of seniors advising team. My apologies. I forgot to mention him. MLA Rutherford is also a member of my seniors advisory team.

Through you, Madam Chair, thank you so much for the question. Yes, you are right. Homelessness is not in our ministry. It's under CSS. But to respond about affordable housing and particularly in Edmonton, what they can expect from my capital plan is that in 2020 in Edmonton, as always, we want to make sure that the older Albertans have access to safe, secure, and stable housing. The government is working with the city of Edmonton to address this housing issue, including housing those who are experiencing homelessness in the pandemic, even those under the CSS ministry.

However, we do under the capital plan 2021 continue to fund the projects, totalling more than \$77 million in Edmonton, to build about 360 more affordable housing units and 350 units of shelter space. We want to make sure to keep existing units in good condition as well for the 350 shelter spaces. Again, in Edmonton in capital 2021 there is \$12.9 million. We will continue to provide that kind of funding. The capital development funding is about \$5.4 million toward construction of 350 shelter spaces and 79 housing units for Albertans in need. So I would say it's approximately \$7.5 million in 2021-22 for capital maintenance and renewal of social housing in Edmonton. That is the highlight of . . .

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

Member Irwin: Thank you. Yeah. Absolutely, I mean, affordable housing – I appreciate you acknowledging shelter spaces as well, but there's a gap in there, and this is what I'm asking specifically about. That's supportive housing. I was trying to pay close attention to your words, and I didn't hear you mention supportive housing specifically. If you haven't had a chance – I mean, Ambrose Place is a great example in the McCauley neighbourhood in my riding, where they take some of the hardest to house folks, folks who have multiple challenges, people who've been on the streets the longest and have had huge amounts of success with that supportive housing model. I want to ask you: have you looked at supportive housing in particular? Do you understand just how effective a model that can be?

10:50

I mean, in your business plan you speak about efficiencies multiple times, including on page 92, increasing efficiencies. I can tell you one of the best ways to address and improve efficiencies and to save money in the long run would be through investing in affordable housing, investing in supportive housing in particular. That will take a whole lot of pressure off you and your budget. Again, can you please just acknowledge whether or not you've had an opportunity to look into supportive housing, and have you had

an opportunity to talk about supportive housing with your colleagues in Community in Social Services?

The Chair: Thank you. I'm just going to very quickly remind everybody that we are dealing with the main estimates of Seniors and Housing.

Minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. I will be happy to answer the questions. Investing in affordable housing is very important. As you can hear in my estimates and also in my answers today, we are continuing investing. That's why we are focused on our partnership and working with the private sector and the proper organizations, three levels of government to establish a plan to build more housing. Referring to the member's question about supportive housing, I can give you some highlights that there are about 360 units of 1,800 coming in Edmonton; 56 of the 300 units are in Edmonton, and it would be considered permanent supportive housing.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Member Irwin.

Member Irwin: How much time do I have left?

The Chair: Two minutes, 50 seconds.

Member Irwin: Perfect. With that, I would like to cede my time to Member Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you.

The Chair: Member Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm going to turn to page 92. I have a question. In performance measure 2(b) you talk about the work that you're planning going forward. You refer to last year, with 532 new and regenerated units. I'm wondering if you could tell me: of these projected numbers of units, 1,000, 300, and then 100 for the next three – well, this budget and then the next two – can you tell me the per cent that are new and the per cent that are regenerated units or that you project will be new, projected regenerated new units?

The Chair: Thank you, Member Renaud.
Minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. The new, regenerated units: yes, those are based on the performance measures of the numbers of new and regenerated units that help track progress in the capital projects and then develop and then renew the affordable housing. We will continue on developed, and as a result – I mentioned 1,800 new, regenerated units for seniors and families over three years. We have a target number of new developed units, reflecting the projects approved in the capital plan and projects approved in the previous budget. We have to make sure and we are making sure to make the right decisions, make sure that we balance between suggesting the financial situations and supporting those most in need of substantial growth. I'd mentioned that affordable housing is important. We continue to look into building and maintaining those 1,800 new, regenerated units.

Ms Renaud: That didn't answer my question.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Member Renaud, while you might not always like the answer that the minister gives, the minister has a right to give an answer.

Ms Renaud: Actually, she's not answering my question. My question is: how many of the projected units are new, and how many will be regenerated? Pretty straightforward question.

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you again. I'll look into it, and maybe I can just get my DM to send you that updated information, how we're going to break it down.

Ms Renaud: Thank you very much.

Ms Pon: Thank you.

Ms Renaud: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.
My next question. Can you tell me: of these targets, what per cent of these targets are accessible units? Now, I'm not talking about barrier free. I know that you score them using different criteria, but I'm asking . . .

The Chair: Thank you.
With that, we now move to the government and Mr. Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you once again, Madam Chair and to the minister. We had been discussing a little bit about the red tape reduction initiatives earlier, before our time ran out, and I wanted to continue along that line of questioning. Minister, as we were talking about in the business plan, it says that your ministry is continuing to "identify opportunities to reduce regulatory burdens." In fact, you were answering a little bit about the digital transformation work that is in development, and I'd like to give you the opportunity to continue with that if you still have additional input to add.

But in addition to that, page 90 of the business plan commits to "making life easier for hard-working Albertans . . . by reducing regulatory requirements by one-third [in] 2023." Indeed, the minister was talking about that in her last answer to my question about that one-third reduction. In any event, to the minister: how long are you in reaching this target, and what can Albertans expect to see in the coming months and year?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the member, for these good questions. As of March 11, 2021, the ministry also reduced the regulatory requirements by 13.98 per cent below the baseline count. The count is now about 4,906 requirements and down from the baseline of 5,703.

Seniors and Housing has achieved and exceeds the 12 per cent government of Alberta wide goals of 2020-21. Definitely, we continue to cut the red tape to make sure we deal with the burdens for affordable housing providers, the reporting requirements for operational review, business plan submissions, and then the reporting on the wait-lists and the client demographics so that our housing providers can spend more time addressing tenants' concerns, maintenance of the units, and processing applications. This is the feedback from the housing providers, too, that they would prefer dealing with the concerns and serve the client more than doing all the paperwork.

Also, the income verification review is taking a look at the strategies and at how we can reduce red tape and also make the

approval process less complex and also work better for Albertans to get affordable housing. The work is under way.

We are also revisiting the housing management body handbook that we produced a while ago, which hasn't been reviewed and updated since 2008, to increase and make sure of the efficiency and reduce a number of administrative requirements.

Last but not least, in addition, we are in year 2 of a four-year plan to reduce a number of the housing management bodies through amalgamations and transfer of housing units.

Basically, what we are looking for is to make sure that we do things more efficiently and effectively and also that we control spending, and then you get the outcome for Albertans.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Mr. Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair. Can I get a time check, please?

The Chair: Six minutes, 30 seconds.

Mr. Amery: Perfect. Thank you.

Minister, I wanted to turn the attention now to some of the items that we had discussed briefly earlier today, and that involves the Affordable Housing Review Panel. Over the course of the summer of 2020 we embarked on a provincial-wide review of the affordable housing in this province, and with the help of nine experts in the industry a report was delivered to the minister, Madam Chair, in October 2020. In that report 19 separate recommendations were made with respect to affordable housing in our province, including a number of recommendations involving the implementation of policies on a go-forward basis that would increase efficiencies within the system.

I want to highlight, Madam Chair, to the minister that the report and its recommendations were, in my view, truly transformative, and I am very much looking forward to seeing the establishment of those 19 recommendations, including those that strengthen the relationship between government, nonprofits, and our private industry. I think that in the recommendations there is a significant amount of positive details that are going to, if implemented, change the way that affordable housing is handled in this province.

11:00

Having said that, Madam Chair, over the course of the summer – and the minister knows quite well – we spoke to hundreds of stakeholders throughout the province and took the recommendations from those stakeholders and put them into this affordable housing review report. The minister is also quite well aware that there was a significant amount of work done with these nine expert panel members and the contributions of these hundreds of stakeholders.

While the report was delivered in October 2020, my question involves the implementation portion of those recommendations. In the business plan I see key objective 2.1, and that is to implement the recommendations of that Affordable Housing Review Panel. The business plan states that the plan is "to create a new vision and transform . . . affordable housing . . . in Alberta to achieve better outcomes for Albertans, attain greater value for government spending, and address [the housing] demand" in this province. Having said that, Madam Chair, through you to the minister, can we please have an update as to the status of this report, its recommendations, the implementation of those recommendations, and what we can expect in this year?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you, thank you once again, MLA Amery, for your fantastic work in creating this affordable housing review. Yes, we accepted all the expert panel's 19 recommendations, and also we haven't wasted any time at all in getting started. My teams are already working on a strategic plan. The strategic plan is based on the panel's advice. Also, we will be looking to redefine the government's role, tap in to community expertise, expand partnerships, and reward innovation. That's what we are focused on and also to simplify the housing system. All this is stuff that we are not just getting from the panel recommendations; we also heard from a number of stakeholders that provided similar feedback. So work is under way.

I'm excited to share with you the strategic plan. It outlines the very important visions for the province's affordable housing system, which includes the strategic real estate asset plan, which, as I mentioned before, is indicated in key objective 2.2. The plan will map out how we will act under the affordable housing review. It is very important that we are taking step by step these recommendations, to implement and put a strategy on it, to also make sure that the system has the ability to respond to the needs of Albertans, and to make sure that it is financially sustainable. As we all know, our population is growing, and particularly the COVID-19 pandemic impacts people financially, so as a government we are trying to manage that and provide assistance for those most in need.

We are also on track to have the strategic plan finalized in the coming months as well as the asset management plan. Once we complete the plan, that will guide the transformations of the provincial affordable housing system. What we're doing here: we're not looking at a quick fix; it's a long-term plan. It's a long-term plan that we wanted to work on for affordable housing for Albertans.

We are also pleased to share with you that we're working on the redesign of the rent supplement program, as per recommendation 11 from the affordable housing review report, and also to simplify how income is calculated, which is a recommendation from the panel, recommendation 13. Again, this is not easy, but I commend my team and the panel for working on this so tirelessly. I'll be looking forward to the strategic planning and sharing it with all the members.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Amery, you have about two seconds. Fantastic.

With that, we move back to the Official Opposition and Member Irwin? No. Sorry. Member Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Yeah. Thank you. Madam Chair, just through you to the minister, thank you very much for having your officials just provide more clarity about my previous question, about the breakdown of new units versus regenerated units.

Also, if you could add to that, if we could get a breakdown of the accessibility of the units, actually, all 58,250. What portion are barrier free? What portion are accessible? If you could also include . . .

The Chair: Ms Renaud, can you make sure, please, that you're directing your questions through the chair and not directly at the minister?

Ms Renaud: I will look in this direction, Madam Chair. Absolutely.

Through you to the minister, if you could provide a breakdown, that would be most appreciated.

My other question. You mentioned wait-lists. It would be most helpful – I know there are wait-lists all over the place – if there's a way to get a consolidation of the wait-lists that you have access to, and if you could have your officials, Minister, through the chair, let us know. We already know that there are 170,000 low-income seniors. We know there are 70,000 people at least on AISH, another 60,000 on income support. It would be most helpful to know what percentage of people waiting on wait-lists – many don't even get on to a wait-list – are income support recipients and AISH recipients.

Thank you very much.

With that, I'm going to turn the rest of my time over to my colleague. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Renaud. You don't want to go to the minister for a response?

Ms Renaud: Sure. Actually, I mean, if she could just have her officials, like, submit that information as well, that would be great.

Ms Pon: Okay. If I may, through you to the member, I just have a couple of updates for you. Thank you for all of the questions.

Just to refer to the previous questions you asked me, I have the breakdown right now. For the breakdown we have about 262 units regenerated, about 21 per cent of the total; and 1,138 new units, about 79 per cent of units, that we are going to be working on.

The other two questions that the member has asked, through you, Madam Chair: my office will be working on it and will provide you the extra information.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ceci.

Member Ceci: Thank you. I'll just begin. Minister, thank you for your time.

Just a couple of quick questions. On page 188, previously, the first speaker from the government side talked about the growing number of seniors, and certainly we see that. I'm going to be amongst them, I guess, in a couple of years, officially. Page 188 talks about loans and advances with regard to seniors' homes: home adaptation and repair and then property tax deferral. Certainly, at the city of Calgary we had challenges trying to support seniors around their civic property taxes and deferring them. They didn't often take that up, but I see that you've flatlined from forecast to estimate this year. No increase in any of those things: seniors' home adaptation and repair and property tax deferral. I'm just wondering. If there are a growing number of seniors and as we've been through some really, really challenging times, why wouldn't there be a slight increase in the estimate for both of those program items this year? That's my first question.

The Chair: Thank you, Member Ceci.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Member, through the chair, for the questions. First of all, yes, we are proud to offer those programs. The programs provided the grant components available to help eligible seniors with low income, particularly those that do not qualify for loans, as you know, but who require financial supports for critical home repair. As I mentioned, our government's platform commitment related to keeping seniors staying at home and staying in their chosen community, close to friends and family. This is our goal and objective.

11:10

For 2021-22 the SHARP program, the grant components budget, is about \$1.6 million, which has increased by \$0.3 million, 23 per cent, accommodating the growing demand. All seniors that apply to the program must feel confident that they are protected. We have consumer protection measures in place to make sure that seniors . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, back to Member Ceci.

Member Ceci: Thank you. I'd like to move on to page 191 in estimates as well. It says: Change in Capital Assets. The Alberta Social Housing Corporation, you can see, was going along at about \$160 million, and in estimates for this year it drops to \$90 million. I'm wondering what's behind that drop in valuation of Alberta Social Housing Corporation property and buildings. The change in the capital asset total: you can see there, under that, that it goes down to about 45 and a half million dollars. What's going on in terms of that sudden change in capital assets?

The Chair: Thank you, Member Ceci.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Well, as I mentioned, housing systems are complex, and the transformation takes time. Also, we expect the results of the housing review implementation strategy to be available later this year. Then we can look at the recommendations and the strategy, and we can implement it. We also are working very hard and expanded the use of P3 partnerships and to leverage other sources of funding that are from the private sector, nonprofit organizations, civil society, and the different levels of government, federal and municipal. This is to allow us to open more housing options for Albertans, and this is also making taxpayer dollars go further. We are continuing to do that.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Member Ceci: That didn't explain: why the drop in valuation from \$160 million for Alberta Social Housing Corporation properties to \$90 million? It concerns me, Minister, because if there's that much of a change in the value of property and you're moving into a different framework for delivering housing, I'm just worried that the price is suddenly more affordable for purchasing the property of the government of Alberta. My colleague spoke about the financialization of housing a little while ago and about housing as a commodity, and this looks like this commodity is suddenly a lot cheaper. Is that what is happening here? You've written down the value of Social Housing Corporation properties and are getting it ready for sale? It's a change in the capital assets.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ceci. Just a reminder that the questions need to go through the chair and not directly to the minister.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. For this question – it's a long question – in fact, maybe I can refer it to DM Taylor to give more details, or maybe we can just supply all the details to the MLA later on. Is that okay with you, through you, Madam Chair, to the member?

The Chair: Member, we've got approximately 20 seconds remaining, so if you would like to make a decision.

Member Ceci: I'll take it in writing.

Ms Pon: Thank you. My office will send you more information on this. Thank you.

The Chair: Fantastic. That concludes that round.

With that, we go back to the government caucus and Mr. Rutherford.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the opportunity. Also, to the minister: thank you for being here with your officials as well. The minister was out in the Leduc community not too long ago for the opening of Linsford Gardens, which was an important project for the city, so I appreciate your time there and those efforts. Also, as the military liaison the support from the ministry and from the government as a whole has been really important, so I wanted to say thank you to the minister for that.

I also want to turn the minister's attention to page 92 and down to key objective 2.5, which centres around increasing "awareness of the experiences of military members, their families, veterans, and reservists, and enhance resources and supports through key initiatives." Two questions. Can the minister provide some details on these initiatives, please? It is my understanding as well that based on the description under outcome 2 on page 92, the ministry has been working with civil society organizations, other jurisdictions and orders of government to continue to support this initiative. Can the minister provide an update on how you have engaged these partners to support our military veterans and their families, please?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rutherford.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the member, thank you, MLA Rutherford, for doing an awesome job in the last 20 months as the military liaison. We all know that the Alberta government recognizes the dedication, courage, and sacrifice of the Canadian Armed Forces members and, thus, is committed to making the lives of military members and their families as enjoyable and hassle free as possible while they're stationed in Alberta. As I said, some of the Armed Forces members come from different areas of our country, and then they come back and choose Alberta as their home. I'm proud to have the MLA for Leduc-Beaumont looking after this file for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing.

There are a couple of things that I would like to raise that MLA Rutherford has done and that we are very proud of. Number one is that the military family resources website is available in English and French to ensure that all Canadian Armed Forces members and their families have online access to that very helpful information. This is a new website. I understand that MLA Rutherford has been doing this stuff for a while and that it's quite well received because the military members can research all the information about Alberta before they even arrive in our province.

The second thing is the Veterans Service Centre and housing supports – the project is co-led by Seniors and Housing and also Community and Social Services – to provide transitional housing and wraparound supports to address veterans experiencing homelessness and to assist transitions into the civilian community. This is very important. This is something that MLA Rutherford and I are sort of looking into. We're trying to provide a home, a place for veterans or retired veterans to call home. Because of that, I'm proud to share with everyone – actually, I believe that MLA Rutherford made that announcement a few months ago – that Alberta provided \$1.1 million in funding to the Home for Heroes project in Edmonton in the Evansdale neighbourhood. I believe that they have already started building – right? – MLA Rutherford? This is exciting.

11:20

Then, also, I understand that the military liaison, MLA Rutherford, is working not just with my ministry; he's working very hard across other ministries. I understand that recently the Minister of Advanced Education, Minister Nicolaides, participated last month in a supportive campus experience for veterans, on February 4, 2021. This is a two-year pilot project to make postsecondary campuses better suited for military veterans, to make them feel comfortable as well as so they can upgrade themselves in a very comfortable environment.

Also, MLA Rutherford said that there is more than \$360,000 for two heroes. The advocacy and the research of the project is through the University of Alberta. I talk about the mental health and addictions and COVID-19 community funding. This is a very important initiative, so we're helping those people in need.

These are all initiatives. I can go on and on; there are just so many. More importantly, MLA Rutherford has been keeping in touch with every single corner of veterans in Alberta. I understand he also represented us at the Canada conference to share best practices and, again, different kinds of perspectives or learning about all the new, innovative initiatives and projects from across Canada from different representatives, to build our action plan to serve our veterans appropriately and make sure that they're comfortable when they retire and move into Alberta. Thank you very much to MLA Rutherford for the great job.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. You were very much approaching on your five-minute speaking time.

With that, we'll go back to Mr. Rutherford.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Madam Chair. Again I want to thank the minister for her support, including on mental health initiatives and transitional housing initiatives surrounding our veterans and our military members, which have been very well received.

Moving on to just a new question to the minister, the business plan's key objective 1.2 on page 91 indicates that the minister is focusing on addressing the prevention of elder abuse, which can take many forms and can be difficult to detect. How do you plan on raising awareness and engaging Albertans in this work? Two, the objective also indicates that you are working to create stronger protective laws and policies. There has been a lot in the news lately, and it sounds like a very critical initiative to support Alberta's seniors. What can we expect to see as you work towards addressing this growing concern?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rutherford.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Well, thank you, Madam Chair, and, through you, thank you, Member, for raising this important concern about elder abuse. What are we looking for? We are looking to create different kinds of programs and services to prevent elder abuse more than to just fix it afterwards. In 2020 I believe the government has provided funding and collaborated with civil society and across ministries and stakeholders to address preventing elder abuse in communities across Alberta. As mentioned, I have an advisory committee on seniors, which includes members, MLA Rutherford and MLA Lovely. This committee allows us to engage with civil society and has members that represent the diverse population of seniors. We are constantly having great discussions and input on matters that are important to Alberta seniors. We are continuing to do that.

Last fall the members of this committee did discuss activities in Alberta to address elder abuse and the challenge that was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. What needs to be included to understand elder abuse and to enhance the co-ordination of information, the programs, and responses to prevent elder abuse? I have put the spotlight on elder abuse to improve the safety and well-being of seniors across the province. Also, I have advocated constantly on this issue to our federal counterpart, the Minister of Seniors, to address this issue and continue to share best practices. In fact, we are working on some strategy action plans on elder abuse, so please stay tuned. We will share information with the members.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we move back to the Official Opposition and Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm just following up on what was just discussed by the minister. What's the prevalence in Alberta of elder abuse, and what's the difference since the pandemic? Certainly, we know that other kinds of abuse have all gone up. I'm wondering what stats she has on that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Pon: First of all, Madam Chair, through you, I would like to answer a question from MLA Joe Ceci. We have an answer to his question now. Would you like me to take this time to have my senior executive member answer his questions? Then I can answer the questions from MLA Sigurdson. Through you, Madam Chair, would it be okay to provide the information right now to Member Joe Ceci and answer the questions from MLA Sigurdson after?

The Chair: Yes, please, very quickly.

Ms Pon: Thank you. I will refer to the senior financial officer, Darren, to answer the question, to provide the information to MLA Joe Ceci.

Darren, please.

Mr. Baptista: Hi. I'm Darren Baptista. I'm senior financial officer. Just regarding Member Ceci's question on page 191 of the statement of operations for the ministry . . .

The Chair: Darren.

Mr. Baptista: Yes.

The Chair: Can I ask you to take your mask off? It's really difficult to hear you. There you go.

Mr. Baptista: On page 191 of the statement of operations, the number at the bottom, the change in capital asset total, is the net change in book value. This is not the valuation of the housing assets. This is the anticipated change in the book value over the year of 2021-22. So the investment of \$90 million less the amortization would be the increased value of \$45.6 million.

The Chair: Thank you.

Minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Would it be possible that I ask MLA Sigurdson to repeat her question again so I make sure I provide the correct answer? Please, MLA Sigurdson, through you, Madam Chair.

Ms Sigurdson: Madam Chair, I asked for the prevalence rates in Alberta of elder abuse and if there was a change, as there has been in many other kinds of abuse in Alberta, a significant increase because of COVID-19. What are those rates?

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the member, for repeating the question for me. On elder abuse, the most frequently identified and reported types of elder abuse in Canada – we break it down three different ways: physically, financially, and emotionally. Those are the three top, major sorts of elder abuse that have been experienced. According to the family violence Statistics Canada report, 2019, family violence against seniors between 65 to 89 years old increased in Canada for the fourth consecutive year, and this is up about 20 per cent since 2015. In 2019, then, 1 in 3 senior victims of police-reported violence was victimized by a family member, which is, like, by children, a spouse, or a family member. This is concerning, yes.

The risk is higher in the rural areas than in the urban areas. We talk about 95 versus 60 persons per 100,000 population. There are approximately 665,000 seniors in Alberta. According to the national initiative for the care of the elderly in 2016, up to 9 per cent of older Albertans experience one or more forms of elder abuse. That means that about 59,800 seniors in Alberta may experience this elder abuse. In Alberta the provincial rate of police reports of family violence against seniors is over 86 per 100,000, which is about 14 per cent higher than nationally, which is 72 per 100,000. The rate is the highest in Calgary, where it's about 81 per 100,000, then in Edmonton, where it's 60 per 100,000, although both are lower than the provincial rate.

11:30

As for during the pandemic, we don't have the statistics updated yet, but we will continue to look into that. As I mentioned, we have an action plan to deal with elder abuse, and last year we launched a tool kit to provide training to all the seniors' services organizations to address elder abuse. We will continue to work on that to address this issue.

I'm pleased to share with you that we are allocating about \$750,000 in our budget to address and create programs and services that address elder abuse this year.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.
Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. It sounds like there hasn't really been an update regarding that information for some time. It's certainly an area that I think deserves the government's attention and investment, absolutely.

I want to move to the fiscal plan, page 182. Talking about staffing, it says that nine staff have been terminated or positions have been eliminated in the ministry. I just want to know what areas, Madam Chair, if the minister can explain that.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Sigurdson.
To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. The Ministry of Seniors and Housing staffing level has been adjusted by nine full-time employees. Now we have about 250 full-time employees for 2021, and this is about a 4 per cent reduction from the 2020-21 budget. The positions adjusted in this year, 2021, resolve ongoing

efficiency and is a way that management can get costs under control. Reductions will be achieved through attrition. I'll remind you that it's very important to continue to review cost savings. That is no different than any other ministry. We will protect front-line services that support the most vulnerable, of course. However, because the technologies that we're trying to develop are more efficient and effective, sometimes we develop more efficiency so that people are able to apply for a claim or application online. This is the result, that we may have to reallocate and adjust some of the positions.

Last but not least are reductions for five full-time employees in the housing and capital planning branch. It's a line that saw reductions in the capital plan's requirements as well. This will be temporary contract staff instead of permanent positions. The general reduction of the four full-time employees has already been addressed in the 2020-21 budget. It will not impact any staff.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
To Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. So the reduction in housing sort of fits with, obviously, the government moving to privatize affordable housing in Alberta.

I'm going to go to the business plan now, page 91. There's 1.4, to

support the diverse populations of older adults and seniors through initiatives that address diverse social priorities for seniors, including retirement planning, addressing ageism, promoting social inclusion, enhancing transportation options and caregiver supports, as well as encouraging healthy aging in communities,

and performance metric 1(b), also a sense of belonging to local community. This

indicator is a proxy for social inclusion and community connectedness, and ties directly to the ministry's work related to social isolation, age-friendly communities, ageism, and aging in community.

This is your core business plan, outcome 1. These are a key objective and a performance metric under your plan, and certainly we know that the Seniors Advocate worked . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Sigurdson. I will let you very quickly finish that sentence.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I would say that the Seniors Advocate worked very hard on these areas and informed them, and I wanted the minister to speak about what information she got this year because we have no report.

The Chair: Well, perhaps she can get to that in her next round of responses.

We are going back to the government caucus. I believe that we have Mr. Gotfried.

Mr. Gotfried: Great. Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you for the opportunity for some more comments and questions. Through the chair, as well, I just wanted to move to a little different topic. Of course, we seem to be evolving in our seniors perspectives, not just to providing housing and care and activities and nutrition and health, which, of course, are extremely important to the health of our seniors and to their protection, but we seem to be pivoting more to the thoughts of vibrancy, active engagement, contribution, and purpose for our seniors as well.

I just had one example in the States. In one of the seniors' facilities there they've actually embedded a greenhouse into the

facility, whereby they can enjoy the fruits of their labour, quite literally, but also if there's a surplus of production from their greenhouses, they can use it as a social enterprise to sell to local restaurants and other things like that, so some really innovative ideas going on that I think are worth reviewing.

In the business plan, through the chair, Minister, on page 91, objective 1.4 identifies supporting

the diverse populations of older adults and seniors through initiatives that address diverse social priorities for seniors, including retirement planning, addressing ageism, promoting social inclusion, enhancing transportation options and caregiver supports, as well as encouraging healthy aging in communities.

Again through the chair, Minister, we know that healthy, active, and engaged seniors are important to renewed focus on aging in community and broader definitions of quality of life. Can you please expand on what key initiatives you are focused on in regard to this objective, based on page 91 and objective 1.4 of your business plan?

The Chair: Thank you.
To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you so much, Madam Chair and through you to the member, for this important question. In this government we provide more than \$8 billion in service and support to Alberta seniors each year. We have a number of programs that we meet the needs for the seniors most in need. One of them is the seniors' home adaptations and repair program to assist seniors in making repairs and adaptations to their homes so that they can remain in their chosen community. As I mentioned a few times, this is very important to this government, and this is one of our platform commitments, to provide services that keep seniors in their community and then close to their friends and family.

Also, my ministry helps seniors to live safely and independently through the seniors in need assistance program, which is another program where we meet needs for seniors. I'm proud as Alberta is the only jurisdiction with the special-needs assistance program, that's all programs in one big program, which seniors can just go in to find the information and they don't have to go all over the map looking for different grants and different benefits. Seniors and Housing supports seniors to live in their chosen community, as I already mentioned.

Another thing that's important to seniors is financial aid. Seniors' property tax deferral program allows seniors to leverage their home equity to pay their property tax, which uses the equity. The senior can comfortably draw the equity from their home, and they won't have to pay that until they sell the house.

11:40

There are well-funded, small levels of great support that enhance collaborations with the community partners such as senior-serving organizations, academic institutions, and the city and municipality to develop transportation options for seniors so they are able to live independently and participate in the community. My team and I are working really closely with a couple of organizations that provide transportation, for example Driving Happiness. They are doing such a great job to help seniors pick up food, drop them off for doctors' appointments, so on and so forth. That is another thing that we understand, that transportation is very important to seniors, particularly when the vaccination programs roll out. We will continue to work closely with Alberta Health on how we're going to assist those seniors who are most in need of transportation for the vaccination program to get their vaccine.

I'm also very proud of and I mentioned a couple times during this question period our CORE website, which is a collaborative online resource and education website. This is a website where we are partnered with over 600 seniors' service organizations, Alberta Health Services, Alberta Blue Cross, and the government of Canada to help community organizations to co-ordinate their efforts to address the needs of seniors during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. I am proud to say that the feedback was fantastic. That is something that's not just sharing information. The seniors are having a good time using the chat and the chat room and also learning something new during this pandemic. They can stay home and learn all the news and get all their updates and chat with their families.

These are a number of the initiatives that we are working on. Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Mr. Gotfried.

Mr. Gotfried: I'd just like to cede my time, I believe to Member Lovely if I'm not mistaken.

The Chair: Yes. Ms Lovely.

Ms Lovely: Thank you so much, Minister. There are a lot of people clamouring for your time. I just wanted to recognize that you've been out to Camrose to make the Stoney Creek Lodge announcement.

The Chair: Ms Lovely, I would just remind you to make sure that you're directing your comments through the chair.

Ms Lovely: Yes, Madam Chair. Through you, to the minister, I just wanted to acknowledge her trip out here.

To the minister, through the chair: within the parts of the business plan that address seniors' needs, I see two important metrics that speak to seniors' incomes and their sense of belonging. These can be seen at the bottom of page 91. Why are these measures so important, and how do they relate to the work of your ministry?

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister. You've got about two minutes for a response.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you, thank you to MLA Lovely. It was a very fantastic trip visiting Camrose. It seems like you know everybody in town there. That's great.

To indicate and provide information on the well-being of Alberta seniors, the first indicator of seniors' median income health provides the financial well-being of seniors. The second indicator is the sense of belonging, which helps show the seniors' physical and emotional well-being. In general higher income contributes to better health and well-being outcomes for seniors. So we continue to look into investing to make sure of the health and well-being of the seniors and provide programs and benefits and working with senior-serving organizations to make sure that all the seniors are healthy and safe during this COVID-19 pandemic.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Lovely, there's approximately a minute remaining. Ms Lovely?

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to cede my time to the next member.

The Chair: All right. I believe that is to Mr. Turton.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you very much, Minister, for coming out here today and bringing along your staff.

First, really quickly: how much time do I have remaining, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Twenty-four seconds.

Mr. Turton: Twenty-four seconds. Okay.

Well, I guess I could start prefacing at least a little bit, and then I'll be obviously continuing my question in the next segment. Obviously, you know, seniors' housing is incredibly important out in my riding of Spruce Grove-Stony Plain. In my riding alone there are over 10,000 seniors, and housing is an integral part of ensuring that . . .

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, we move to the final block for the Official Opposition and Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Chair. I just want to follow up from what I was asking the minister previously, and I'm referring to the business plan, outcome 1, key objective 1.2, performance metric 1(b). I just want to ask when the last Seniors Advocate report will be made public. It informs, absolutely, this outcome 1 of the business plan, and it is the legislative responsibility, as the advocate reports to the minister, that she table that in the House. So when is that going to happen?

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm just a little bit confused because that Seniors Advocate has been transferred, merged to Alberta Health a year ago, and for those questions that she's looking for, I would suggest that the member refer those questions to Alberta Health. Now that we have said that the Health and Seniors Advocates are in Alberta Health, I'm sure that they will provide all the information that's requested by the member.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

To Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah, Madam Chair. The final report of the advocate was submitted to the minister, but it was never released, and I know that. That's the report I'm referring to, and that would inform her. It wasn't available at the last estimates, a year ago, but it has subsequently been, and it still has not been released. Unfortunately, I do have the Health Advocate report right here, but it says nothing about the cases, and it actually shows that there's sort of been no increase in cases, so I'm really questioning the validity of the amalgamation of the Seniors Advocate into the Health Advocate because there's no documentation to support that.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Sigurdson.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair. As I indicated – and this is my second time – this advocate for seniors has been merged with the Alberta Health ministry, so all the answers and information should be provided by the Alberta Health ministry, and I would suggest that the member refer her questions to Alberta Health.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, thank you very much, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, I would say that this is extremely concerning because it's been repeated many times by the minister, by the Minister of Health also, how important it is to have a Seniors Advocate. There is one that still exists, and there's work that's done, but we have no information from the Health minister . . .

Mr. Turton: Point of order.

Ms Sigurdson: . . . or from the Seniors Advocate.

The Chair: Mr. Turton.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair. Point of order. I believe it's under 23(b), relevance. I mean, the Seniors Advocate is clearly under Health. It's been talked about and repeated many times, yet the hon. member across continually brings it up. I mean, I would like to focus on the estimates that are before us and items that are under the purview of the minister that we're discussing with right now, and I would just hope that we stick with the actual business plan and the items before us.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turton.

Member Irwin.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Madam Chair. Again, Member Sigurdson made a very good connection to both the business plan as well as the annual report. These issues are inextricably linked. I can't understand why the Minister of Seniors and Housing could not address issues related to the Seniors Advocate. Just like I made the case around housing and homelessness, it's absurd to not be able to address this issue.

11:50

The Chair: Thank you, Member Irwin.

Mr. Gotfried: Madam Chair, if I may comment as well?

The Chair: I don't believe so.

After hearing the arguments on both sides, I would just really urge all members – I do believe the minister has been extremely clear that this is under the budget of the Ministry of Health, so it would have been a question better asked to the Minister of Health in the estimates that we'd had earlier, last week. I do not believe that we've breached the subject of it being a point of order, but I would just really urge all members to ensure that they are focusing on what is under the purview of the Ministry of Seniors and Housing.

Thank you.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. I'm just going to move on. I mean, it's clear the minister is not being informed and doesn't know what's happening, so I'll just make that comment.

The fiscal plan again; I referred to that earlier. I just want to go back to the schedules – whatever they were – 16, 17, and 18 on pages 180 and 181, that show just like a, you know, a cliff, a drop-off, a clear indication that this UCP government is going to get out of affordable housing, sell off the public housing portfolio, and do it in a pretty quick way, Madam Chair. You know, I'm hoping that the minister, through you, has considered those different models, the public model/nonprofit, and then the private model.

Certainly, we know that oftentimes when there are private models, there is sort of a discrete period of time, 10 years, 20 years of contracts, so housing is not in perpetuity. Of course, as we all know, affordable housing in Alberta: we have a deep need for that. In fact, we have on average fewer subsidized housing units, only 2.9 per cent, compared with other provinces at 4.2, so we're already behind in this. Privatizing it is going to make it worse, and oftentimes when the privatization does happen, it is, as I said, more discrete periods of time, 10 years, 20 years, and then it goes back to market.

I'm just hoping that the minister, in her work, is going to ensure that this is housing in perpetuity and that we are not going to all of a sudden have no housing because contracts have come up. And then how is she going to address, too, just in private delivery of housing, that there's going to be a profit margin, usually of 6 to 8 per cent? Certainly, in public and nonprofit that's not there, so how is she going to deal with this stuff? How is she going to deal with financialization of housing as a commodity instead of a public good? The accountability piece: how are they going to be accountable? I mean, if it's within the government, then they have to be held to account. The private sector does whatever they decide to do.

We know that the P3 models are riddled with difficulties, so I'd like to hear her thoughts on just how she's going to manage some of these very important pieces about privatizing housing and sort of the negative consequences of that. How are Albertans going to be better off? I mean, this model that they're suggesting, even though they haven't quite said it explicitly – but it shows very clearly in these schedules – is extremely concerning. I think Albertans are going to be not having the housing they need. We already don't have enough, and this is going to make it worse, so anything the minister would like to say regarding this, Madam Chair, I'd appreciate.

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the member, for these important questions. We are so proud to continue to work with the nonprofit organizations, the private sector, and three levels of government. It's a work-together partnership to build a strong community together.

We are working with community partners to explore options and use of the P3, which is the partnership initiatives. One approach is how to maximize our ability of affordable housing in Alberta in increasing investment. We call this investment. We call this a partnership to serve Albertans better for the long term.

This is a partnership that would be designed specifically for affordable housing. Until the community meets an affordable housing strategy, we have a longer term approach developed for the best use of P3. This is long overdue. We have been talking to a number of stakeholders. Those people have many years in affordable housing. When they saw our affordable housing review report, they were just so glad that the Alberta government takes this extra step to look for the different ways to do things differently.

If we're going to continue to use the old method, the old way to do things, we are not going to improve. That's what Albertans want. Let's maximize the taxpayer dollar, utilize our dollar for the biggest return on investment. The partnership: we are generating more capital to invest in housing.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we move to our final block. There about three minutes and 19 seconds to Mr. Turton.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Again, thank you, Minister, for coming out here today. Just to continue on a couple of my points, and specifically I want to be talking about outcome 2 of the business plan and about affordable housing in particular. I just want to make reference to an amazing affordable housing project that's going to be opening up here in Stony Plain shortly, Folkstone Manor. I know that many residents are looking forward to having that open up. It's going to be opened up this fall, pretty close to Thanksgiving, so everyone there can get a little turkey.

I guess my main question has to deal with – you know, obviously, I know that you're working with a number of civil society organizations, housing management bodies, other orders of government to maintain affordable housing for 110,000 Albertans. Again, just a reference, I know that in Spruce Grove-Stony Plain we have over 10,000 seniors, in my riding alone. I guess my question really is: how have you engaged these groups to support affordable housing?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turton.

To the minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you for this question, through you, Madam Chair, to the member. As I always mention, my ministry is continuously in contact with the housing operators and provides real-time updates and the guidelines and the issues or any challenge and any support that we can respond to through these public organizations and the stakeholders.

I mentioned as well, while I was commenting on housing, that MLA Getson is one of the members working together to allow us to work with all the housing operators and the civil society organizations representing the range of affordable housing models. His skilled input matters. That is important to Albertans in need of affordable housing. We do care. We listen. We act. That's what we do for affordable housing.

In 2020 the Affordable Housing Review Panel, which we just mentioned, had many comments. We had about 160 Albertans and organizations through engagement sessions, and we reviewed more than 120 written submissions. Work is under way, and the strategic plans outline divisions of the province's affordable housing support system, including a strategic real estate asset plan. The plan will map out that we will act on the Affordable Housing Review Panel's recommendations and how we're going to make sure that the system is financially sustainable in responding to the needs of Albertans.

Of course, as a part of the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers' Forum on Housing I'm able to ensure that the best practices are delivered and are innovative from across Canada, with the goal of promoting across sectors and across these jurisdictions the collaborations.

Last but not least, we are continuing to commit . . .

The Chair: Minister, I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for the consideration of the ministry's estimates has now concluded. This concludes the consideration of the 2021-2022 main estimates by the Standing Committee on Families and Communities.

Please remember to take all your drinks and any other items with you as you leave.

Thank you, everybody. This meeting is now adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

