



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, March 20, 2024
9 a.m.

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**Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 31st Legislature
First Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services

Hon. Jason Nixon, Minister

Jenn Anderson, Assistant Deputy Minister, Preventive Community Services

Clay Buchanan, Assistant Deputy Minister, Disability Services

David Williams, Assistant Deputy Minister, Housing

9 a.m.

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

**Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, when we come to you, would you please introduce the folks with you at the table. We'll start to my right.

Mr. Wiebe: Ron Wiebe, Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Lundy: Good morning, everyone. Brandon Lundy, MLA for Leduc-Beaumont.

Mrs. Petrovic: Chelsae Petrovic, MLA for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Singh: Good morning, everyone. Peter Singh, MLA, Calgary-East.

Mrs. Johnson: Good morning. Jennifer Johnson, Lacombe-Ponoka, and to my right Beki Lees, my assistant.

Mr. Nixon: Good morning. Jason Nixon, MLA for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre and Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services. To my far right is David Williams, who's the ADM of housing. On my right is my financial ADM, Sonya Johnston. On my left is Cynthia Farmer, who's my deputy minister. Then on the far left is our ADM responsible for financial supports, everything from AISH to income supports. He has a much broader title than that. It's not coming to me at the moment, but that's what he does, and that's Toby Schneider.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

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

Ms Sigurdson: Lori Sigurdson, Edmonton-Riverview.

The Chair: I'm Jackie Lovely, the MLA for the Camrose constituency and the chair of the committee.

We do have a member joining us online. Mr. Boitchenko, would you kindly introduce yourself? You were off mute, but now that you're back on, we can't hear you. Okay. Go ahead. Mr. Boitchenko is having some technical difficulty, but he's here joining us online.

Now we'll continue on with some housekeeping items here. I'd like to note the following substitution for the record: Mr. Wiebe is here for Mr. Long.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostreams and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Members participating remotely are encouraged to turn on your camera while speaking and to mute your microphone when not speaking. Remote participants who wish to be placed on a speakers list are asked to e-mail or message the committee clerk, and members in the room should signal to the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Finally, further to the direction of the committee, we have arranged to provide ASL interpretation service at our meeting this morning. Are they online? What time will they be joining us? Okay. So they're available this morning?

Ms Rempel: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. Available this morning. Thank you so much.

Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services shall be considered for six hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(6) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to the ministry officials at the table.

For each segment of the meeting, blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both the minister and the member agree to speak that way. If debate is exhausted prior to six hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break at the midpoint of the meeting. Does anyone object to having a break this morning?

I will pause now for Mr. Boitchenko, who's here in person, to introduce himself. Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Boitchenko: I apologize for difficulties with my phone. Andrew Boitchenko, Drayton Valley-Devon.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Ministry officials who are present may, at the direction of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to a microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused; however, the block of speaking time and the overall three-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

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

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both questions and answers without interruption during estimates debate. Members, please, debate flows through the chair at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

I would now invite the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services to begin with your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes, sir.

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to your committee for having us this morning. Good morning, everybody. I'm pleased to be here today to provide an overview of the Seniors, Community and Social Services budget.

Seniors, Community and Social Services will invest \$5.3 billion to protect and improve the supports that vulnerable Albertans rely on. Budget 2024 includes critical investments into key programs, including targeted increases to fund sustainable caseload growth in

AISH, income support, and Alberta seniors' benefits; ongoing indexation of financial benefits; record funding for homelessness and housing supports; and continued investment to help Albertans build their skills and find jobs. With more than 90 per cent of our annual budget flowing directly to individuals and front-line organizations supporting vulnerable Albertans, Budget 2024 supports the goal to help individuals and their families thrive and succeed.

One of our key priorities centres on ensuring vulnerable Albertans can access critical financial supports. This includes AISH, income supports, and Alberta seniors' benefits. These programs provide a vital lifeline in helping many Albertans meet their essential needs. As part of our commitment to supporting those who rely on these programs, we continue to index benefits to help those most in need keep up with rising costs. In January we increased benefits by 4.25 per cent, and we will continue to index benefits annually to keep pace with inflation. We heard loud and clear that Albertans wanted and needed their benefits indexed as well as delivered prior to the first of the month, and we listened, starting with the March benefit payments for AISH and income supports, that were issued four business days before the first of the month. This change is giving people more time to pay their bills and helping prevent unnecessary late charges. Through program improvements like these we are making sure programs work for those who rely on them.

Albertans value the AISH program. The AISH core benefit rate remains the highest in the country for single individuals with disability. Budget 2024 invests a record \$1.65 billion into the AISH program, an increase of more than \$108 million. While these benefits help meet people's basic needs, we also know many people with disabilities want greater independence and an opportunity to earn some income if they can. Our government supports this, with several programs in place for people with disabilities who want to expand their skills and ability to work. We are proud to support Albertans with not only the highest monthly benefit but also the most generous income exemptions in the country.

Our government is focused on job creation as well and making sure Albertans have what they need to thrive and succeed. Since the pandemic fewer Albertans are using the income support programs that we have as more people have returned to work. In fact, Alberta's unemployment rate has decreased from over 15 per cent in May 2020 to 6.2 per cent as of January 2024. Department staff are actively helping individuals who are looking for work find meaningful employment, which is contributing to this decrease. Budget 2024 maintains funding for the employment and income support program at \$792.9 million.

To further support Albertans in finding and maintaining meaningful employment, we're investing almost \$96 million in career and employment services. This will ensure that Albertans who are looking for work have access to resources they need to gain new skills and to rejoin the workforce. In 2024 we anticipate that 65 per cent of Albertans who use the ministry's employment services will enter the workforce. This strategy supports Albertans to build resilience, gain independence, and move off the income support programs when they are stable enough to do so.

Our government is also investing \$536.4 million towards grants and low-interest home equity loans through seniors' financial assistance programs to support more than 189,000 seniors with low income to meet their basic needs.

To further support seniors, we have increased investments into community grants for seniors to \$6.1 million in order to support co-ordinated community action for seniors' services, expanded programming for elder abuse prevention, and targeted outreach initiatives to deliver social supports for older adults. Budget 2024 also includes \$3.3 million, \$9.7 million over three years, for seniors

experiencing abuse by supporting the following initiatives: supporting communities' co-ordinated response networks across the province, increasing operational funding for elder abuse shelters in Calgary and Edmonton, and establishing new safe spaces programs in rural Alberta.

We have a commitment to make sure that those depending on our programs get the supports that they need. In Budget 2024 we have increased funding for disability services by \$48.2 million, a 3.1 per cent increase from Budget 2023. In 2023 significant investments were made to increase wages for front-line disability workers, to increase funding to support service providers, and to reduce the PDD wait-list and caseload growth.

9:10

These investments have enabled staff to tackle the backlog of families waiting to receive FSCD services. In the last year we processed 6,500 applications, and over 5,500 families have begun accessing FSCD since April 1, 2023. Budget 2024 maintains these investments and the funding for FSCD programs. We know how valuable FSCD programs are to children with disabilities and to the families in our province.

As I mentioned earlier, Budget 2024 is strengthening public services for Albertans, and that includes those struggling with homelessness. Homelessness remains a very personal matter for me. I know first-hand the difficulty and the complex nature of this issue. Our government is committed to addressing this crisis in Alberta and working to make homelessness brief and non-recurring.

Budget 2024 includes significant investments for homeless shelters. In fact, we increased funding for homeless shelters by \$24.6 million. That's almost a 30 per cent increase from last year. This funding ensures that we can continue to implement the action plan on homelessness, which includes providing 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week shelter supports.

To tackle this problem, we must be willing to try new solutions. This winter we opened a navigation centre in Edmonton to help connect those living in dangerous encampments to shelters and housing, health supports, financial benefits, and other important social services. We took action to ensure vulnerable Albertans have access to a safe, warm bed at night and to wraparound services. This is a dynamic and important file. We will keep working with crossministry partners, Indigenous leaders, and other levels of government to create positive outcomes for those dealing with homelessness.

Providing adequate shelter is only one part of addressing the homelessness crisis. Supportive housing is an integral part of this response. Supportive housing includes subsidized housing and on-site health and social supports, including mental health and wellness, addiction, and supports to build life skills. These services help provide stability, autonomy, and dignity for those who otherwise would struggle to maintain a permanent home. That is why we are maintaining annual funding of more than \$100 million to support programs that move people out of homelessness and into stable housing linked with supports. This is part of our commitment to support a variety of programs, including supportive housing, intensive case management, and rapid rehousing. In 2022-2023 that investment helped ensure over 7,800 Albertans were provided with housing and supports.

This approach is working, Madam Chair. Approximately 92 per cent of Albertans who received housing and supports last year have remained in stable housing. Albertans receiving housing with supports spent fewer days in jail, had fewer interactions with the police, and spent fewer days in the hospital than before receiving housing.

Our commitment to housing does not stop there. We are working hard to expand affordable housing across the province. The stronger foundations affordable housing strategy maps out what is needed to provide an additional 25,000 households by 2031. Budget 2024's capital plan allocates \$840 million over three years to provide 5,100 affordable housing units and supports more than 6,000 jobs. This includes investing almost \$121 million over three years to maintain and repair government-supported housing units.

We are also investing in a new program to modernize seniors' lodges and to ensure that they meet the needs of Alberta seniors today and into the future. Our commitment to increase Alberta's affordable housing supply is unwavering. Since 2019 we've completed almost 3,200 new affordable housing units, 430 new shelter spaces, and expanded rent supports to an additional 2,300 households.

Through Budget 2024 the investments we are making strengthen our commitment to uphold the security and the potential of each and every Albertan. By prioritizing strong yet responsive investments, our government is creating a sustainable future so that Albertans today and tomorrow have the supports that they need to succeed.

In closing, Budget 2024 is a well-thought-out and responsible plan. It puts Albertans and their families first, it secures the future of Alberta, and it ensures vital services remain in place to support vulnerable Albertans. We will continue as a department to make sure that we work on some of the biggest challenges that we face today. I'm very proud to say that we've been able to come forward with a budget at the same time as the tough fiscal time, that the Finance minister has had to address, and that still maintains our funding, in fact increases our funding in this year, particularly on some of the biggest issues that we face right now on the social services side – homelessness, housing – as well as maintaining supports for those who depend on our supports as our population grows at an unprecedented rate and we continue to see inflation growing at an unprecedented rate across the province and across the country.

I am confident that the budget that the department has put together will continue to be able to maintain the excellent programs that Albertans depend on each and every day to be able to make sure that they can live happy and thriving lives, and we are going to continue to make sure that we implement those programs going forward. Madam Chair, I think that you will see over the next six hours the tremendous amount of work that goes into both Seniors, Community and Social Services as well as all the effort that comes from my assistant deputy ministers and the thousands of employees that work in this excellent department each and every day to provide support to the people of Alberta.

With that, Madam Chair, I will turn it back over to you and your committee for questions.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Member Gray has joined us. Please introduce yourself.

Ms Gray: Good morning, everyone. Christina Gray, MLA for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

The Chair: Welcome. Thank you for being here.

This brings us now to the question-and-answer portion of the meeting. For the first 60 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams. Members, would you like to combine your time with the minister?

Member Irwin: Yeah. That'd be great.

The Chair: Minister, what's your preference?

Mr. Nixon: Back and forth is fine.

The Chair: Okay. Fantastic. Well, let's proceed.

Member Irwin: Okay. Thank you to the chair and to the minister for those opening remarks, and thank you to the ministry staff that are here as well. I want to begin by acknowledging the critical importance of today's estimates as we are discussing money that flows to some of the most vulnerable folks in our province. Of course, this ministry plays a critical role in the livelihoods of those individuals, so the weight of this discussion is not lost on me. My hope is that as we talk about this budget today, we can maintain a respectful level of decorum.

As a result, I want to begin today talking about homelessness, which is a pressing issue in our province and in the communities that I'm very proud to represent. To begin, overall it's incredibly concerning that at a time when investments in supporting unhoused folks are needed more than ever, this UCP government is cutting funding for homelessness and outreach support services from \$218 million in the current year to \$213 million in 2024-25, as noted on page 87 of the fiscal plan.

You know, I can share my thoughts, but I also want to share the thoughts of folks who are very engaged in this work. The Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness notes that this budget in particular, this line item cut in particular will make it difficult to ensure health and safety for people who have already lost their housing. Poor funding for community mental health services and facilities and for adequate compensation and training for people working in the human services sector adds to difficulties . . .

Mr. Nixon: Madam Chair, if the hon. member has a question, let's answer the question.

Member Irwin: Yeah. That's my – it doesn't seem fair to interrupt.

Mr. Nixon: First of all . . .

Member Irwin: Can I get to my question?

Mr. Nixon: Well, you did ask a question. Thanks.

Madam Chair, that is not a line item that is being cut for adult homeless services. What that line item reflects, so I could save the hon. member some trouble, is a decrease due to the transfer of the youth homeless grant to the Department of Children and Family Services. The reality is that we continue with the highest level that we have ever invested in homeless services in the province, as I stated in my opening remarks. While we are dealing with some transfer of different divisions of the department to other ministries, including the department of children's services, where it makes sense for them to lead the way when it comes to things like youth shelters so we can focus on the adult side of the homeless file, while Minister Turton focuses on children, we're providing actually approximately \$108.1 million in funding for homeless shelters across the province alone. It's the highest amount ever. I can give you some breakdowns of that between us and our community-based organization fund, which is us. We are providing \$209.6 million with our partners when it comes to homelessness.

Member Irwin: Okay. Thanks. That's great.

The challenge here is that, yes, you can say that you've got record levels of funding; you've also got record levels of . . .

The Chair: Member, just a note: through the chair.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Chair.

There are also record levels of homelessness under this UCP government. In fact, we've got a 90 per cent increase since 2019 in Edmonton alone, and it's not just an Edmonton issue. We also know that homelessness in Lethbridge, as an example, has doubled since 2019. All this should alert this government that far greater investments than the ones that the minister has just laid out are needed. These are simply inadequate investments.

But I'll get to a few more questions on this.

Mr. Nixon: Well, I mean, I will respond to that, Madam Chair, if I could. First of all, to bring up Lethbridge: let's actually focus on that. That is a critical area that has faced some real challenges when it comes to both homelessness and addictions. It's an area, though, where the department and our friends in the Blackfoot have done incredible work. I was just down in Lethbridge a few weeks ago to announce money for their new shelter services. What we realized when it came to Lethbridge was that almost 100 per cent of the homeless population of Lethbridge is Indigenous and that was going to require a different type of leadership in the way to do shelter differently. So we went and made a partnership with the Blood Department of Health. As all members in this committee will know, the Blood would be predominantly the nation that would be around Lethbridge. They have taken over the operation of that shelter in partnership with the government and have done an incredible job.

While we do see homelessness increasing in Edmonton, we also see homelessness decreasing in Calgary, so we have to look at the reasons for that to be able to make sure that we come up with solutions to understand what is working in Calgary and what has not been working here in Edmonton. The two things that we have seen – and this is what I think is the important point – is that we need to do some shelters differently, like we see what's taken place in Lethbridge, which is why you see investments . . .

9:20

Member Irwin: Yeah. That's a great segue to my questions about shelters, actually.

Mr. Nixon: . . . Madam Chair, in our Indigenous-only shelters, our women-only shelter spaces, and the highest amount of shelter spaces in the history of Edmonton to be able to respond to that need.

I also want to let you know, Madam Chair, that at no time – at no time . . .

Member Irwin: Thanks, Minister. That's it.

I'm worried about my time, Madam Chair.

Mr. Nixon: . . . has the capacity of those shelters ever exceeded capacity. Let's just make sure that fact is clear, and then I look forward to hearing some questions about the budget.

Member Irwin: Thanks, Minister. That's a great segue into my questions about shelters.

Again, referring to page 123 of the business plan, where you address tackling houselessness, there are no metrics in the business plan to measure the success of that specific outcome. So my question is: how does the ministry measure whether the shelter model is successful? What pathways to permanent housing are in place? What metrics of success are being used to look at long-term housing for people who were experiencing chronic homelessness? Objective 1.3 in the business plan calls for a "housing-focused delivery model," so how is the government moving towards a housing model and away from a shelter model to address homelessness?

Mr. Nixon: Well, those are two different issues. They are combined, but they're different issues that you need to measure. I mean, first of all, the emergency shelter system is designed to deal with emergencies; i.e., to make sure that people are safe, not in conditions where they would be freezing to death, and are receiving important daily services that everybody should be receiving, including the ability to shower, eat, stay warm, receive health services.

We certainly judge whether or not that shelter system is doing its job based on the capacity of that shelter system, first and foremost. Our shelter systems anywhere in the province have never exceeded that capacity, and our providers continue to be able to provide that daily service, and thousands of Albertans are utilizing that service on a daily basis.

But then, further to that – you're right – we want to continue to be able to drive towards long-term solutions when it comes to homelessness into permanent support, which is why in 2024-2025 we are going to continue down the road that we have seen with the navigation centre, which is making sure that we have the ability to provide wraparound supports to individuals. That includes getting people access to housing, but also it's dealing with the fundamentals that are causing that homeless situation.

Housing is not what causes homelessness. There are other major issues that cause homelessness, particularly addictions and mental health supports. We are continuing to do that. As I said in my opening remarks, how we know we're being successful with that is that 92 per cent of the individuals who take us up on the ability to go into more long-term housing remain in long-term housing in our province and go on to have success.

I don't know if the member has anything more specific to ask about the budget itself, but we are continuing to see great success when it comes to the emergency shelter system.

Member Irwin: Yeah. Actually, this is all quite relevant to the budget because the budget refers to the report of the homelessness task force multiple times, so I think there's a clear connection between questions around that report and some of the things that I want to dig into there in the budget.

Speaking of that same report, page 7 notes that the ministry will develop a logic model and specific outcomes for shelters and that this tool will enhance accountability for public funds. I've got a few questions here; I'll just try to get through them so then you can answer. It talks about this logic model. Has this logic model been developed for allocating funds? Where do we access this information?

We also see on page 9 that shelters receiving funding for 24/7 services will be required to adhere to service expectations established by Alberta community and social services. I've been very clear that I've got some concerns about the conditions in some of the shelters, particularly in Edmonton, in my own riding of Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. I've seen them first-hand, and I've also heard from so many folks who are experiencing homelessness. It's clear that the standards are not being enforced, so I'm wondering when this will change and what assurances do we have . . .

Mr. Nixon: Well, Madam Chair, that's categorically false, so let's address that question first.

Member Irwin: Well, you can clarify for me.

Mr. Nixon: I mean, if the hon. member is going to come and make assertions about multiple nonprofit organizations that work daily with the department . . .

Member Irwin: Not multiple.

Mr. Nixon: Well, Madam Chair, I can see the hon. member getting upset . . .

Member Irwin: No, not at all.

Mr. Nixon: . . . but that's who we depend on for our emergency shelter systems, pretty significant nonprofit organizations, and it's disappointing to continue to see the Official Opposition cast, you know, doubt on the services that they provide. Through you, Madam Chair, to them: I'd like to apologize to all those providers for the behaviour of the Official Opposition when it comes to that.

But let me be clear. We do have service expectations when it comes to shelters. They're handled in all of our contract agreements with those shelters. Often what you'll hear, Madam Chair, are accusations that there will not be places to store people's belongings – not true; there is in all of our shelter systems – that there won't be 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week operations: not true; there is inside our shelter systems inside the province. So those standards are met.

Now, one thing that we do find often is that when members are referring to that, they're actually referring to agencies that don't have anything to do with the government; i.e., that are not in a contract to provide services for shelter to the government. So often you'll have somebody come in and say, "Hey, I know this organization is not providing 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week support," but they're not associated with us, they don't receive a contract from us, and they're not an emergency shelter. So, again, I want to make clear that our shelters are doing a good job.

I do want to talk about this logic approach and being able to track it, which I think is the point that the member is trying to bring up. Some of that is in progress right now, but we continue to build dashboards to be able to make sure that we can see real time and then be able to evaluate and adjust to it.

One of the things that's really been beneficial with the navigation centre approach that we've taken in Edmonton and why we will mimic it in other cities is the ability to see real time. I mean, for the very first time we've had a centralized approach that can allow us to know exactly what had happened the night before – how many of those different providers had space; how many did not have space? – and be able to manage the system overall to be able to, you know, utilize that data in a much more efficient way. I have made clear to the department that they need to continue to build that up, and as they finish that process, we will come out with a very clear, transparent dashboard that all the public will be able to see in real time, just like us, when it's completed.

Member Irwin: Okay. I've got some questions on that in a moment. Can you tell me how much money goes annually to addressing the shelter standards? Is there a specific line item at all around shelter standards in particular?

Mr. Nixon: Again, we invest. Well, here we go. Our shelter funding in the city of Edmonton was \$42.5 million as well as for our CBOs, which is us, \$41.3 million; \$83.8 million in the city of Edmonton. In Calgary we invested \$42 million in our CBO partners, which, again, we fund the CBOs, \$41.6 million, which is \$83.64 million. In Fort McMurray our shelter funding is \$2.8 million, and our CBO funding up there is \$3.3 million, which is \$6.1 million. In Grande Prairie – I know there are some members here from Grande Prairie today – \$3.9 million is going into shelter funding, combined with our CBO funding of \$4.2 million. Again, I can keep going through the entire list if the hon. member would like. Well, let's do that. Let's go. In Lethbridge \$3.7 million . . .

Member Irwin: Okay. No. That's okay, Minister. I've got a few more questions, Madam Chair, if you don't mind, particularly on the data piece, because I think you've indirectly alluded to the fact that some of the issues we're seeing are around the lack of data and clarity.

The Action Plan on Homelessness, which again is referred to on page 121 of the business plan, talks about developing a new provincial homelessness management information system, HMIS. This HMIS, it says, will develop data, evidence, and analytics to assess shelter and housing support program capacities. My first question is: is that what you're referring to?

But I do have a follow-up, so I'll get to that right now. You know, we saw a great deal of mass confusion when it came to reporting Edmonton shelter numbers throughout the fall and winter. Of course, I wrote the minister about that, Madam Chair, including contradictory information reported by the minister and by Homeward Trust. We know that Homeward Trust has taken down their nightly breakdown of shelter spaces, and the new information provided by the government of Alberta is a lot less detailed. It gives no verifiable information about the location or agencies responsible for the spaces. My question is: what is the status of this HMIS? Is this developed? Is this the system you're referring to? If not, how are you determining the numbers? Like, what is being considered an emergency shelter space? Does it include spaces with eligibility criteria? Yeah. What's the status of the HMIS, and is that what you're referring to, Minister?

Mr. Nixon: Well, first of all, Madam Chair, the only mass confusion was being created by the Official Opposition.

Member Irwin: Absolutely not.

Mr. Nixon: We were very much aware each night exactly what our capacity was.

Member Irwin: You weren't sharing it publicly or with the media.

Mr. Singh: Point of order.

Member Irwin: That's not a point of order.

The Chair: Yeah. Point of order. Go ahead.

Mr. Singh: Madam Chair, the point of order is under Standing Order 23(j). The member "uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder." The member has been disrupting the minister with abusive, insulting language that is not appropriate for good parliamentary practice, which would tend to create an uncomfortable position on the part of the minister, and it would be fitting if the member does not interrupt and lets the minister continue and finish the answer. Also, if this format here, going back and forth, is not working, I will recommend going to block time as well.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Go ahead.

Ms Gray: Thank you, Madam Chair. I do not believe this is a point of order. In fact, the member did not reference anything that the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood said that might be unparliamentary or insulting or cause disorder in any way, shape, or form. I see both parties in this debate enabling the exact same technique, which is: we're short on time and people are trying to make sure we're getting to the crux of the matter. I don't believe this is a point of order, Madam Chair.

9:30

The Chair: To be honest, members, I didn't hear anything that I would deem to be a point of order. I'm having a little difficulty because I'm finding both parties are kind of talking over one another. So if you would just kindly direct the conversation through the chair, I think we'll have more of a respectful tone and we'll be able to hear the respectful questions, but we'll also be able to hear the respectful answers from the minister.

If we could please proceed, let's pick it up. Where were we? Who was talking last?

Mr. Nixon: That's me.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead.

Mr. Nixon: We were talking about the so-called mass confusion system that was created by others, particularly the Official Opposition at the time. But to be clear, we have released each night the capacity of the shelter system. Some of that confusion was being caused, frankly, by the fact that Homeward Trust actually does not run the emergency shelter system in the province. They have no connection to the overall running of it. That's actually run by the department with our nonprofit providers. The decision was made to centralize that process to be able to make sure each night that all came in ultimately through my assistant deputy minister responsible for homelessness so that we could make sure that we could co-ordinate amongst all the shelter providers that we have.

Specifically on the technology question of what is taking place, we are working with our partners, obviously, over in the technology department. They are working on creating a new data portal for us that will include all of our CBOs, so homeless housing providers and our shelter providers, all in one spot. That is in progress and I hope will be completed sooner than later so that we can actually have that up so everybody can see what we see in real time.

But right now I'm very confident as far as capacity numbers that we receive from the shelters that are coming up from each provider each day so that we can manage it. I do appreciate that Homeward Trust has acknowledged that they're not running that shelter system and they don't want to add to that confusion by putting out numbers that they would not have that are accurate.

Member Irwin: Yeah. Part of the challenge is that publicly the data that's being shared is very high level at this point. This is why I want to dig into it a little bit, because as we saw over the coldest months, the data in the shelter spaces data that you were sharing was including bridge and transitional housing.

The Chair: Member.

Member Irwin: Madam Chair, pardon me.

What we saw is that transitional housing, bridge housing, a lot of these spaces that were being included in emergency shelter spaces have eligibility criteria. An example would be Salvation Army transitional housing spaces – one of which is in my area – have application forms, and they have a long list of exclusionary criteria. Again, without that information we can't be saying that we had, you know, at that point 1,700 emergency shelter spaces available when they simply weren't emergency shelter spaces. I'm concerned about that lack of accountability. I would urge the minister to restore that level of information.

Mr. Nixon: Madam Chair, if the hon. member is trying to say that the work that transitional beds do in connection with the shelter are not somehow shelter and/or emergency shelter . . .

Member Irwin: They are not emergency shelter; you can't just walk in.

The Chair: Hon. member, I'm just going to hear from the minister first, please.

Member Irwin: Okay.

Mr. Nixon: Madam Chair, through the chair, it's not the member's first day here. But if that is the assertion, she's incorrect. You know, it's unfortunate because, again, it's continuing to relay things that just aren't factual when it comes to the system.

If she's looking for a breakdown by city, I'm happy to provide it. Calgary, there are 2,089 spaces that are available to deal with homelessness; Edmonton, 1,796 spaces. At one point we had 1,801. We have never ever – ever – had to come close to that as far as capacity. We're about 1,796 at the moment. Fort McMurray, 91; Grande Prairie, 147; Lethbridge, 121; Lloydminster, 28; Medicine Hat, 30; Red Deer, 230; Slave Lake, 20; Wetaskiwin, 50. Those numbers are provided as well as the detail of which organizations are providing it for us and the type of organizations that we partner with to be able to complete that.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Minister.

Madam Chair, I believe my time is running out.

Mr. Nixon: What we need to do, though, is continue to make sure that those who are homeless know there's somewhere safe to go. If they are hearing somewhere that there is not, that is incorrect. If anybody needs supports anywhere in these cities, please go immediately to our shelter providers. They will provide you safe support and make sure that all of our homeless are in a safe spot, and I think that's very important, particularly when it's cold out.

Member Irwin: Thank you. I'm aware of my time, Minister.

Madam Chair, again, not what I'm saying at all. I mean, it's very much a reality that those are not emergency shelter spaces, but I'll move on. This is about more than numbers; it's about more than data.

Mr. Nixon: Well . . .

Member Irwin: Let me continue.

It's about the real humans who are impacted. As noted on page 6 of the action plan, it talks about the voluntary approach to support folks leaving homelessness. I would argue that forcibly removing folks and throwing out their belongings, which the minister describes as garbage, isn't voluntary.

My question is about the supports at the navigation centre, which I had the opportunity to visit, and I can say that there's some great work happening there. We've asked this, and the minister has been asked as well. He's talked about the number of services or the types of services that folks are able to access, but we haven't heard about how many people have actually been housed. So can the minister please share the data on how many folks accessing the navigation centre have been housed?

Mr. Nixon: Well, first we have to address again the hon. member's ridiculous comments that somehow people that are leaving encampments have their stuff thrown out. That's not true. The process is that a city of Edmonton bus arrives at the same time as the teams that will dismantle that encampment. Everybody is provided a secure ability to transport their personal belongings to the navigation centre, and that has worked well. It has been a high priority of the government to make sure that takes place.

What the member may be referring to is the 129 tonnes of garbage that had to be cleaned up at those locations, which include things like 4,000 used needles lying on the ground and other things, including stolen property and other components that certainly should not be left laying around the community. I would certainly hope it's not the Official Opposition's position now that we leave 4,000 needles lying in the streets and 129 tonnes of garbage for Edmontonians to look at.

Now, if you're looking for the specifics of who has come through the navigation centre . . .

Member Irwin: Housed, please. Just to repeat the question, I'm looking for how many folks have been housed. I do know the numbers on how many people have accessed the navigation centre, Madam Chair.

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. We can get that for you in two seconds. The vast majority have received housing services – I'm just looking. Oh, you know what? Actually, given the interest in this I'd be happy to have our ADM responsible for homelessness come up. She'd be excited to tell you about some of the great housing stories that are taking place inside our navigation centre.

Ms Anderson: Thank you for the question. Jenn Anderson, assistant deputy minister for preventive community services division. At the Navigation and Support Centre people are being housed both by the housing workers and directly through the shelter. Once they leave the centre, we're not sort of tracking at that point; we leave that to our shelters and CBOs to do. However, as of last Friday – there are a few categories; I'm just going to go through them all – five people have been housed, one through co-ordinated access by the Hope teams directly at the centre. There are 220 referrals to co-ordinated access; 42 people have been accepted, and all are connected to a housing team. There were 127 accessed and eligible for the intensive case management team for housing; six were eligible for supportive housing, and 30 were assessed as eligible for rapid rehousing. Everybody else who's gone through the centre has gone into a shelter or a longer term transitional shelter.

Member Irwin: Thank you. Thank you for that. I really appreciate that data.

Absolutely – I'll make it very clear – it's no criticism of anybody working on the front lines. They are doing all they can with limited resources. But the number just shared is five, right? Five out of . . .

Mr. Nixon: No. That's not the number that was just shared.

Member Irwin: Five that were housed. That's the number that was shared at the beginning, and then other people are provided services, and that absolutely aligns with what . . .

The Chair: Excuse me, Member. I'm a bit confused. Minister, could you just clarify for a moment?

Mr. Nixon: The number that was shared was not five that have received housing. The vast majority of people who went to the navigation centre end up in housing . . .

Member Irwin: Wait-lists.

Mr. Nixon: . . . either through shelters and/or through our housing program.

Member Irwin: A shelter isn't a home.

Mr. Nixon: The number is not five. You know, this goes back to the characterization . . .

The Chair: Sorry, Minister.

Hon. member, I can't hear the minister because you keep talking over him. We'll just be respectful to one or another, please. If we would kindly direct the conversation through the chair. I'd like to hear the minister's answers, and, Member, you're going to have more than ample time to ask your questions. I'll make sure . . .

9:40

Mr. Nixon: I have the number here, and this will be from probably about a week ago, the number that I have in front of me. It's probably changed a little bit since then. Of the 420, 278 people of that number have currently been connected to some sort of housing. So that's not five.

That said, though, you know, Madam Chair, we do have to go back to talk about the issue around the other role that is taking place while the encampment dismantles is taking place, which is cleaning up and securing the city of Edmonton and making sure that Edmontonians can be safe. This is something that I know the other party, the Official Opposition, doesn't want to do, which is fine. But, you know, this is a process where the city of Edmonton came, said it was a crisis and was creating very significant challenges. They were finding things like weapons, people being abused within those encampments, which is part of that process. [interjections]

The Chair: Sorry. There are four people talking at once now. The only person that I'm going to hear from right now is Mr. Boitchenko, who's called a point of order.

Mr. Boitchenko: Okay. I call a point of order on 23(j). The member opposite, particularly with the tone of her questioning and the interruption of the minister's answer, is likely to create disorder. The member opposite had an opportunity to go with block time or shared time. With block time she could have talked for an hour. Perhaps next year maybe we can go into block time so that we don't interrupt the minister while he's talking, because I do not clearly understand either the question or the answer. And if the member opposite would maybe stop interrupting the minister, perhaps she can learn a couple of things with his answers there. I would appreciate it if we can maybe let the minister finish before we interrupt him.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Boitchenko.

We'll hear from the opposition.

Ms Gray: Thank you, Madam Chair. This is not a point of order, and Member Boitchenko has misunderstood 23(j), which reads, "uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder." The minister set the tone by interrupting the critic for housing in her very first question. We have very limited time, and the member quite literally said, I can quote, respectfully, Minister, because she is short on time, so we are trying to get to answers. I do not find this to be a point of order.

The Chair: Okay. I'm just going to read the directions here. The block of shared time is 20 minutes during which time you may go back and forth with questions, comments, and responses; however, neither participant may speak for longer than 10 minutes at a time. Those are the instructions, so however you choose to manage it. Block time was not chosen. It's a free flow, but I would as chair like to hear from both parties. The minister is speaking, so if we could pick up where the minister was speaking, and then we'll go

to the member. But, please, both of you kindly direct your comments through the chair, and we'll continue.

Mr. Nixon: Well, Madam Chair, through you to the hon. member, if we get to some specific questions, we'd be very excited to answer them, but if we continue to see untrue statements, I will continue to correct them. But if not, I will be happy to answer those questions if they've got a question about the budget. In fact, so far over the last 10 minutes I haven't even referred to the budget itself, so maybe the member could ask a question about the budget. Let's try that.

Member Irwin: I was really hoping that it would be a respectful tone, but again this minister set the tone.

It's quite clear that objective 1.6 in the business plan refers to the Action Plan on Homelessness, which is what I'm continually referring to, and I'm trying to get some clear data. So I would like some clarity. Perhaps if the ADM would like to come up again because the notes that we took as she was speaking said that five folks have been housed; there have been 220 referrals; 42 have been accepted into housing. First, 127 have been eligible for tons of case work. The reality is that five people have been housed. Again, this is no criticism.

Mr. Nixon: That is an inaccurate statement again.

Member Irwin: Allow me to continue, Madam Chair.

Mr. Nixon: No. Madam Chair, it's an inaccurate statement. Here's the thing, actually.

The Chair: Minister.

Member Irwin: I would love some clarity from the ADM.

Mr. Nixon: The report the hon. member is referring to is not in the budget.

The Chair: Okay. Minister, we'll just go back to the member, and then I'm hoping that once the member finishes asking her questions, if the lady – I'm so sorry; your staff member from the back – could maybe just clarify what she was reading.

Mr. Nixon: Madam Chair, I'm not going to refer anymore to the document the hon. member is referring to because it's not in the budget.

Does she have a question about the budget?

The Chair: Let's go to the hon. member for your questions.

Member Irwin: Again, it's wild to me, Madam Chair, that I wouldn't be able to ask about data around folks being housed when we're clearly referring to an action plan on homelessness. These are my constituents, these are people that matter, and we should be able to ask for data.

Moving on, I'm interested in the approach of what services are being offered to folks who are accessing services. The task force report, again referred to on page 123 of the business plan, talks about access to recovery-oriented services, including harm reduction, detox treatment, and stabilization. I love seeing that harm reduction is referred to in the action plan, but I know we have heard from some ministers who are very much degrading that approach. We know, folks on the front lines know that it's very important that folks are offered a range of services meeting them where they're at so that they can get housed and that they can stay housed.

Can the minister confirm for me that the budget does in fact support a range of services, including harm reduction, and if so, in

which line items would we find those? Where would we find those services reflected?

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Mr. Nixon: Madam Chair, the budget of course has a range of services. If you listened to my opening remarks, you would hear the vast number of services that go into a \$5.3 billion budget. Specifically, if you're asking about the services around the navigation centre, the work that we do around homelessness, we have everything from health care supports, addiction recovery supports, housing supports, mental health supports, and other things like access to income supports.

One of the most interesting things that's taking place right now in the navigation centre is about getting people ID, which is the greatest challenge that often individuals that are homeless have when they enter that process. So we partner with Service Alberta and are able to get people ID right there on the spot at the navigation centre, which then gets them access to other services in the department, including income supports or even the ability to get prescriptions filled, going through that process.

We are not the lead when it comes to addiction recovery. That is led by the Department of Mental Health and Addiction. That said, we have an important role in that process, which is to connect people to prerecovery and, after that, to postrecovery housing. The department is very focused on what that process is, which is to get people to emergency supports, and then ultimately, if they are facing addictions, connected into Minister Williams and his department's recovery programs.

If the hon. member is asking if I support the Alberta recovery model, the answer is most definitely yes. I support the Alberta recovery model. I think everybody should. That is what our department continues to do to be able to make sure that we move people from places of addiction into long-term recovery in partnership with Minister Williams' department.

Member Irwin: Thank you. I've focused a lot on what we're seeing in Edmonton. Of course, that makes sense, but it's important to talk about some of the smaller communities, and there are many that I could ask about. One question I do have is around Wetaskiwin. I note again in the Action Plan on Homelessness, referred to on page 123 of the business plan, that there's an allocation of \$1 million to create up to 50 new shelter spaces in Wetaskiwin. Of course, we know that that has not happened. I just would like an update, Minister, through the chair, on the potential of a new shelter in Wetaskiwin. You know, is there a push from the local MLA and from this minister to move towards funding this project, and if not, who is supporting unhoused folks in Wetaskiwin right now? And what is the plan if they're not going to move forward with an expanded new shelter space?

Mr. Nixon: Well, it's unfortunate again to have the member continue to state things as fact that aren't fact. There are shelter spaces being run in Wetaskiwin as we speak . . .

Member Irwin: I'm asking for the expansion. [interjection]

Mr. Nixon: Again, you know, I see the hon. Member for St. Albert heckling in estimates, which shouldn't shock us. I'm looking forward to that segment.

There is shelter space in Wetaskiwin. It's currently being run through trailer systems that have been built. Yes, the local MLA has been a significant advocate of that approach. We also have money for capital to continue to invest in a long-term permanent shelter

within the city of Wetaskiwin, but I want to be clear that there is a shelter.

What's really important when it comes to Wetaskiwin is to emphasize the Indigenous approach that the government of Alberta is taking when it comes to homelessness, which is supported by, you know, people like Grand Chief Thomas up here in Treaty 6. I mentioned earlier in some of my comments when it comes to the work that's taking place in Lethbridge, which was one of the biggest challenges that we faced a couple of years ago when it came to homelessness, that we were able to really get on a good path once we were able to bring in long-term partnerships with the Blood Tribe down there, who are doing an incredible job with that shelter, which is why we now have a shelter here in Edmonton that is run by the Enoch, supported by our department as well as by other First Nation communities. We're looking at similar approaches when it comes to Calgary.

Why that's relevant for Wetaskiwin is that that's absolutely essential for us going forward in Wetaskiwin, to be able to make sure we have a good, strong partner with Maskwacis, in particular, to be able to have that homeless population receive services that are Indigenous and culturally appropriate, to be able to have success. But I want to stress, Madam Chair, that there is shelter in Wetaskiwin as we speak. People would have slept in it last night.

Member Irwin: Thank you. Minister, again, through the chair, you may not have heard what I was asking, but I was asking about the new shelter space. I have great respect for the work of folks in Wetaskiwin. That's absolutely not what I was implying. I was asking about the new shelter space, which we know has had some controversy around it.

9:50

Let's move on, though. I'd like to end this section by coming back to an issue very close to my heart and something we've been talking about a lot in the Legislature. We know for a fact that higher rents lead to homelessness. This government's own task force report, on page 4, again referred to on pages 121 and 123 of the business plan, points to the fact that "during periods of growth, higher market rents and more people moving to Alberta have historically correlated with increased homelessness in communities." And it notes that increases in homelessness are best predicted by increases in rent and provincial in-migration. We know, all of us in this room, that we are experiencing both of these things and that rent increases are higher in Edmonton and Calgary than anywhere else. So I'd like to ask the minister. You know, he's been very clear that his government won't support Bill 205, which will include rent caps; they refuse to increase rent supplements, which we'll get to more later, to keep pace with their own plan. So, in this budget, how specifically are rent increases being addressed when your own government documents mention the fact that higher rents mean more tents, higher rents mean increased homelessness?

Mr. Nixon: Well, to be clear, our government's approach is not to have the homeless stay in tents. That's the Official Opposition's approach.

Member Irwin: Well, what's your plan, then?

Mr. Nixon: First of all, I want to be clear, Madam Chair, that while we are seeing the highest rent increases – the hon. member is correct – in Edmonton and Calgary, we still rank very, very low on the affordability scale in the country. In fact, Edmonton and Calgary remain the most affordable rents in the country or pretty close to. Edmonton, I think, is ranked 32 of 35 in terms of actual rent costs at the moment. Just checking that that is correct.

What the challenge is when it comes to rent is that we must provide stability to the market, and that is going to mean we have to increase supply. That's the only way forward. Unfortunately, those who want to go down the path of rent control don't seem to understand that that won't increase supply. Actually, what that will do is end up stopping supply from growing, which means ultimately what we see in other jurisdictions – including right here in this country, Vancouver and Toronto – who have forms of what the hon. member is referring to where you have the highest rent inside the country because supply was not able to increase, which is why you have now the federal government and the B.C. and Ontario governments working overtime to try to overcome that challenge.

That is why we are very focused on increasing supply in the market both on the affordable and the attainable side, but we must get that attainable side – and what I mean by the attainable side is the market side – right because that is where the bulk of that will come from, which is why we've worked on things like the reduction of red tape, Madam Chair, which is in the process right now of helping us create almost 50,000 more houses than the market would have ultimately been able to create, at the same time as investing inside more and more affordable government-run housing processes with our partners.

But I want to be clear. The bigger way to deal with that rent issue is to be able to increase supply, and the government's plan is working because you're now seeing the largest number of purpose-built rentals being built in the communities that she refers to as well as the largest amount of residential construction in the history of the country taking place right here in the province of Alberta. Further to that, we are also making sure in this budget, through pretty significant investments, that you're going to continue to see more affordable housing built, including 5,100 more capital builds, 1,900 more rental supplements for . . .

Member Irwin: This is great; not what I asked about, so . . .

Mr. Nixon: Well, it is what the hon. member asked for.

Member Irwin: Yeah. It's a great segue.

Mr. Nixon: She asked how we were going to deal with rent control in the budget . . .

Member Irwin: Yeah.

Mr. Nixon: . . . and our approach was different than the NDP when it came to rent control.

Member Irwin: Right.

Mr. Nixon: I just told you what our approach is.

Member Irwin: Yeah.

Mr. Nixon: Our approach is to be able to make sure that the market can do its job and that more people have houses, and to make sure that we continue to make sure that we don't go down the road that the hon. member is proposing . . .

Member Irwin: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Nixon: . . . which would result in more homeless people.

Member Irwin: That's a great segue. We can agree – I'm happy to shake your hand after – on the fact that supply is absolutely critical. I've said all along that rent caps are not the panacea to this, but they're one step that we can take immediately to keep Albertans in their homes.

But this is a great segue into supply. When it comes to investments in affordable housing, the number this minister continues to throw out is \$9 billion. He's been asked multiple times by us and by the media to provide a breakdown of how he has arrived at the amount of \$9 billion. We don't see this number anywhere in the budget documents, yet he has repeated it at least a dozen times in the Legislature and with the media. For instance, at a press conference on February 26 he noted that the Alberta government is investing \$9 billion between now and 2031 to create 13,000 new units. He again said it in Lethbridge as well. I just want to know, again because I'm trying to understand the connection to the numbers we see in the budget, can he walk us through how he arrived at the figure of \$9 billion? Which percentage of this figure is through private partnerships? Which percentage is for nonmarket affordable housing?

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Mr. Nixon: The hon. member is forgetting another part of what we say when we're referring to the \$9 billion, which is \$9 billion between us and our partners. We have a lot of partners, which is how we are able to accomplish the amazing things that are taking place in our province when it comes to housing. Some of those partners, obviously, would be the federal government, our municipalities, nonprofit organizations that we work with, that are all working together on that investment within the system.

What I can say specifically is that in this budget we've announced in 2024 that we have \$840 million going in over the next three years; \$719 million of that will go towards new builds, \$121 million for repairs. Budget 2024 ultimately will support 7,000 more affordable households over the next three years, including 5,100 capital builds as well as 1,900 households that will be able to receive increased rent supplements on top of the rent supplements that we already have. Some of the numbers that I also think are important to the question are that we've increased our rent supplements by 3,500 since 2021. Households: Budget 2024 also is increasing the overall rent supplement program by 9.2 per cent, and we are on track now to be able to deliver rental assistance to more than 14,000 households, which is about 28,000 individuals. At the same time, though, Madam Chair, is simultaneously doing the work that ultimately is going to be the core of the heavy lifting of this, which is to continue to see more purpose-built rentals enter the system and the market able to do its job, which we see taking place right now in Alberta each and every month in a record-breaking way.

To be clear, Madam Chair, when we refer to that \$9 billion amount, we refer to all the work that is taking place in the province in partnership – and some of the members may not know this. Most of our housing projects that we often do on affordable housing are actually three-way partnerships. So you would see the Alberta government invest about a third of that project, the federal government often invests another third of that project, and then usually the organization that we're working with, often a municipality-based housing authority, provides the other third investment, which is how we end up with all the numbers that we have going forward.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

I understand that the Official Opposition would like to change the person who's asking the questions now. Is that correct? Yes? Please proceed, Member.

Ms Sigurdson: Madam Chair, I'd like to use block time.

The Chair: Block time has been requested. Minister, your preference?

Mr. Nixon: I'm happy to go back and forth, but . . .

Ms Sigurdson: I prefer block time, Madam Chair.

Mr. Nixon: . . . she has every right to call for block time. Doesn't surprise me.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead.

Ms Sigurdson: Thanks so much, Madam Chair. According to the Seniors, Community and Social Services annual report '22-23, as of March 31, 2023, there were 745,000 seniors in our province. This demographic, we know, is growing at a quicker rate than the general population age groups and expected to double to almost 1 and a half million by 2043. We know that overall our population growth and inflation was 6.2 per cent. This means that to continue to provide the services and supports we currently do, we need a budget increase of 6.2 per cent. However, the UCP is keeping spending overall to 3.9 per cent, which means a cut to supports and services. This has an even greater negative impact on supports to seniors as this population is growing at a higher rate than the rest of the population.

Certainly, we know that it's so important, the work of this ministry, because these are preventative programs and they save the government money in the long run. Sometimes this is called deferred costs; instead of using expensive public services like hospitals, emergency medical systems, police, institutional care, preventative programs support seniors to live with dignity in their community. Not only is this better for seniors but, of course, it saves a significant amount of money on public programs. The work of this ministry is so important. Certainly, I personally as a young single mom benefited from subsidized housing, and in my career as a social worker I worked with many people who received support. So I think it's really important, the work of this ministry, and I'm very grateful for the work of the public servants and the minister because this makes a big difference in people's lives.

I'd like the minister to refer to 7.2, special needs assistance grants. We know that special needs assistance grants are funds that support seniors to age in the community. Seniors overwhelmingly want to remain in their communities as they age, and with the right supports this is possible, and I certainly have heard first-hand from seniors the importance of this and their fears that they may not be able to stay in their communities for a variety of reasons. We know that with the right supports, mental health and general health are higher when seniors age in their communities; however, without these supports, seniors may experience social isolation, which leads to negative mental health and general health outcomes, and in extreme cases seniors may experience elder abuse. Having said all that, it's hard for me to understand why this program is experiencing significant cuts. I'd like the minister to explain this and why not only funding is not keeping up with inflation and population growth, but it has been cut by over \$4 million this year. Of course, as I just identified, the seniors population is growing at a faster rate than the rest of the population.

10:00

I guess I just want to make another point. We know that 75 per cent of health outcomes for seniors are determined by nonmedical factors. The social determinants of health, Madam Chair: food security, quality of social relationships, system navigation, transportation. These nonmedical supports are really important in supporting people to age in communities, which is what the special

needs assistance grants are meant to do. I'm quite concerned. This program has really been gutted since the UCP became government. This year it's \$4 million.

Since 2019, on a regular basis, not always annually, the Special Needs Assistance for Seniors booklets come out, and people can see what's in them. The most recent booklet: I just sort of compared it with what was given when we were government, over the time. This year's budget is a significant cut, but it's 8 and a half million dollars since 2019 that this program has been cut by the UCP.

I just have a few more detailed questions about this program. One of the things is that, you know, it's quite a low income threshold for people to be able to access this program, Madam Chair. I'm just wondering what measure the minister uses to determine that. Does he use the market basket measure, the low-income measure, LICO? You know, what helps him decide that? It seems quite low, and actually more Albertans should be able to access this program because it is a program that keeps people in their homes. We know that aging in community is something that certainly this government has spoken about and we in the NDP really support also. So I'm just wondering how that is determined.

We know that many expenses that often help people live in community, like the personal response service: they have a monthly fee. People are living by themselves, and if they fall – this is something the government used to support, and now they won't even pay for the installation in this program. I'm concerned about that.

Foot orthotics: oftentimes as we age, we need extra support. Our feet, you know, change. Now that's not even covered under this program. That was – they gave two times in a lifetime \$400, so that's a huge loss for low-income seniors. Another thing is that oftentimes laundry expenses were supported. This is sometimes for people who are in institutional care, but that is now gone. So there's a variety of cuts to this program that are really substantial, and I'd really like the minister to help me understand why this is important.

Mr. Singh: Point of order.

The Chair: A point of order has been called.

Mr. Singh: Madam Chair, the point of order is under Standing Order 23(b). The member "speaks to matters other than the question under discussion" without referring to any line item. The committee has convened for the purpose of considering the ministry's 2024 budget, including estimates, fiscal plan, and business plan. The matter that has been raised by the member, which is not covered by this budget here, is not within the boundaries of these set topics.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Ms Gray: Thank you, Madam Chair. This is not a point of order. I believe Member Singh has not followed the conversation. On page 192 of government estimates we are discussing line 7.2, the special needs assistance grant. Everything that the member was talking about falls under line 7.2 and this government's investment or lack of investment in special needs assistance grants.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member. When it comes time for the minister to address this – thank you for referencing the page number for him to be able to follow and then speak to it. I don't find this to be a point of order at the moment.

Please proceed.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Thanks very much, Madam Chair. Just in summary, I would just like the minister to help me and all Albertans

understand why this program is really being gutted. I mean, this is a fundamental program that has supported seniors, low-income seniors on very low fixed incomes, to be able to stay in their communities. So \$8.5 million dollars has been cut from this since the UCP became government and \$4 million in this budget, which is devastating to many people.

I'd like to move on now to 7.3, the seniors home adaptation and repair program. It's also called SHARP. That's the acronym for it, which makes it easy. This is another important program that's meant to support seniors to age in their communities. It supports seniors to make changes to their homes; for example, maybe removing carpets. You know, when people age they may also have some mobility issues. Sometimes if they have stairs, they can apply for funding to get a lift to take them up. I mean, it just makes a huge difference. I certainly know many wonderful stories of people being able to stay in their own homes for 10 years longer, and it made a huge difference for them because then they could enjoy their community and their yards that they often have put so much love into and created.

Again, because I did discuss earlier about our very rapidly growing seniors population and the increase in inflation that was considerably high, this program has also been cut by about half a million dollars. If anything, it should be increasing because, of course, our population is growing, as I've just said. I'm just wondering what's going on here either. Of course, this is a value that the government has identified as something that's important to them – and, you know, it's absolutely important to our Official Opposition – so if the minister could please explain why this program has also been cut.

Now I'd like to refer to line items 1.1 and 1.2, minister's and deputy minister's offices. This line item supports government-wide policies and goals. Governments often have challenges working crossministerial because sometimes they get criticized for working in silos, but of course seniors' programs are often several ministries that serve them. I know that it's important, and of course it identifies right here that the minister works with other ministers to make sure that he's advocating for seniors and they're getting the supports they need.

Back in 2019 the Seniors Advocate office was cut. At that time the minister said: no worries; the Health Advocate is going to take care of all of those needs of the seniors. The truth of the matter is that the Health Advocate is exclusively for health issues. A third of the Seniors Advocate's focus was on financial supports, and a third was on social services, and a third was on health. Now, we were told at that time not to worry because all of these would be supported by the Health Advocate, but this isn't true. The Health Advocate actually, in her last report, did indicate that those were out of the scope of what she does. So I'd like the minister to address that because that was something certainly that the UCP government said that they would do: seniors would be supported; it was a redundancy.

The Chair: Thank you so much. That's the member's time for questioning.

Now we'll move over to the hon. minister for his response.

Mr. Nixon: Well, Madam Chair, thanks to the hon. member for her questions. I have good news for her. All the things that she says are cuts were not cuts. So let's go through that. We'll be able to help her out.

Starting with special needs assistance grants, which the hon. member refers to 7.2: this actually is an adjustment within line items, which I'll go through in a minute. But to be clear, she asked, actually: what measures do we use to make these decisions? The

measures that we actually use to make these decisions is to meet caseloads and demands. So the program, the special needs assistance grants: this reflects an adjustment to the lack of demand in the program. We are meeting all of the demand that is requested within that program, and that line item reflects rightsizing in the budget based on prior years' utilization of that program and off-setting of program indexation costs. We have sufficient dollars within that line to be able to meet the full needs of that program. There has been no change to the benefit itself, and that is a reflection of what is being asked for in the benefit.

10:10

I will make clear that 2024: that line item budget is \$4.1 million, right? I got that right? And then I just want to make sure I'm on the right one. Yeah. Sorry. The change or the adjustment is \$4.1 million – I want to make sure I give you the right number – and that change is due to lower than anticipated take-up for the program.

To be very clear, that benefit was also indexed, so it is indexed at 4.25 per cent as of January 2024. Three point four million dollars of this budget change is being reallocated ultimately to seniors' community grants to support senior service organizations, deliver programs and services that help keep seniors safe and independent, which includes enhancing funding for elder abuse shelters, prevention efforts, and the delivery of nonmedical home supports. To be clear, the benefit has not changed and will continue to be fully funded. This reflects use rates.

Now, I'm glad the hon. member brought up elder abuse, which I think is clearly an important topic and something that the government continues to take very serious. That's why I referred to it in my opening remarks. Budget 2024 will include \$3.3 million for seniors experiencing abuse: \$435,000 of that will go to our new safe spaces program, which is about using our existing lodge system capacity within that lodge to be able to help elders that are facing abuse be able to go to a safe location; \$1.7 million is going to the Unison elder abuse shelter in Calgary and Sage Seniors Safe House in Edmonton; and we're also investing \$1.1 million to the Alberta Elder Abuse Awareness Council to support co-ordinated community response networks. This funding over three years is investing \$9.7 million in elder abuse prevention, and that would total up to just over \$2 million for the safe spaces program, over \$2.6 million for both of the shelters in Edmonton and Calgary, and then ultimately \$2.4 million to the Alberta abuse awareness council to support that community response. So the member can rest assured that we continue to invest significantly in elder abuse prevention and will continue to going forward.

I think the third thing that she raised was around the seniors home adaptation and repair and property tax deferral loans program. For some of the members that may not know about this program, it allows senior homeowners to finance home repairs and adaptations through low-interest home equity loans with the government. The program offers low-interest home equity loans to a maximum of \$40,000 per household for seniors with household incomes of \$75,000 or less. No changes are being made to that program. That will remain with a \$9.5 million budget allocated to SHARP in order to provide those loans to eligible seniors. Typically over 400 loans are provided annually at an average of over about \$11,000 per loan. So again to the hon. member: rest assured, that program remains in place.

And then, lastly, she brings up the Seniors Advocate or the Health Advocate situation. I don't know if there was a specific question there beyond the fact that the decision of the government was to bring the advocate into one location, but we continue to work very closely with the advocate and are very confident in the work that is taking place with Alberta Health, which I think also refers to some

of the biggest work that the department would be doing when it comes to seniors at the moment, our partnership with the Ministry of Health.

As the refocusing of the health care system takes place, we have been brought to the table to participate in the process of developing that new continuing care organization to make sure that it ultimately reflects not only seniors, which will be a very important part of that program and will have impacts on all of our communities, but also some of the key stakeholders that we're responsible for in our ministry that have often been forgotten in the large work that Health has to do, including those with disabilities, the homeless, and other key sectors, to be able to make sure that this takes place going forward. I think that is probably where you'll see a tremendous amount of that effort to be able to make sure that we are at the table advocating for seniors in that work that's taking place for health care reform.

I wouldn't mind talking about some of the other grants that we have taking place in the department when it comes to seniors. We talked about the elder abuse, but we moved over to several different community grants when it goes – I'm just trying to pull them up. Yeah. There they are. Through our seniors' community grants the ministry is working with community-based senior service organizations to address the priorities of our growing seniors population. Some of those grants are funding those community-based initiatives that are meeting the emerging needs of issues facing Alberta seniors. Projects include funding for healthy aging Alberta to support co-ordination and collaboration among Alberta's senior sector; funding to support elder abuse prevention, which we've talked about; funding for elder abuse shelters; targeted outreach initiatives delivering social supports to older adults.

The department continues to make sure that the efforts that we put in are often helping make sure that seniors can ultimately remain in the communities that they built and our grandmas and grandpas can remain in the communities that we live in and can be able to live happy and productive lives inside their community of choice. I think there's some very exciting work taking place in the department when it comes to this important area.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

You know, I think we'll pause for our five-minute break now. Let's break, and then when we come back, we'll go to the independent member for her questions. Thanks, everyone.

[The committee adjourned from 10:16 a.m. to 10:23 a.m.]

The Chair: Thank you, everyone. We're going to get started right away here.

We are now going to move over to the independent member for 20 minutes of questions. Member, would you like to combine your time with the minister?

Mrs. Johnson: I would prefer shared back and forth if the minister is willing.

Mr. Nixon: Of course.

The Chair: Fantastic. Let's proceed.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair and through you to the minister. We'll start with page 121 of the ministry business plan. It states that the ministry "will continue to improve and expand the housing system by 40 per cent, to serve a total of 82,000 households by 2031." On page 124 of the ministerial business plan, 1(c), it states the goal of "supporting 25,000 more households by 2032-33, as identified in the 10-year Stronger Foundations strategy." First,

could the minister clarify if these two different line items are related, and if so, how? Then can the minister provide some more information on where these households will be concentrated? Specifically, what will be the approximate ratio for urban versus rural?

Mr. Nixon: Great question. Thanks to the hon. member for the question. They are related. Everything on housing is related at the end of the day. We'll give you a summary, and then I'll ask some of my officials, maybe see if they can get a rural versus urban breakdown.

Alberta's stronger foundations affordable housing strategy has committed to supporting an additional 25,000 households over 10 years, as you mentioned, Member. Of these, 13,000 are being addressed through the creation of new units and 12,000 through rental assistance. Budget 2024 puts us on track to meet that goal. By 2026-27 we will be just shy of the halfway point, and funding will continue to ramp up as we continue to implement the strategy.

One thing that I think is very important when we talk overall on housing is that it's two components. There's the investment that we put into affordable but also the investment and the policy process that we're putting into making sure that the market can continue to create the tens of thousands, particularly of rental-only, of spaces that we need, which we see taking place right now in the province.

I'm just seeing if we've got a breakdown by rural or urban. Edmonton will receive about \$24.7 million in 2024 calendar year if I got this right.

But this looks like it's operating, guys. I think that the member is looking for a breakdown on units.

I don't know if we have it with us here. Oh, we do. It's about 50-50 between rural, and then in this context I think they'd be defining urban as Edmonton and Calgary.

Mrs. Johnson: Okay. That was easy. Thank you, Madam Chair, to the minister.

On page 121 again of the ministerial business plan it states that the ministry "is working to increase mixed-use or mixed-income housing models." Can the minister explain these two terms and how this will enable long-term sustainability through the affordable housing partnership program?

Mr. Nixon: I can, but I will actually let ADM Williams, who's with us here at the table, answer it because he'll give you a much more detailed answer on the two definitions than I will.

Mr. David Williams: Yeah. Thank you very much. The goal for mixed use and mixed income is that, rather than have a traditional sort of apartment-style building where you only had individuals who were all paying 30 per cent of their rent geared to income, we would actually allow for a mix of different incomes, where people would have different rent levels so people could move as they improve, they could move up within the same community. The way the band works is that we have three bands within the building. One would be a deep subsidy, which would be 60 per cent of the average market rent; we'd have a near-market band, which would be around 81 to 99 per cent of average market rent; and a mid-range band of 60 to 80 per cent. So we allow for a mix within the building in order to off-set the operating costs of the building because, obviously, if you're offering significantly below market rent rates, it becomes hard for the building to be sustainable and to operate.

The other part around mixed use is that there's an example of it here in Edmonton. If you go up to the Londonderry building, it's not only social housing in the building, but we've also incorporated daycare and other services in the building. Mixed use would mean not just purely housing but incorporating other services, so we've

got other opportunities for other services to be combined and offered within our housing facilities.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister and staff.

On page 121 of the ministerial business plan can the minister explain what the pilot shelter service hub is and where it is reflected in the budget?

About two-thirds of the way down.

Mr. Nixon: Service hubs would be underneath line item 5.2 in the budget, which would be homeless shelters.

And then the second part of the question? Sorry.

Mrs. Johnson: An explanation of what a service hub is.

Mr. Nixon: What our service hub's approach is is very similar actually, frankly, to what we tried to now bring into one united way within the navigation centre. It's about a service hub approach, as we call it, which is to bring all of the service providers, all of the services that we have within the social services sector, partner ministries, and other organizations that work with us, all together to be able to help that individual. It's about trying to bring around supports. So that's what the service hub is referring to, our hub-based model when it comes to homeless shelters.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair, to the minister.

To be clear, the navigational centre is called a service hub?

Mr. Nixon: No. The navigation centre is different than service hubs, but it's a buildup on that approach. Shelter providers ultimately provide a mix of accommodations and on-site services while facilitating enhanced access to key resources, including housing options, mental health and addiction supports, cultural supports, on-site income supports, program and ID services, and primary health services, which is the investment that we've done into our hub services in our shelter system already. What will be done with the navigation centre is to bring that all into one location to be able to make sure it all takes place in one location. What both come down to is about trying to provide wraparound supports to individuals that are facing homelessness. We ultimately end up dealing with the main day-to-day function issue, the emergency issue, making sure people are fed, housed, and safe, but with our hub model we bring in our other agencies that help deal with things like health, access to addiction supports, ultimately transitioning into housing and other supports through what we call our hub model. So it's about wraparound services.

10:30

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister.

On page 123 under outcome 1, under initiatives, "\$108.1 million is allocated to homeless shelters to provide safe temporary accommodations and basic needs services, and \$101.5 million to provide safe housing and supports to those experiencing homelessness." Again, these two outcomes sound very similar. This is also reflected on page 189 of the estimates, 5.1: "policy development, management and delivery of programs that support and deliver homeless shelter services and homeless support outreach services." Can the minister explain the difference between these two items?

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. The \$108.1 million which is being allocated to homeless shelters: that money is going towards providing safe temporary accommodations and basic needs that would be serviced within that shelter system. The \$101.5 million is ultimately

provided to provide safe housing and supports to those that are experiencing homelessness. One is about that emergency level of housing; the other is a direct investment into more long-term housing options for those that are experiencing homelessness.

Mrs. Johnson: Perfect. Thank you for that clarity, Minister, through the chair.

On page 124, under outcome 2.3, what are the current rates of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder? Are they rising or falling? What supports are currently in place for this group of people? This is also reflected at 4.6 on page 189 of the estimates.

Mr. Nixon: Given the specificity of that, I want to make sure we don't say it wrong, so we will ask our ADM of disabilities, if we could, Madam Chair, to come up. He'll give it to you in a very clear format.

Clay.

Mr. Buchanan: Thank you very much. Clay Buchanan, ADM, disability services. With FASD, we support a number of networks throughout the province, and these community-based networks are, really, our delivery system throughout the province. They work directly with families and individuals to support FASD.

I think, from the perspective of growth, it's a percentage of the population. The population grows; the prevalence and incidence of FASD also grow in the population. It's really tied to that. We spend \$25 million in this current fiscal year, and next fiscal year that budget would be maintained as well.

I don't know if you have any other questions.

Mrs. Johnson: No. To be clear – thank you, through you, Chair, to the staff – it sounds like it's just remaining stable in that regard if it's just directly linked. Okay.

Mr. Nixon: I think that's a fair summary.

Mrs. Johnson: Through you, Madam Chair, to the minister, on page 110 of the fiscal plan is \$130 million, including \$125 million in new funding, for the seniors' lodge modernization program to ensure lodges continue to be a viable housing option for our Alberta seniors. This is also referenced in the fiscal plan 2024 on page 75 under Operating Expense Highlights: \$19 million for seniors' lodges. The Lacombe Lodge, I believe, is the oldest in the province, and naturally they are adding maintenance issues to their list every month. It serves a large region, including the growing population of over 12,000 in Blackfalds, where there is no seniors' housing. Is there money in the budget, outside of the seniors' lodge modernization program, to replace this aging seniors' lodge and others, and if so, will Lacombe Lodge be included in the replacement funding?

Mr. Nixon: Well, first of all, Madam Chair to the hon. member, good job advocating for her constituents. I can't answer specifics on a project here today, but what I can say is that the Lacombe project certainly fits the eligibility of the type of lodges that we're trying to fund, and she's done a great job advocating for it.

I think what I hear in her question is maybe whether or not there's money coming forward to both replace and invest in capital maintenance of aging lodges. The answer to that question is yes. We are trying to balance both issues. Sometimes you have to make decisions on infrastructure based on whether repairing makes sense or building new would make more sense or be more affordable.

But we do know and we heard very clearly from the industry over the last year about the need to be able to continue to invest in both. This budget has investments in what we would call capital

maintenance and renewal dollars, which are targeted investments to be able to repair existing units. I think it's \$121 million over the next three years for capital maintenance and renewal that's in the budget. We did last year as well. You might have seen some announcements where we really targeted units that were either offline or about to come offline to make sure that we could save them for utilization. But then there's also that overall investment in capital that is taking place throughout the budget to do both.

Specific to Lacombe, we know that it's going to need a new building and that we're past the realm of capital maintenance and renewal. We do know that we need to keep investing in both going forward.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister.

Camp L.G. Barnes, established by Red Deer's Michener Centre for the purposes of supports for the disabled, has been successfully functioning since the 1980s. On page 188 of the government estimates 4.1 and 4.4 both reference the co-ordination to "support continuous improvement of supports and services for adults with disabilities in Alberta" and to "provide comprehensive support to families of children with disabilities to strengthen the family's capacity to promote their child's development and participation in activities in the home and in the community." Is there a line item in Budget 2024 to ensure the funding and continued success for Camp L.G. Barnes?

Mr. Nixon: I'm L.G. Barnes' MLA, as you know, though you are almost their MLA by about a foot; I think it is exactly the line. I love going and visiting with the camp and want to congratulate them on all their important work. During that transition time with the department, L.G. Barnes had to go through a rejigging process as things have realigned. The department has funded them several times along the way to be able to help them go through that process to be able to make sure that they can continue to do their current work, and we will remain in close contact with the camp as they begin to adjust into what will be a new, nongovernment process. We recognize and value the services that they're providing.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister.

As you mentioned nongovernment process, that takes me into my next question as well. You mentioned many partnerships with nongovernment organizations. Can you expand upon that and how the ministry is working with nongovernment organizations to expand the services of your ministry?

Mr. Nixon: Well, you know, it's a big question. It's an important question. I want to stress that I think what's really special about Alberta, I would say, is that we're amongst the best provinces as far as relationships with a variety of nonprofits, which is special and why we're able to accomplish so much. We certainly value all of them. The issue and why it's such a big question is that because this department has such a variety of tasks that it's taking on, you're going to see such a variety of different nonprofits that go forward. Maybe I could ask, through you to the member, whether or not there's a more specific part of the department where she'd like to hear about some of the nonprofit organizations that are involved.

We cannot provide the services that we are providing without our nonprofit partners. We talked a lot this morning. When it comes to both housing and homelessness, for example, we rely not completely on but we rely significantly on our nonprofit partners to run our emergency shelter system. They have for decades inside this province. We rely on housing authorities to partner with us to be able to complete our objectives when it comes to affordable housing. We

rely on nonprofit organizations in our communities to help be able to facilitate the grants that we have to help seniors to be able to healthily age within place. Then, of course, as we go into other aspects of the department, it will be the same thing, just different nonprofits reflecting the scope of the work that they do.

Mrs. Johnson: Great. It's good news, Madam Chair, and thank you, through you to the minister.

Page 125 of the ministerial business plan, performance indicator 3(b), seniors' sense of belonging to local community: this indicator is a proxy for social inclusion and community connectedness and is tied to the ministry's work related to social isolation, age-friendly communities, ageism, and aging in the community, the percentage of Alberta seniors reporting a positive sense of belonging to local community. First, how does one measure this metric, and can the minister explain why we are seeing downward trends? That is from page 125 of the ministerial business plan.

10:40

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. Thank you, through you, Madam Chair, to the hon. member. That indicator describes the percentage of Albertans aged 65 and older who report a somewhat strong or very strong sense of belonging to their local communities at the time of the survey. It provides context on seniors' engagement with the local community as well as their quality of life in Alberta. The indicator is a proxy for social inclusion and community connectedness. It ties directly to the ministry's work related to social isolation, age-friendly communities, ageism, and aging in the community.

Data for this indicator is obtained from the Canadian community health survey conducted by Stats Canada. In 2022 71 per cent of seniors reported a somewhat strong or very strong sense of belonging to their local community. The result represents a 1 per cent decrease, which is what the member is referring to, overall in results from the prior year and the lowest result over the last five years. The COVID-19 pandemic may have contributed to that decrease in results since 2019 as public health restrictions to contain the spread of the virus led to many seniors experiencing social isolation and loneliness and anxiety, something that we will continue to watch as we go through this year, the further we get away from COVID-19, to make sure that that indicator starts to go back in the right direction.

I would also say, Madam Chair, to the hon. member that this is also why we're working very closely with Health when it comes to continuing care, to make sure that the community aging aspect of it is also looked at beyond just traditional health care. We want to make sure that, obviously, seniors are receiving the health care that they need but that we understand that this has to be all about how we live in a community and that there are other aspects to continuing care beyond just health care.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister.

In light of our time I'll just finish up with this last question. AISH is going up significantly, more than \$100 million. How will this be rolled out to Albertans, and what is reflected in this increase? This is from page 126 of the ministerial business plan.

Mr. Nixon: AISH is going up significantly. It's going to be an investment of about \$1.65 billion in this budget. It is a reflection of making sure that we can meet our indexation obligations which we've brought in as a province. We were able to index AISH rates by 4.25 per cent. That number reflects what we believe will be case growth and the need to be able to fulfill that indexation number and continue forward.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair, to the minister.

If he has any closing remarks, he may take them.

Mr. Nixon: Just thank you for the questions.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Now we will move over to the government side for their questions. Please proceed, Member.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Madam Chair. With that, I would like to thank the minister and his team for the amazing work you have been doing on this file and for our province. You know, I think you and your family and your parents are known for helping the most vulnerable people in our province. That's very honourable, and it's heartfelt to have you on this file and working diligently to support the most vulnerable.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member. Are you going back and forth, just to confirm, or is this going to be block time?

Mr. Boitchenko: Sure. We can go back and forth.

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Nixon: Of course.

Mr. Boitchenko: I will promise to let you finish up and learn from your answers rather than interrupting.

Mr. Nixon: Thank you.

Mr. Boitchenko: With that, we understand, Minister, that the Navigation and Support Centre in Edmonton is doing excellent work to support the most vulnerable people in the city. Can the minister, through the chair, please provide a breakdown of what services are available at the navigation centre, and how many people have been provided with those services to date if you can?

Mr. Nixon: Well, I appreciate the question. During the break, Madam Chair, we were able to get the latest numbers for the navigation centre: 630 people have accessed Edmonton's Navigation and Support Centre since it started two months ago. Over 2,200 referrals and direct connections to services have been made for those individuals. Over 200 individuals have been referred to housing programs, and almost 300 other people have been connected to either emergency shelters and/or transitional housing, so almost 500 to some type of housing beyond a tent.

Last night in Edmonton over 1,400 individuals slept in shelters, for 89 per cent of the capacity of that shelter system. I think what is the most promising statistic that we see across the system is that approximately 92 per cent of Albertans who have received housing with supports have remained in stable housing, showing that that is working very well. The other supports that you see in the navigation centre are health care, obviously, addiction and mental health care, making sure that people have access to both income supports, and then there are other things like getting access to ID. One of the things that we learned when we set up the navigation centre was the biggest challenge is individuals are coming with no ID, and then we can't connect them to other services. You also see stuff like access to prescriptions and other aspects that individuals may need.

There's also the ability to be able to sleep on-site. Sometimes individuals are coming straight in from encampments. They may not be ready to deal with some of the big conversations that would take place and need a little bit of time to rest and, obviously, to be able to shower and ultimately be in a warm spot as you look at ways that you could be able to interact with the social services system.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you very much for the prompt answer here and the update on information.

My next question, if I may, would be related to affordability and inflation. Thank you for coming out and visiting my riding. I have an absolutely amazing, beautiful riding of Drayton Valley-Devon. In fact, in the last couple of months I had an opportunity – in fact, throughout the whole year I had an opportunity – to visit, you know, people with needs, severely handicapped, on AISH, and I had an opportunity to visit as well seniors homes, pretty much all of them in my riding. We have quite a few of them, as people would love to retire outside of the busy cities into rural settings, providing that they have good support and access to health care.

There was one particular lady that stood up, and she's turning 98 this April.

Mr. Nixon: Wow.

Mr. Boitchenko: Yes. Her name is Kay.* Talking to her, her concern was the inflation that we have. I'm glad to see that in your report we have addressed that. I'll read my question to you, and if we can maybe provide and concentrate a little bit on affordability, inflation, and indexing of the inflation. Indexing social support like AISH, assured income for the severely handicapped, income support, and the seniors' benefit to inflation was such an important change for the government. Thank you for that. Both my constituents and I were very, very pleased to see the indexing of this support after our government fixed the fiscal mess left by the members opposite here during their time in government.

Looking specifically at the page 123 of your business plan, the first bullet under initiatives supporting key objective states, "In 2024-2025, \$2.7 billion" – yes, I say "billion," not "million," here, so this is huge – "which includes indexing for inflation, is allocated to Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped, Income Support and seniors benefits." My question, Minister, would be – my first question, and then I'll follow up with some others – can you, through the Speaker, or Madam Chair, please break down the \$2.7 billion by each benefit?

Mr. Nixon: I can. The chair would make a great Speaker as well, but she's doing a good job being chair right now, so we will stick with that for the moment.

The breakdown is as follows: income support, \$595 million; AISH, \$1.6 billion; special needs assistance grants, \$15 million; Alberta seniors' benefit grant, \$390 million; and supplementary accommodation benefit, \$111 million.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you.

Also, indexing these benefits to inflation was the right thing to do for our seniors and the vulnerable, especially as Albertans continue to see rising costs of everyday things like groceries, gas, and many, many other everyday items that we need for survival here and living. At the same time I'm assuming that this added significant operating costs to the minister's budget. The question is: can the minister, through the chair, please provide us with how much the government has invested in indexing this support to inflation?

Mr. Nixon: Well, for those programs, Madam Chair, we've increased by almost \$112 million from the 2023-24 budget. Those funds are going primarily to both caseload and to continue to index benefit rates to help, obviously, the most in need keep up with the rising cost. I would also point out that it's also part of that overall \$5.1 billion investment the government is doing to be able to invest in helping with the affordability crisis.

10:50

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you.

Now I would like to talk a little bit more about AISH, assured income for the severely handicapped. It is a deeply important program providing needed support for Albertans with permanent medical conditions that prevent them from earning a living. I have a series of questions. I can either go one by one or read out all of them or . . .

Mr. Nixon: Whatever is easiest for the member, Chair.

Mr. Boitchenko: Okay. Let's go one by one. How was the 2024 indexing rate established?

Mr. Nixon: Well, indexing is done based on a year-over-year change to the Alberta consumer price index, which is obtained by comparing the cost of a fixed basket of goods and services purchased by the customer over a 12-month period from October 2022 to September 2023. The indexing methodology is set out in the AISH Act and regulation that's been passed by the Legislature.

Benefit rates vary depending on Albertans' needs, household composition, and other factors, but examples of monthly benefit changes for January 1, 2024, would be as follows: going from \$1,787 to \$1,863 for AISH; \$790 a month to \$824 a month for income support, expected to work; \$919 to \$959 a month for income support, barriers to full employment; and then \$303 to \$316 for the Alberta seniors' benefit. One thing to point out on the Alberta seniors' benefit is that's not CPP, which is handled by the federal government. This is supplementary to other pension benefits that seniors may be receiving.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you so much.

Now, the next question will be: how does Alberta's AISH program compare to similar programs in other provinces throughout Canada?

Mr. Nixon: Well, I mean, two key things when it comes to our AISH program. First is that we have the highest benefits in the country. Second, we also have the highest ability for individuals on AISH to be able to earn income before we have clawbacks to the AISH program. Those are probably the two biggest things that make our program stand out. There's not exactly a full comparable program to AISH anywhere else in the country as well, but when you go and look at what other provinces have done, it's pretty clear that we stand out.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you again.

The other question would be that we see that there is a payment date that was changed. Would you expand on why that payment date was changed?

Mr. Nixon: Well, after consultation, when I came into the ministry, with stakeholders it became clear that there was a desire to change that date and that ultimately it would make things easier for everybody involved. It would prevent unnecessary late fines for individuals who count on AISH every month to be able to pay their bills. So we made that change. It had no impact on the budget. After hearing from stakeholders, you know, the importance of that, it was something that I thought that we should do and therefore instructed the department to do so.

Mr. Boitchenko: Okay. The next similar question would be: how will this change impact Albertans receiving benefits from this program?

*This spelling could not be verified at the time of publication.

Mr. Nixon: Well, I think the biggest thing it does is alleviate, as I said, pressure on those individuals who rely on those benefits every month to be able to get their bills paid on time. A couple of days earlier coming into their bank accounts lets them meet particularly big monthly obligations like rent and other reoccurring expenses like that in a timely manner. What we were hearing was that with the four days later it was impacting individuals, particularly with late charges. I think that is the biggest benefit. Again, it came at no cost to the taxpayer.

Mr. Boitchenko: So it's a huge positive impact.

The next question will be on the integrity of the program, okay? What approaches and processes are used to ensure that Albertans are receiving the benefits that they are entitled to?

Mr. Nixon: Well, we have different information-sharing agreements across government, and we conduct regular data matches against various sources – you know, stuff like the Canadian pension plan, CRA, provincial data sources, maintenance enforcement program would be some of the big examples – to identify and validate changes in client circumstances. There's also a process for public reporting of suspected fraud and program abuse. We also streamline processes for benefit program staff to refer cases of suspected fraud and program abuse to the investigation unit for investigation and action. We have some work under way right now where we're implementing digital identity verification processes, automated processes, to validate Alberta drivers' licences and Alberta identification cards to detect forged or falsified identification.

We're also implementing a Canada Revenue Agency look-up tool to verify income of income support applications and clients. We're automating potential fraud flags for staff to review and then ultimately to take action on and establishing ongoing crossmatches of clients receiving duplicate student aid and foundational learning assistance.

Mr. Boitchenko: That was actually answering my other question on the file reviews, so thank you. Thank you for touching on that as well. I'll skip the question.

Next I would like to go and talk a little bit about the food security because with affordability, inflation rates, we also need to talk about the food security with our most vulnerable in our province. On the topic of rising prices, food security is a growing concern for Albertans, especially those on fixed incomes. I'm sure the minister is in the same boat when I say that we see the rising prices at the grocery store. We hear from constituents about the challenges that these rising prices create for them and their families, and we also hear about more people needing to access food banks. This is something that weighs heavily on people's minds and something that weighs heavily on my heart and the hearts of many Albertans in our province. No one wants to wonder about how they are going to put food on the table or whether they are able to pack lunch for school or work for the week to come.

I see on page 123 of your business plan that your ministry is providing \$5 million in funding to community organizations that support food security in our province. Minister, can you outline what the \$5 million goes towards, specifically including examples of organizations? And what kind of funding did they receive, those specific organizations?

Mr. Nixon: The last budget year was the first time that the department really got into working with food banks. In the past it actually had not been asked for, frankly, by food banks, but obviously the changing times and the circumstances we see both with inflation and the affordability crisis has caused the government to go in and see areas where they can help with food stability.

We've done a lot of that through our work with Alberta Food Banks, and what we've learned from that process over the last year, I think, is going to reflect on some of the decisions that we'll make in the future.

One thing that we did learn is that we're not the body that should be going out and buying food. We don't have the same buying power and resources and access to the industry that an organization like Alberta Food Banks would have. We have invested, for example, \$2.2 million to fund Alberta Food Banks in a partnership with them so that they can redistribute donated food throughout the province, help food banks maintain their supply of high-demand food items, offer bulk purchasing and transportation subsidies to help Albertans in need to get that bulk food there. They're working with 120 member food banks across the province, and we are also working with Alberta Food Banks to make sure plans are in place to support communities during times such as emergency events like wildfires and floods. We've also identified a need to do specific work on that given the amount of emergencies that we've been seeing in the province. That ends up being a unique need that we end up having to work with when people are evacuating.

Our focus when it comes to funding associate food banks at their request, particularly through the work that we've done with Alberta Food Banks, is to focus on helping them build capacity and to be able to maximize the abilities that they have rather than becoming the food purchaser. We're going to evaluate how well the program went the last year and make any adjustments in partnership with them going forward so we can, again, help them continue to do the great work that they do.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Minister and your ministry for being proactive on this file and supporting the programs with \$5 million.

Would the minister, through the chair, provide us with any of the key metrics for the measuring of the success of this funding? As well, are there any targets that go along with it?

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. Grant agreements establish metrics such as the number of member food banks that were supported through the year, the volume of food that is distributed throughout the province, the ability to balance business needs with those of the very people that they are helping. Our goal ultimately, though, as I said, is to work with Food Banks Alberta to ensure Alberta's network of food banks has the support they need to ensure Albertans in need can put food on their tables. So a lot of the focus of the department right now is helping those organizations build capacity and be able to work together in a collaborative way, particularly when it comes to buying power, because if we work with all of them together, we end up being able to purchase a lot more food and be able to have a bigger impact across the province.

11:00

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you very much, Minister. I also have heard from Edmonton's Food Bank and people visiting there as well that there was a huge support to some specific food banks, you know, in the city, in Calgary, and there was a lot of response that they were extremely happy with our support.

Overall, one more time, if this program or the support of \$5 million is successful, what are your plans for the future given the success of this program?

Mr. Nixon: Our plan: as we look at food security over the next years, we're going to take a little bit of time with the industry to evaluate what worked and what did not work with these first rounds of funding as we've entered into this program space, and we'll work with them to be able to make sure that what we come forward with for this year will create a benefit to the overall food bank industry.

But in particular our focus will be about capacity building and making sure that we can empower or help food banks overcome any type of hurdle that they may be having to provide to the community.

The other area where I've instructed the department to spend some time is where there are unique food needs, so different aspects of the province where there may be a need to put some investment to culturally appropriate foods for those neighborhoods or those communities or to be able to access parts of our communities in the province that may not be getting access to traditional food banks and figuring out a way that we can help our existing food banks be able to get to that targeted group of individuals that may need help.

But as the MLA for Lacombe-Ponoka was asking in her segment about nonprofits, this is a big area that again illustrates where we really count on our social services sector to help us deliver. The food bank sector has done an amazing job for decades inside our province because of the support of Albertans who continue to support those organizations, and we want to come in and just be able to continue to empower them to do the work that they're doing and be able to make sure that our resources are going into areas where there may be holes within the system that they need help with.

Mr. Boitchenko: Okay. Thank you.

I actually do have another question, but I probably won't have time to go into my next question here given that we only have 15 seconds left. But it gives me an opportunity to go back to my constituents and specifically to Kay,* who's turning 98 this April, to say that I've been able to talk and thank personally the minister for the great job and work you've done in this ministry.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Nixon: Well, say happy birthday to your constituent.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member. That concludes this section of the government's time.

Now, members, we do not have a deputy chair and a substitution notice has not been provided. I have just consumed this giant container of gluten-free hot chocolate, so I need to take another biobreak. We will need to just pause for five minutes. So please take another break, and I will be right back.

[The committee adjourned from 11:03 a.m. to 11:09 a.m.]

The Chair: Welcome back, everyone. Thank you so much.

We have a new member who's joined us from the Official Opposition. Please introduce yourself.

Ms Al-Guneid: Nagwan Al-Guneid, Calgary-Glenmore.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Let's continue on with questions from the Official Opposition. Please go ahead, members. And do you prefer block time, or did you want to share?

Member Irwin: Block time.

The Chair: Block time? Sure. Let's proceed.

Member Irwin: Thanks so much. I'd like to speak to page 123 of the business plan, key objective 1.5, creating a strategy for attainable and affordable housing based on middle- and low-income renters and buyers. This plan notes \$86.6 million to provide rent assistance for Albertans in need through the rent supplement program; \$86.6 million in rent supplements sounds like a decent number, but in fact it's incredibly low in that we see an increase of

only 550 supplements this entire year, and that's not even close to what's needed to make a dent on the wait-lists in Edmonton alone. And we're not just talking about the big cities here; it's an issue across Alberta. Just one example: Canmore Community Housing reports that 219 people are on a wait-list for its rental program. My first question, through the chair to the minister, is: you know, adding only 550 is a dramatic decrease in the amounts that they've been adding over the past few years, so I would like to ask the minister to walk us through his rationale as to why only 550 new rent supplements are being added.

Page 86 of the fiscal plan notes that the funding for the 550 new supplements will also address cost pressures in the rental assistance program arising from increases in market rents. Again, it's clear, as I noted earlier, that this government is acknowledging the increases in market rents, the highest increase in rents across all of Canada happening in Edmonton and Calgary, in fact, but their offering is a mere 550 additional rent supplements. Why? I'd also like the minister to break down that 550. How many will go to each housing management body? How many are for RAB, and how many are for TRAB?

I have a lot of concerns about the wait-lists, as I mentioned earlier. Could the minister outline for us how many Albertans are on the subsidy wait-list? We know that from stronger foundations there were more than 24,000 households waiting for suitable subsidized accommodation, and we can only imagine that that number has dramatically increased. So what is today's wait-list number for rent supplements?

The target noted in stronger foundations is to reduce the number of households on a wait-list by 30 per cent, and that's found on page 22. Has that wait-list been reduced? Has it grown? What is the wait-list number for affordable housing as well? Of course, that's directly linked to objective 1.4 in the business plan on page 123. For those folks waiting – we've heard from so many in my office; I know my colleagues as well have heard the same concerns – on the wait-list, what supports are available to them now?

I'd also like to ask the minister to break down the number that he's provided. He has mentioned multiple times that he is spending a quarter of a billion dollars on rent supplements, providing tens of thousands of households for Albertans. That's a direct quote from his press conference on March 7 in Lethbridge. I cannot arrive at \$250 million for rent supplements alone, no matter how I slice the numbers. The reality is that around \$86 million is going to rent supplements, and there are around 12,000 households getting the supplements, not tens of thousands. Again, page 123 of the business plan. So can the minister outline how he's arrived at the 250 million, quarter of a billion, number?

I'd really like the minister to rationalize how he could not push for a significant increase in the number of rent supplements. He's not willing to consider rent caps, so what is he going to do in the immediate to support renters grappling with these skyrocketing rent increases? What measures can he point me to in the budget that will support those renters who are struggling and at risk of losing their homes now?

We also know that this is the same UCP government that slashed the rent supplement program by 24 per cent, \$44 million, in their first budget, in 2019. This meant that Albertans did not have access to that funding when they needed it, and of course it had rippling impacts during the pandemic, when so many Albertans were struggling financially.

As well, we can see on page 78 of the most recent annual report that between 2001 and 2021 the number of households in Alberta increased from over 1.5 million to over 1.6 million, a 7 per cent increase, whereas the number of households in core housing need decreased, about a 5 per cent decrease. Given the rate of inflation

*This spelling could not be verified at the time of publication.

in Canada and the termination of the CERB program, the number of households in core housing need is expected to increase again. This government has mentioned that they're going to try to address core housing need, but my question for the minister is: if his own budget documents point out that he could anticipate an increase in core housing need, why would he not significantly increase rent supplements? And even I can point to key stakeholders like Alberta Municipalities who are critical of this decision, noting that this budget will leave over 60 per cent of households in core housing need without any supports whatsoever.

I'm out of time here, but I'd very much like the minister to rationalize his decisions on rent supplements and what he's going to do in the immediate to support struggling renters across Alberta who are at risk of losing their homes. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll turn it over now to the minister to provide some answers.

Mr. Nixon: Well, Madam Chair, only the NDP would call 86 million of Alberta taxpayer dollars nothing, but I digress.

Member Irwin: I didn't say it was.

The Chair: Sorry. Please turn my microphone on.

Hon. member, when the minister is giving answers, if you would kindly not heckle. I need to be able to hear the minister's response. Thank you.

11:15

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you. I'll address the hon. member's questions. First off, I'll address the quarter-billion dollar number because that's the simplest. That's a three-year number, and that is what we're referring to when we say that. We are investing in rent assistance significantly, \$87 million this year, increasing households. I want to be clear when we say "households," that's not just one person. There's more than one individual who lives in a household. It has a significant impact on more than just the one person, obviously, who would go and live inside those units.

In Budget 2024-25 just over a quarter billion dollars has been allocated to operate government-supported affordable housing programs, which does include that \$86.6 million to provide rent assistance to Albertans in need through the rent supplement programs. We remain committed to the rent supplement programs. I do want to be clear, though, Madam Chair, that that has limited capacity, and we are close to what that capacity can accomplish.

The reality is that we have a supply problem in our market. Unfortunately, we saw underneath the former government a lack of effort to build up that supply, which is why you saw affordable housing wait-lists increase underneath the NDP by, I believe, 76 per cent. You see underneath our government that wait-list numbers have decreased by over 25 per cent. The hon. member asked a question about the wait-list. It's dropped from 24,500 to 18,500 and will continue to do so with the effort that we are putting in place to address this issue. I want to point out that sharp contrast: a 25 per cent decrease underneath the Conservative government whereas underneath an NDP government the wait-list went up by 76 per cent to receive affordable housing.

Now, there is a capacity, though, when it comes to rent supplements. At some point you still have to make sure that you have enough units for everybody to live in to supplement, which is why the effort is about supply. I know this is something that the NDP have had trouble understanding. A lot of it I think is to do with their distaste of business or anything free enterprise. But the way forward to get everybody the home that they need is that we need to build them, which is why you see efforts taking place on both the

affordable and the attainable side going forward to be able to make sure that we are able to accomplish that. That's why you have an investment in Budget 2024 to support 7,000 more households, 5,100 more capital builds, and 1,900 rent supplements to deal with all of those levers that we have to be able to help the supportive housing industry be able to survive through the process that we have to undergo.

The real work that is going to change that capacity so that we would have rental units that we could supplement, that we will have homes that people can buy, and that will stabilize the market is around the incredible work that's taking place in this province when it comes to market housing, which is significant. You see the work that has already taken place by the government or that is being legislated as we speak is creating a way for industry to be able to create almost 60,000, 50,000-some, more houses than they would have been able to complete over the next several years. Because of that work there are 16,000 purpose-built rentals already started within industry right now taking place in the province. We have the most purpose-built rentals ever being built. In fact, right in the last three years our purpose-built rentals are the equivalent to the 15 years before that. As that comes on the market, you'll see rent stabilize and you'll see the situation get significantly better.

Now, with the last minute that I have left, the member asked about what other benefits there are for people that are experiencing stress when it comes to paying for their daily bills. Well, first is this. We have a 5 and a half billion dollar budget with almost 90 per cent of it going to vulnerable Albertans that need it directly and/or to organizations to support them directly to be able to make sure that you're able to help deal with everything from income support, AISH, disability payments, senior payments, all of that being indexed to make sure that Albertans can face those challenges as they go forward.

I will say this. The other thing we hear from the social services sector is the drastic impact that the NDP-Liberal carbon tax is having on that social services sector. If the hon. member would actually like to help this sector, the most important thing that she could do is join the other half of the Legislature who continues to call on Mr. Singh and Mr. Trudeau, and the majority of Premiers in the country, to remove the damaging carbon tax, which is making things very, very, very unaffordable for Albertans each and every day. That is the number one thing we could do tomorrow to make life more affordable.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll move back over to the Official Opposition for their next block of questions. Oh, sorry. It's now the government side. Yes. Please proceed, members.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister for answering all these important questions. I would like to just go back to the AISH overall budget here for a few questions if you don't mind. Page 123 of the ministry business plan says that \$2.7 billion has been allotted to support programs such as AISH, income support, and seniors' benefits. My first question is: is the budget increase for AISH sufficient to meet the needs of the rising number of clients on the AISH program?

Mr. Nixon: Well, it's a great question. Thank you to the hon. member for it. Just to provide some context, the AISH budget itself is \$1.6 billion, which is an increase of \$108.2 million from last year. Starting with the January 2024 payment, our clients are seeing their monthly financial benefits increase by 4.25 per cent to reflect the increased cost of living and our commitment to the indexation of AISH. The AISH program is a legislated program, which means it

will remain fully funded and available to all eligible Albertans. We are very confident in our projections when it comes to AISH, based on the forecasts that we're seeing, that we'll be able to meet our obligations with the budget that we're presenting to the Legislature. But to be clear, it's also a legislative obligation, so we will meet it.

Mr. Wiebe: Right. Thank you.

Then I have questions around assessment. Are the assessments of AISH applications being delayed?

Mr. Nixon: No, the assessments of AISH applications are not being delayed. Again, this is a statutory program. We have an obligation to run that assessment process and make sure that it's working. There will always be reviews done by the department for, some of the questions that the previous member asked about, making sure that the program's integrity is upheld, that we're watching for things like fraud. We're reviewing timelines, so the ability and resources that staff may need to be able to meet our statutory obligations when it comes to AISH. Our standard process: that will continue. The department has received clear instructions to continue to do the important work that AISH is doing, and I would say, Madam Chair, that the significant investment by Albertans in this budget for this important program reflects that desire and that commitment by the Alberta government to continue with this program.

Mr. Wiebe: Further to that, how long does it take to assess and process an application?

Mr. Nixon: Well, it's interesting. Underneath the previous NDP administration the average processing time for AISH applications at the end of their term was 32.7 weeks. From October to December 2023, the latest complete quarter that I have, the average processing time was 25.9 weeks, so almost two months faster. We care about this issue. We understand the need to be able to process AISH applications as efficiently as possible. We also, at the same time, understand the need that it has to be done right. You know, I think the number is roughly a million dollars on average for every individual over their lifetime when we put them on AISH, so we have an obligation to the taxpayer and to the integrity of the program and the people that count on the program to make sure that we're making these decisions underneath the requirements that have been set up by both legislation and regulation. Clearly, there have been significant investments by the department to speed up that timeline, which is why you're seeing two months faster, and we're going to continue to encourage the department in that important work.

Mr. Wiebe: Wonderful. Thank you for that important work on just reducing the wait times and timelines on that.

I would like to now switch over to some of the housing questions here. On page 126 of the business plan we see more than \$1.5 billion in investments to the Alberta Social Housing Corporation over the next three years. Last year we saw just over a billion on the same line. Why is this government so committed to making affordable housing more accessible, and what are the outcomes anticipated with these measures?

Mr. Nixon: Well, first off, just to summarize those numbers, in this budget we have a line item that includes \$719 million in capital funding, \$6.8 million operating funding, and \$121 million in capital maintenance and renewal dollars over the next three years. That is to show the commitment to our stronger foundations plan, which ultimately is going to support a total of 82,000 more low-income households by 2031, which is an increase of more than 40 per cent

compared to 2021. Of the additional 25,000 households that will be served under that stronger foundations plan and affordable housing strategy, around 13,000 units will be through new supply and 12,000 through rental supplements. This investment in the budget shows that we understand that we have to invest in both affordable and attainable housing, as we've talked about a lot today, but it shows that we have a commitment to fulfilling that stronger foundations plan.

11:25

The other thing I will say is that it also shows that we've really heard from our nonprofit, in particular, housing authority partners and municipalities that there's a need to invest in both rent supplements and new builds but also a need to invest in capital maintenance and renewal dollars that have been sorely lacking because of different financial pressures for the government. I know that they're excited to see the investment that we had in 2023-24, and that will continue in '24-25, because what we've recognized is, one, that we need to do it and maintain those buildings and, second, that they're some of the fastest units that we can put back online compared to new builds, which is why we're investing in all of those levers.

Mr. Wiebe: All right. You've just answered with some of the projects that were in process, so can we expect to see the same with this new funding?

Mr. Nixon: Yes. You know, we're working to support about 7,000 more households by funding rent assistance and construction of more housing units. The capital plan itself includes \$696.3 million of the \$719 million over three years to support the implementation of the stronger foundations plan alone. That strategy, when implementing that capital funding, will be over three years, which would be \$135 million in this year, a quarter billion for the following year, and just over \$303 million in 2026. I want to stress that about 7,000 new households will be served as a result of that investment, 5,100 through capital investments and 1,900 through rent supplements.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you.

Madam Chair, I've got another set of questions here. On page 123 of the business plan, key objective 1.4 is to continue to implement stronger foundations. Alberta has a 10-year strategy to address affordable housing across the province. Alberta's government launched this strategy in November of 2021. What has the government accomplished under the stronger foundations strategy since it has been launched?

Mr. Nixon: I'm going to supplement the end of that question with some of the new stuff that we've had to add on to that strategy since we have got into the fiscal situation and the inflationary situation that we've seen, which is different than when the strong foundations was originally put forward. That said, we're still committed to it and beyond.

Some of the stuff that we've seen is a completion of 1,361 new affordable housing units since November 2021, a development and commencement of the implementation of the affordable housing asset management framework and partnership program. We also redesigned the rent supplement program. We maximized federal funding. We launched the finding housing online tool. We launched the seniors' lodge program review, which is taking place right now, and we're working with the housing providers, municipalities, and other partners to come up with innovated, nuanced solutions. I referred to some of them just a moment ago when I talked about capital maintenance and renewal dollars. We increased that budget

in the last fiscal year, maintained that going into this year, and we challenged our housing partners to go find units that were either offline or about to be offline to make sure that we invested in stabilizing those dollars. We have focused that investment on those type of innovative solutions.

We're going to continue to do that. I think what has changed since the stronger foundations plan that has been an add-on, because of the housing crisis we see that's been created by both the federal government and global pressures, is that the department is also doing significant work with our crossministerial partners to be able to make sure industry can be able to meet that obligation.

When the stronger foundations plan was completed, I think we were short, according to CMHC, somewhere around 20,000 houses. Right now we're going to need to build about another 100,000 to 150,000 houses, depending on which projections that you want to go with it. That has shown us the real need to be able to invest in other things like red tape and other components to be able to help the industry. I'm really happy to report that they're indicating to us at this moment that they can build well over 50,000 more units as a result of just us doing that.

Mr. Wiebe: I think you answered maybe part of my next question. How will the 2024 budget ensure continued success of this strategy? Is there anything else that you would like to add to that?

Mr. Nixon: We're going to continue to be focused on the demand, making sure that we are working on both affordable and attainable supply and making sure that our construction industry, which is also building our affordable housing, is able to do the work that they need to do; continue to partner with our nonprofit and municipal partners to find shovel-ready projects to get everything moving.

I also want to point out that we're also putting a lot of effort, as we come into 2024, to work on Indigenous housing both with off-reserve, obviously, which we have an obligation on, and to work with our Indigenous partners to push the federal government to actually uphold their responsibility on-reserve, which we are seeing our First Nations partners really struggle to receive appropriate funding from the federal government. So those will be some of things that we'll be working on this fiscal year.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister, for that response. We'll move over to the Official Opposition for the next block.

Ms Al-Guneid: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to start by thanking the public service, who worked hard to deliver this budget for Albertans and to advise the minister. So thank you for all the hard work.

My first question is on the expansion of the Bertha Gold seniors building, which is home to around 60 residents in the heart of my beautiful riding, Calgary-Glenmore. I've been engaging with leaders from the Paperny Family JCC in Calgary-Glenmore. These leaders want to expand this seniors' facility, and they have shared with me the importance of an individual's ability to age in place. The JCC's ambitions are aligned with your ministry's objective 3.2, to support Albertans to age well at home and collaborate with community-based seniors-serving organizations. The goal of this expansion is to future-proof the building, which means the suites can be modified to accommodate seniors of all needs, but also can be repurposed if needed to support student housing, general housing, and more. The former minister of seniors, the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, had granted funding for the JCC to conduct a needs assessment study. This needs assessment is reflected in this expansion project and was priced at \$75 million years ago. To be clear, this is a provincial building on the JCC property.

Through you, Madam Chair: what is the minister's plan to support this much-needed project to add more seniors and affordable housing in Calgary-Glenmore? Is it shovel-ready by your description earlier?

This facility would serve all surrounding community members in Calgary-Glenmore, including a 30 per cent Jewish population in the riding. The JCC's supplemental programming covers up to 200 new suites and maybe more depending on the zoning conditions. The JCC plans to include a new school, a daycare, and a cultural area.

Mr. Singh: Point of order.

The Chair: A point of order has been called. Please proceed, Member.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. The point of order is under Standing Order 23(b). The member "speaks to matters other than the question under discussion." The said program which the hon. member is describing is not part of our ministry's 2024 budget, including estimates, fiscal plan, and business plan. The matter that has been raised by the hon. member is not within the boundaries of these said topics.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms Gray: Thank you, Madam Chair. This is not a point of order. As I was listening to my colleague, she cited business plan objective 3.2. In budget estimates, going forward, I've always found it to be in order to ask about items that are in the budget and items that maybe we can't find, asking the minister to identify where that might be included. I don't believe that this is a point of order. I believe this is directly within the ministry's mandate and worthy of discussion.

The Chair: Thank you so much, members. I don't find this to be a point of order at the moment, but it will be up to the minister to decide how he chooses to answer. Let's proceed.

Ms Al-Guneid: Thank you, Madam Chair. Yeah. So where is your ministry at in reviewing this project? Does it exist? How do you plan to support such a multipurpose and culturally competent housing project in Calgary-Glenmore?

Now, I'd like to continue with the theme of support for seniors and support for renters across Alberta, as in your ministry's objectives 1.1 and 1.5. I recently attended a meeting with tenants from Glenmore Gardens and Elata complexes as they discussed their concerns with the regional vice-president of Avenue Living. Tenants in this complex have faced drastic rent increases. Some renters have faced a 60 per cent increase of what they were paying before. Calgary-Glenmore is home to more than 10,000 seniors, and many are currently struggling to keep up with the rising cost of living and out-of-control rent increases. The Glenmore Gardens and Elata complexes are home to more than 400 families, with 60 per cent of individuals being seniors.

11:35

My constituents have shared impact statements, and I'd like to read them to you. "I'm desperate. They raised my rent \$400, so I will have to move." Another one: "It feels inhumane. It feels criminal. It lacks compassion and empathy and these big companies should use some of their profits to make sure this doesn't happen to people." Another one, from a disabled senior couple on a fixed income. I'm quoting here: "Because of the increases coming, upwards of \$700, this isn't a reality. We thought this would be our forever place. My husband has had to go back to work, and I'm looking for work and can only do certain things due to a disability."

So what is your ministry's plan to provide immediate relief to these people? How are you going to help these seniors with disabilities on a fixed income right away?

There is a recent report by the National Institute on Ageing that shows that approximately 41 per cent of Canadians aged 50 or older are at risk of social isolation and up to 58 per cent in that age group have experienced loneliness. This alarming statistic highlights the need for policies directed at building communities around our seniors in Alberta. We know that they prefer to age in place, surrounded with their communities, with people they know, with their families, and closer to all their connections in the riding. So I would appreciate the answers to these questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Now, this is block time. Did you have anything else to add? Okay. Fantastic.

We'll just move over to the minister now for his response.

Mr. Nixon: We'll start with 3.2. The member seems to be referring to capital investment, which has nothing to do with 3.2. I won't be able to speak specifically to a project in her constituency, but I did check with officials. We're not aware and we can't guarantee it without leaving the room to double-check, but we don't think that project has actually applied to us for funding. We would encourage you maybe to reach out to that stakeholder, and if they are interested in working on a housing project with us, the department would be happy to have a conversation with them about what that process would look like both provincially and federally. We could be wrong about the double-check when we come out of here, but nobody from the public service is aware of that project applying, just so you know.

Your question, though, is about 3.2, supporting Albertans to age well at home and in their community by collaborating with community-based seniors-serving organizations, health and other sectors, and all orders of government. While that certainly would be collaborating on capital projects, which we deal with in other aspects of the budget, it also remains a priority, overall, to make sure that we work with our providers to be able to make sure that we can work closely with community partners, and particularly healthy aging Alberta, where we have a collective of community-based senior services organizations that ultimately deliver nonmedical home supports to older adults and assisted transportation services, for example, for seniors and persons with mobility challenges in rural Alberta.

We also have spent a lot of time today talking about some of the action that we've been putting in place to prevent elder abuse in Alberta by working closely with other community partners, which includes the elder abuse awareness campaign, supporting community organizations to develop resources for diverse communities, undertaking a new elder abuse prevalence study, and funding community supports for seniors experiencing abuse. Supports for seniors experiencing abuse includes funding over the next three years, as I said, for shelters in both Edmonton and Calgary as well as working closely with us on our new safe spaces program for rural Alberta, where we can use existing lodge space to help seniors who may find themselves in that type of a spot.

We also continue to collaborate closely with the private sector and the research community, as well as civil society organizations, to develop innovative solutions to address the needs of caregivers themselves and to explore how technology can be leveraged to address the needs of an aging population and enhancing workforces in senior services' sectors, which is the work that we're doing on the item that you refer to.

I do know that you brought up some specific issues that may be happening with some of your constituents who are on AISH, if I understood it right. I just want to be clear, if I did understand it right, that the department would be happy to talk with them. If you could reach out to our office, we'd be happy to connect that constituent with our AISH division because we do have some other resources that may be available to them in the circumstances that I think I heard you describing, although this is probably an inappropriate spot to try to do full case management.

In regard to what we're doing on the overall seniors investment in housing: we've captured that a lot already here today within a lot of that affordable housing investment that we talk about. Large amounts of that go towards seniors' housing projects both on the capital side and overall on our lodge program side.

One of the things that we are also doing right now is that we are doing a lodge review, led by the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont, who I know is a member of this community right now where he is working with stakeholders – a large amount of stakeholders – as they travel around the province to overall look at our lodge program, which is our oldest affordable housing project in the province, and to look at some of the changes where we need to modernize our lodge program to be able to address things like new ways to develop lodges. That could both be a physical capacity issue of lodges, room sizes, different ways that individuals want to experience those lodges but also about how those lodges interact with two very important areas. One is the community as a whole, to be able to provide other services within those lodge processes to help seniors age healthy in place but also the connections that we have to health care, to continuing care. We're looking forward to seeing the report come back so that we can then begin to implement some of those changes.

Lastly, I will discuss your rent concerns. The organizations that you mentioned are private companies. They are not funded by our department; those are private providers and are not within our affordable housing programs. If there are specifics about what rent rules are – and there are in this province – that's actually not managed by the Department of Seniors, Community and Social Services; it's actually managed by the minister of red tape and service Alberta, who has put in when rents can be increased, when rents can't be increased, and what those processes look for. As far as regulating landlords and tenant relationship, that actually is not managed by Seniors, Community and Social Services; it's actually managed by Service Alberta, and I know Minister Nally would be happy to provide you some details in regard to that.

I also do know that he just passed either last cycle or this cycle, early, some new rules around when rents can be increased that you might be interested in.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll head over to the government members. Please proceed.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister. Thank you, Minister. I appreciate the efforts and commitment made by the ministry. I am pleased that Budget 2024 aims to help elders, families, and communities and Albertans access disability services, financial assistance, and other social-based initiatives. My question is on page 123. Key objective 1.5 is to create a strategy for attainable and affordable housing focused on middle- and low-income renters and buyers. What data do you have on the need of this new strategy, and what progress has the ministry made to date on this strategy?

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, through the chair to the hon. member for the question. I think it's an important question. We had to

recognize, alluding to this earlier, that our stronger foundations plan is something we remain committed to, but we recognize that there have been some changes to both the economy and particularly around what we're seeing as far as population growth. Our population increased with an influx of 194,000 people between October 2022 and October 2023, which adds some new context to the work that we're trying to do when it comes to the stronger foundations strategy. It doesn't change the fundamentals of that strategy, but it does certainly change some of the demands that we're seeing as a result of that.

I think it's important to note that, fortunately, we're still seeing the fact that our market still remains the most affordable market in the country, particularly when it comes to large cities. But what's clear is that if we don't take action, we could end up in spots like Toronto and Vancouver. I would also say that if we take the wrong action, we could also end up like Toronto and Vancouver, who have tried to do things like rent control, which has not worked, and we see skyrocketing rent as a result of that.

The change, also, that I think really stands out is that CMHC was projecting, I believe – I don't have it in front of me right now – around when the stronger foundations plan was being built, about us being short about 20,000, maybe 25,000 houses. We now have projections now that by 2030 we could be short as much as 150,000 houses. So that's required us to make some adjustments to the plan. We still continue, though, to be focused on investing in affordable housing to deal with the affordable housing challenges that we see in the demographics that have to live within those housing type of projects, which in this budget, again, at \$840 million capital investment is pretty significant.

It's why we have also added to this process significant investments in both legislation and time to be able to make sure that we create a way where our industry can get us to that 150,000 houses, because the bulk of those houses must come from industry and they must come from the market. But it's not enough that they just build the houses. If we end up with the same traditional houses, we're going to not end up in a spot where we actually deal with affordability, which is why we've also worked with our cities to be able to deal with zoning laws and different circumstances to be able to help more purpose-built rentals be built. I think we should be pretty excited because it appears that it is working. Right now there are 16,000 new rental units started in the province at the moment. January was a record month for housing starts; February was another record month for housing starts. Our industry has indicated to us that they think they can create upwards of another 50,000-plus houses as a result of those red tape reductions. So we have it on the right trajectory, and we have to continue to be able to make sure that we could foster that.

11:45

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, for the answer, and thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister.

Minister, as you know, the seniors lodge program is very important to Calgary-East and all of Alberta, for many seniors in Alberta, especially for those in rural communities, playing a critical role in helping to ensure that seniors can age in their community. Key objective 1.6 on page 123 of the business plan is to review the seniors lodge program to ensure it meets the needs of communities and seniors. I understand the minister launched the review by appointing a panel in January. Can the minister please tell us about the work of the panel? What are the next steps? And how does it tie into Budget 2024?

Mr. Nixon: Yes. Madam Chair, we did launch a panel review in January 2024, as mentioned. It's actually chaired by the hon.

Member for Leduc-Beaumont, who I know is here today, as well as co-chaired by Arlene Adamson, who is the president of Alberta Seniors Communities and Housing Association, represents our senior housing providers across the province, which brings together a lot of key stakeholders to be able to look at some of the challenges that we face and has representation from all across the province, including municipalities and other organizations that are our partners along the way when it comes to our lodge program.

I'm looking forward to seeing that report. They've been given a challenge to go across the province and be done by the end of April, to come back and give us some recommendations on how to refocus our lodge operations. They are looking at everything from modernization of buildings to how we build units to how we renovate units to our funding models and, ultimately, how our facilities also connect to both community and continuing care. This was in our mandate letter, and we're looking forward to seeing that. It's been a long time coming, and I think that we're going to see some pretty interesting ideas that can help us continue what is our oldest affordable housing program in the province.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, for the answer, and thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister again.

According to the business plan on page 123 under the initiatives supporting key objectives for outcome 1, I see that in 2024-2025 \$198.4 million is allocated to build, renew, and maintain affordable housing in Alberta. This includes \$62.1 million for the affordable housing partnership program. Can you please tell us about the affordable housing partnership program? What has it achieved? How will Budget 2024 support this good program, and what does the remainder of the funding, around \$136 million, support?

Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Nixon: Well, thanks again for the question. The affordable housing partnership program was launched in December 2022, Madam Chair. It brings together partners from public, private, and nonprofit organizations to provide more affordable housing where it's needed most. New construction, renovations, and the development of projects overall may be eligible for up to one-third of total project costs from us. The provincial contribution may come in the form of capital grants, land and/or buildings, and transfer or long-term leases of government-owned assets. This program is designed ultimately to increase the supply of affordable housing, particularly for seniors and families and individuals with low incomes as well as those with special needs.

The first two intakes of the program resulted in 38 projects receiving provincial funding, which will build over 1,500 housing units and over 190 new shelter spaces. That first intake allocated \$125 million to 30 projects in 2022-23, over 1,100 housing units and over 60 shelter spaces. That second intake is going to allocate \$68 million to eight projects in '23-24 for over 300 housing units and over 120 shelter spaces. Those projects have not been announced yet, but the funding is within the budget. Every dollar invested into this program will result in \$2 of new investment from partners, including the federal government, which is key because one of the components we want to do is maximize our federal investment as well to try to address the housing challenges.

As for the remainder of the \$136.8 million, \$40.3 million of that is allocated to capital maintenance and renewal to preserve existing affordable housing; \$25 million for the lodge modernization program to ensure lodges continue to be viable housing for Alberta seniors; \$24.6 million, Madam Chair, for the Indigenous housing capital program; \$23.6 million for the affordable housing strategy; \$18.1 million for the affordable and specialized housing, which is to develop affordable housing projects that provide supportive

social housing services for Albertans with a focus on reducing homelessness and ensuring affordable and sustainable housing is available for populations with special needs; and, lastly, \$4.7 million which is going to a large partnership program to increase designated supportive living spaces and seniors' lodges where stand-alone continuing care facilities are just not feasible.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister.

Looking at page 123 of the business plan in the initiatives supporting key objectives, the ministry has allocated \$256.6 million to operate government-supported affordable housing programs. This includes \$80.6 million to provide rent assistance for Albertans in need through the rent supplement program. Can the minister please speak about the importance of the rent supplement program? How will this funding make a difference for Albertans in need?

Mr. Nixon: As we work towards our overall goal of 25,000 more affordable housing units, 12,000 of those will come from rent supplements. Rent supplements remain one of the key strategies to be able to help us address our affordable housing strategy, which is why you see that large investment reflected in this budget.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll move over to the Official Opposition.

I see that we have a new member who has joined us. If you would kindly introduce yourself for the record.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Madam Chair. Amanda Chapman, MLA, Calgary-Beddington.

The Chair: Welcome.

Please proceed.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Chair. I would like to come back to supply. In my earlier questions around overall investments in affordable housing the minister was unable to give a breakdown of the \$9 billion. Again, he's noted multiple times that together with his partners they're investing \$9 billion worth of work to create 13,000 new units. Now, spending \$9 billion and only building 13,000 units means the government is spending about \$692,307 per unit. I'd like the minister to explain why these affordable housing units are so costly. That's quite an exceptional amount per unit unless, of course, those are not the correct numbers.

As well, the minister has said now on multiple occasions that the government has already built 5,000 affordable units as part of their stronger foundations plan since 2019. Of course, this is referred to on page 123 of the business plan. I find this curious as stronger foundations was launched in 2021. Is the minister counting these units as retroactive? Counting these units retroactively is concerning to me as it will skew the total number of affordable units in the province. Can the minister please provide us, through the chair, with the actual number of new affordable housing units since 2021, when the stronger foundations plan was actually first implemented?

Now, these are some of the dollar investments, but they're also broken down by number of units. The strategic plan on page 22 notes: "providing safe, stable, affordable housing for an additional 25,000 households by 2032-33." While this 25,000 number sounds laudable, in fact, Deloitte reports that by 2030 Alberta will need approximately 44,000 new affordable housing units. Because the government's plan is, again, to only build 13,000 units, we're going to be behind by 31,000 affordable housing units. I'll also quote the minister himself. He noted during his press conference in Lethbridge on March 7 and, in fact, just a few moments ago that by some estimates we're actually going to need about 150,000 new

homes. So I would love for the minister to explain his strategy, his plan to deal with the significant shortfall.

We know that city of Edmonton data shows that approximately 1 in 7 Edmonton households were found to be in core housing need, and this number is expected to increase to around 60,000 by 2026. The data is alarming, and it's quite clear that single-parent households, particularly those that are women led, have some of the highest rates of core housing need across Alberta, making them extremely vulnerable to homelessness.

The reality is that the data shows that these investments are woefully inadequate. The Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness notes that we need to be building more than 5,000 units of new social housing every year in Alberta, housing with rent set to ensure that people are not spending more than 30 per cent of their income on housing. The money that we see in this budget would take three years to build that much even if it were all dedicated to that form of housing. It fails to keep up with current need, let alone to address the decades of built-up deficiencies.

Now, I'd also like to speak a little bit about housing starts. This minister has talked a lot about housing starts. In fact, he referred to these in response to my questions in the House on Monday. I'd like to refer to page 24 of the fiscal plan, which outlines housing starts since 2021. The minister has said multiple times that Alberta has the highest purpose-built rentals in our history, highest housing starts in our history, but these numbers do not refer to affordable housing units. These are housing starts generally.

11:55

On page 53 of the fiscal plan the government projects higher housing starts than the average of all private forecasts. We know that this government has missed their housing starts target by 2,000 units this year, as noted in the latest fiscal update on page 16. [interjection] I can provide the minister with that reference as I can hear him heckling me.

So is this goal tangible? How is it going to be met? And despite missing the target this year for housing starts, the government projects higher housing starts over the next four years than we have seen this government achieve. What steps are being ensured so that we'll actually meet those housing targets?

We need to see real support put into place to grow construction in this province. With very low supply and vacancy rates, there's no hope for an affordable housing market unless construction really increases. We can point, again, to the fiscal plan on page 37, that says that "inventories for apartments, semi-detached and row houses are at multi-year lows due to strong rental demand."

You know; there are homes being built, which is great – no one is going to dispute that – but we need considerable investment in rentals and in affordable rentals. Can the minister explain how the government plans to stimulate growth in the rental market? What contingencies are in place for a growing diverse rental market here in Alberta so that the needs of large, mixed-generational families are being met, the needs of single Albertans are being met? What is the minister going to do to incentivize multifamily affordable units, particularly for those who can't or won't be homeowners?

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: The remaining time goes to the minister.

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you. With the time we've got left, we'll focus again on helping, hopefully, the Official Opposition to understand that the housing challenges in the province are about supply. As we have indicated throughout this meeting, the work that is taking place in this province is being done to increase supply. The reality is that to restore affordability to the market, we need supply.

I know that the Official Opposition is pushing forward with policy items to reduce supply, but we disagree with that, and this budget reflects that.

We are working on multiple different levers, which is, first off, investing in our affordable housing stock in the places where it needs to be, in unprecedented ways, in the ability of our construction and nonprofit partners to be able to keep up. We're also investing in processes to be able to make sure that attainable housing goes back up. The industry is telling us right now that by reducing red tape and with some of the work that we've already done with our partners, they're expecting 50,000 to 60,000 more units above the level of housing starts that they were able to do in the previous 10 years.

Madam Chair, what's most interesting is comparing February '24 to February 2023: single detached home starts are up 24 per cent, and all other housing starts are up 89 per cent in Alberta, showing that we are continuing to see more rental units and not single detached units coming into the market. The latest numbers from BILD Alberta indicate that there are 16,000 new purpose-built rentals that are started, under construction as we speak. One-third of new construction in the province right now is actually purpose-built rentals. It used to be something like 10 per cent, which shows that the industry is responding to it.

And the most important number is that in the last three years in Alberta more purpose-built rentals have been built than in the previous 15 years combined. The processes that are in place to be able to make sure that the market is building simultaneously with the investments that we put into affordable housing are working, and we're well on our way – we're about halfway there – to be able to make sure that we accomplish those objectives going forward.

I do want to also emphasize the fact that there is significant investment by the Alberta taxpayer in this budget going into creating more houses, on the affordable side as well: 7,000 more households over three years, 5,100 capital builds, 1,900 new rent supplements for households, which will help almost 4,000 Albertans be able to receive help.

That's significant investment by the Alberta taxpayer. Only the NDP would call multibillion-dollar investments not significant. The results speak for themselves as we see January with a record amount of construction, only to be broken by February. We have every reason to believe that we're about to see the biggest record-breaking housing construction season, certainly in Edmonton and Calgary, in the history of the province. I want to thank all of those organizations for working tirelessly to make sure that happens despite what the NDP keeps telling them.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for this portion of consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded. I'd like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet this afternoon at 3:30 p.m. to continue our consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services.

Thank you, everyone. The meeting is adjourned. Just a reminder that there is an event happening over at the rotunda. It's International Francophonie Day, so as many of you who are available, please join that event.

Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

