



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

Tuesday, March 18, 2025
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First Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Toby Schneider, Assistant Deputy Minister, Employment and Financial Services

David Williams, Assistant Deputy Minister, Housing

New Democratic Party Caucus

Esmahan Razavi, Executive Director, Policy, Outreach and Stakeholder Relations

3:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 18, 2025

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

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

The Chair: All right. Good afternoon, 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, 2026.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. As this morning, Minister, when we get to you, please introduce the officials who have joined you at the table. My name is Jackie Lovely. I'm the MLA for the Camrose constituency and the chair of the committee. We'll begin to my right with Mr. Singh.

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

Mr. McDougall: Good afternoon. Myles McDougall, Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mrs. Johnson: Good afternoon. Jennifer Johnson, MLA, Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Boitchenko: Andrew Boitchenko, MLA for Drayton Valley-Devon.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk, MLA, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville. Good afternoon, everyone.

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you. Far left is Toby Schneider, who is my assistant deputy minister for employment and financial services. Directly to my left is my deputy minister, Cynthia Farmer. Right to my right is Sonya Johnston, who is my assistant deputy minister and senior financial officer. To the right of her is David Williams, who is the assistant deputy minister of housing. Behind me is a whole bunch of other assistant deputy ministers that are ready to help if needed.

Thanks for having us, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

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

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

Mr. Haji: Sharif Haji, Edmonton-Decore.

Member Tejada: Lizette Tejada, Calgary-Klein.

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

Member Miyashiro: Rob Miyashiro, Lethbridge-West.

The Chair: Please introduce the staff member as well.

Ms Razavi: Esmahan Razavi.

The Chair: Could you please turn on her microphone?
Could you say it again? They didn't get it.

Ms Razavi: Thanks. Esmahan Razavi.

Ms Ganley: Kathleen Ganley, Calgary-Mountain View.

The Chair: Perfect. Thank you, everyone.

I see we do not have anyone joining us remotely.

Just a few housekeeping items before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. No need to turn them on and off. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and visual stream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Please ensure, everybody, that you have your cellphones and other devices turned to silent during the duration of the meeting.

I need to also make sure that I've recorded the substitutions for the record: Ms Renaud for Member Batten, Mr. Boitchenko for Mrs. Petrovic, for a portion of the meeting Ms Sigurdson for Mr. Haji, Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk for Mr. Lundy, and Member Miyashiro for Ms Goehring, with Member Tejada as acting deputy chair. Thank you.

All right. Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services shall be considered for a total of six hours. For the record I would note that the Standing Committee on Families and Communities has already completed three hours' debate in this respect. As we enter our fourth hour of debate, I will remind everyone that the speaking rotation for these meetings is provided for under Standing Order 59.01(6), and we are now at the point in the rotation where speaking times are limited to a maximum of five minutes for both the member and the ministry. These speaking times may be combined for a maximum of 10 minutes. Please remember to advise the chair at the beginning of your rotation if you wish to combine your time with the minister's.

With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break today? All right. Seeing none, we'll have a break.

When we adjourned this morning, we were five minutes into the exchange between Mr. Lundy and the minister. I'll now invite Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk, who has substituted for Mr. Lundy, to complete the remaining time in this rotation. You have five minutes.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Chair. Through you to the minister, I'd like to turn my attention to two interesting programs itemized on lines 7.3 and 7.5 on page 195 of the estimates. These two programs are identified as a seniors home adaptation and repair program and the seniors property tax deferral program; \$19.7 million has been allocated to these programs. Chair, through you to the minister, would you describe each of these programs to this committee and how this investment in Budget 2025 helps to support senior homeowners? Are seniors required to make monthly loan repayments under these loan programs?

Mr. Nixon: Well, thanks for that, Madam Chair. The SHARP program, ultimately, allows eligible seniors who are homeowners to finance home repairs and adaptations through a low-interest home equity loan with the government. The program offers low-interest home equity loans to a maximum of \$40,000 per household to seniors with a household income of \$75,000 or less. It covers a wide range of home adaptation and repairs. Some examples of that would be furnace repairs and replacement, bathroom adaptations, roof repairs, those type of things. In our previous fiscal year SHARP loans supported 430 seniors with an average loan of over \$11,000, and the grant supported 230 seniors with an average grant of over \$2,700.

The seniors property tax deferral program allows eligible senior homeowners to defer all or part of their residential property tax through a low-interest home equity loan with the government. That program pays an eligible senior's property taxes directly to the municipality. Property taxes in arrears are also paid through that program if applicable. In the last fiscal year the program supported 2,100 seniors with an average loan of about 3,800 bucks. As for when a senior is required to make that payment back, which I think the hon. member asked, monthly loan repayments are not required. The loans do not need to be repaid until the senior sells the home, which is how it's designed.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister.

Chair, through you to the minister, the workforce of any organization is one of its most important assets. This applies to the continuing care workforce. Page 148 of the business plan highlights a commitment to continuing care transformation. I read that this includes a shift to support the provision of more care in the community, enhance workforce capacity, improve quality, and increase choice and innovation. Minister, through the chair, looking at staffing specifically in continuing care, can you tell this committee how the government is supporting the continuing care workforce through Budget 2025, and can you provide information on how much is being invested to support the continuing care workforce through Budget 2025?

Mr. Nixon: Well, in this budget we're investing about \$141 million in continuing care transformation with aging with dignity funding as well as operational funding for ALA, assisted living Alberta, as we stand it up, which will ultimately support the continuing care workforce. That includes supports such as mental health and wellness programs, workplace mentorship, investment in Indigenous health care aide training along with recruitment and retention initiatives such as maintaining increased health care aide wages that were introduced during COVID, bursaries, alternative training paths, and efforts to reduce the pay gap between those working in continuing care homes and in home and community care, where there is often a significant pay gap.

I think that answers the member's question, but if not, just let me know.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you.

Also, Chair, through you to the minister, on page 145 of the business plan key objective 1.3 is about continuing to implement the crossministry plan to support attainable and affordable housing for middle- and low-income renters and buyers. Minister, could you outline how Budget 2025 will impact this crossgovernment plan? What are some of the challenges that need to be addressed to keep up with the housing demand and achieve the objective?

Mr. Nixon: Well, with the 40 seconds we've got left, it's a big question, but it's a good story for Alberta. We introduced a plan about a year, year and a half ago that focused on a lot of things but particularly on reduction of red tape and making sure that we could increase capacity, rejecting things like rent control, which was not working in other jurisdictions.

It's been pretty exciting to see what has taken place. We've seen a 34 per cent increase in housing starts in our province. About a third of those are purpose-built rentals, which was a key part of the plan that we had to put in place to be able to make sure that we could increase capacity. It's the only place, the only jurisdiction in the country where we see that taking place, for a variety of different reasons. The great news is that we're seeing that capacity go up all across the province, and we're starting to see rent come down as a result of that investment.

The Chair: Thank you so much, members.

We'll head to the Official Opposition. Please proceed. Is this going to be shared or block time?

Member Irwin: We'll continue with block.

The Chair: Block? Okay.

Member Irwin: Thank you. Let's continue where we left off earlier with homelessness, referring, of course, to the objectives on page 145 of the business plan. In Edmonton Homeward Trust has reported record-breaking numbers of Albertans on their by-name list, which accounts for people experiencing houselessness. Whenever the minister is questioned about the growing numbers of unhoused folks, he has many times stated that the numbers are, quote, stable. However, let's go back a little bit to 2019, when Homeward Trust reported 1,504 people on their by-name list. Now, or at least the most recent numbers we have from January 2025, there are 5,038 people listed, which is an increase of over 200 per cent. We know that people are removed from the by-name list when they are housed or if they've been inactive for a period of 90 days. If Edmontonians were being housed, those numbers would be going down. As I shared earlier, these aren't just numbers; these are real people. They're humans, and they matter, and they deserve support.

3:40

We've seen record-setting numbers when it comes to deaths of unhoused Albertans in both Edmonton and Calgary. Edmonton had its highest level of frostbite amputations in over a decade this past year; 87 per cent of those who experienced an amputation were unhoused. As I said earlier, it's shocking that this government would be cutting homelessness supports at a time like this.

The minister often speaks of the navigation centre as a testament to the good work the ministry has done in addressing homelessness. Page 143 of the business plan indicates continued investment in the navigation centres, but there's been no evidence provided to the public regarding how many Albertans have achieved and maintained permanent housing – permanent housing – as a result of their interaction with the navigation centre. We've had no details other than last year at about this exact same time during budget estimates when a member of the ministry staff let slip that only five Albertans had actually been housed through the navigation centre.

The 2023-24 annual report on page 25 indicates that with the navigation centres more than 250 people were connected to housing programs and 325 people were connected to emergency shelter spaces, transitional, and bridge housing. Of course, that's from March 2024. Since that time, including earlier today, we've heard the minister use stats indicating upwards of 9,000 unhoused Albertans being helped at the navigation centre. As I've said many times and I need to say again on the record, referring someone to a wait-list is not a home. That does not address the growing issue of homelessness. I know that this is happening. It's not just anecdotal. I've talked to folks who are experiencing homelessness. I do it often. Many go to the navigation centre – they do – but they don't get housed.

A few related questions to the minister through the chair, of course. Considering the minister's continued investment in the navigation centre as indicated in the business plan, can he show with data how his approach is working? I'd like to ask again for the record: this year how many folks have been permanently housed after accessing the navigation centre? How many of those folks have sustained their housing six months or more after accessing housing supports?

If that data is not available or if it's not being collected, then why not? Doesn't the government want to be able to meaningfully

evaluate if their investments in housing are working? Again, the minister has thrown out many numbers, which I'm sure he will again, which makes me think that there is some data being collected. Why not share that publicly? At a press conference he was asked, actually recently, I think on March 11, if he tracks data, and he said: we certainly track data, and we're increasing our ability to track data. Share that, please. Where can the public find it?

When we dig into the numbers, I'd like to ask: how much of the \$101.5 million in homelessness and outreach support services went specifically to the navigation centres in both Edmonton and Calgary, respectively? Since these services were introduced last year but overall funding for shelters and supports is decreasing – despite the minister saying otherwise, his documents are quite clear – which services are being cut to allow for funding of those initiatives?

I'd ask the minister to advise of some significant updates on the navigation centres, and I really would like the minister to talk about how he is using an evidence-based, data-driven approach. It's very unfortunate that in this entire business plan for SCSS there's only one performance metric on housing. It's . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

We'll turn it over now to the minister for his response.

Mr. Nixon: Well, we'll start with the by-names list. The member is presenting the information of the by-names list wrong. It's a common misconception. Both Homeward Trust and the Homeless Foundation have pushed back on the number and the way the number is being used by individuals.

The fact that the by-names list is increasing shows significant access to services, which is a good thing. It shows that we're starting to connect to individuals. She indicated that anybody being housed comes off the list; that's not true. It would include people in prisons, as an example, and housing programs for up to two years and in other aspects that may be receiving services, certainly people that need services from the government, but it would be very different than people that are currently sleeping rough and that you're trying to address the immediate emergency need and are much more now connected to other long-term programs such as transitional housing, recovery, maybe health care situations that are taking place. It's a common misconception. We do know on emergency housing that it remains fairly stable in both of the largest cities as far as the demand, which is what I've been referring to.

What's also interesting is that Calgary in 2024: their point-in-time count showed no increase, which really was something that the department focused on to understand what was taking place in Calgary versus what was taking place in Edmonton, very similar sized cities with similar sized challenges. Now, having worked in the industry on the Calgary side, over time I learned a few things in Edmonton that they were doing differently. I mean, frankly, they're a little bit behind where Calgary was. We're rushing to catch them up.

A larger nonprofit sector that is much more focused in Calgary on this challenge, but we're seeing that now take place in Edmonton. Stronger partnerships with both levels of government as well in Calgary, which we've now seen take place in Edmonton as well with the investment in homeless shelters; Indigenous shelters; women-only shelters; 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week shelters. The reality is that Calgary took the approach that we're moving forward with in Edmonton, and we hope that we'll see similar results in this community. I would say early days show that we are, which is a good thing.

Again, it's a misconception to use the count in that way. Why that matters, though, is because then you end up using the wrong

service to help that population, if you do those numbers. If we go around and we say there are 5,000 people who have nowhere to sleep tonight in the city of Edmonton, we would put a disproportionate investment inside things like emergency shelters to deal with the immediate emergency need. But the reality is that we are not overcapacity in our emergency shelters. That's why we continue to see other investments in affordable housing, as an example, and addiction treatment, which is a big part of the work that has to take place on the streets going forward.

The question about housing. I think the hon. member continues to want to have the navigation centre say: we house this many people. That's not the navigation centre's role. The navigation centre's role is to connect people to service providers. This ministry works with well over 6,000 partners, as I think I mentioned earlier this morning, that provide housing services. We have requirements that they must meet as part of our funding arrangements with them elsewhere in the department.

I do know that most people that end up inside our housing program, something like well over 90 per cent, remain housed, so it's a good number. In fact – there you go. The assistant deputy minister just gave it to me: 94 per cent is that number. That's the navigation centre's job: when somebody needs housing, connect them to the appropriate provider. Those providers are getting 94 per cent maintained housing rates, which is significant. It's not the navigation centre's job to tell them how to do that job if they're doing it that well. It's the navigation centre's job to connect that individual to the supports that they need.

Now, it's more than just housing. For people that are experiencing homelessness, certainly, housing is the most obvious challenge that is taking place on the streets, obviously. But there are other challenges, which is why we continue to invest in the navigation centres going forward. ID we talk about a lot. It may seem like a simple thing; I can tell you it is the number one hindrance to people who are facing homelessness for being able to get services. The fact that we've been able to create services in both of our largest cities that can turn around ID quickly for people in very tough circumstances, that can get them access sometimes to medicine, to appropriate health care as a result of that, to housing providers as a result of that, or to the other services that they need: that alone would make the navigation centres worth their investment, but they do so much more.

They will continue to be the hub of our homeless structure in the city of Edmonton and the city of Calgary primarily for one reason, that they're working. The second reason: because our nonprofit sector – that is, our partners each and every day caring for this population – wants them to remain. They think it is the right way to do it. They're utilizing it, and we're seeing great results, which is something that we should celebrate because we've been able to create that circumstance and now we've stabilized that emergency situation. Hopefully, Edmonton starts to see the same results as Calgary and then we can get back to work on the work that we're doing on overall affordable housing while we know people are safe and not in encampments.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. We'll move over to the government side.

I believe, Mr. Singh, you're up.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. Shared time if the minister is okay with it?

Mr. Nixon: Absolutely.

Mr. Singh: My questions are on Alberta seniors benefit grants. I would like to highlight the Alberta seniors benefit grants and get a

little more information about how investments through Budget 2025 will improve life for seniors. Line item 8.2 on page 194 of the main estimates shows an increased investment. I see an increase of about \$47.5 million from the previous year's budget, reaching over \$437 million in the 2025-26 estimates. I know that the Alberta seniors benefit program is an important source of income for low-income seniors in my constituency of Calgary-East, and I'm glad that the government is continuing to invest in this program. Can you please describe how this program supports seniors?

3:50

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. Thanks, Madam Chair, for that question. The member is right. The Alberta seniors benefit program ultimately provides a monthly income supplement. I think it's important to be clear that it is a supplement to the work that the federal government does on pension and old age security. The program is designed to supplement that. There is a significant amount that's invested in this space; as the member said, hundreds of millions of dollars. To currently qualify for that total income, you must have a total income threshold of \$33,410 for a single senior and \$54,640 for a couple.

Albertans turning 65 are actually mailed an information package and proactively given the opportunity to apply for the Alberta seniors benefit programs six months before they turn 65. Mr. McIver let me know that that actually works as he got close to that, but he was above the threshold, so it didn't work out for him. But I think it does show that it's working. As of January, 2025, over 197,000 seniors receive the Alberta seniors benefit, which represents about 24 per cent of the total senior population in Alberta, with an average monthly payment to the seniors of about \$173.

Mr. Singh: Thanks for the answer, Minister. Probably Minister McIver might qualify for next round.

Can you also outline why the budget allocation for the Alberta seniors benefit program needed to increase?

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. Most of that increase is based on population. We have about 2,500 more seniors entering the population of Alberta a month, which is a significant number. It's a number that is very similar across the country. Our seniors population is increasing rapidly in Canada, and Alberta is no different. We have anticipated a \$47.5 million increase from Budget 2024. Some of that also would be to deal with indexation as we continue to index to be able to keep up with inflation for that program, so a combination of both of those things would make up most of that increase.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, for the answer, through you, Chair.

My next questions are on the Alberta Social Housing Corporation. The Alberta Social Housing Corporation plays a very important role in owning and managing government-subsidized housing assets in our province. I see line 9.2 on page 194 of the estimates shows increased funding to assistance to Alberta Social Housing Corporation, with just over \$184 million allocated in the 2025 estimates, up from about \$157.5 million in 2024-25. Would the minister please speak to how this funding from Budget 2025 will be used to support low-income Albertans and the role that the Alberta Social Housing Corporation fills?

Mr. Nixon: Well, there's a lot actually taking place on the capital side on housing, about \$1.2 billion over the next three years to build, repair, and maintain affordable housing. The budget itself has funding for 6,300 new affordable housing units, which will be built over the next three years, as well as investments to keep 4,100 units online. One of the things that we've really focused on the last couple of years is making sure that we're not only investing in new

capital but also having a look at the existing infrastructure and getting to that low-hanging fruit of units that may have come offline from lack of maintenance or may be about to come offline. That investment can often be significantly more affordable and have a bigger bang for our dollars as a result of that, so we're investing in that area. We believe, again, that we'll keep about 4,100 units online as a result of that decision.

We've also got \$298 million available in capital grants and about \$51.6 million available in overall capital investments, so lots happening on the affordable housing side of the file. Lots happening on the attainable side, too, but I know the hon. member is interested in the affordable side.

Mr. Singh: Thanks for the answer. As important as it is to get new affordable housing initiatives built, it's also important to ensure that our existing assets are well maintained. Can the minister please speak to the budget's capital maintenance plan?

Mr. Nixon: A hundred per cent right. They have to do lots of maintenance to maintain the infrastructure. The department is actually the largest landlord in the province and has lots of assets that they have to continue to maintain.

The 2025 capital plan provides \$130.2 million for the next three years to maintain existing assets. This is actually an increase of about \$10 million from Budget 2024. We continue to prioritize that funding to bring units back online. That's our number one focus at the moment, to use that investment. There are units that are offline that need minor repairs to get them back online and to make sure that they're in the condition that they need to be to be able to serve people. Our capital maintenance and renewal funding for '25-26, ultimately, as I said in the last question, should create approximately 4,100 units that otherwise would have not been places that people could have lived in safely without that investment. We'll either bring them back online or we'll keep them from going offline.

I'd also like to let you know that in fall 2024 we actually brought in a consulting team through a competitive process to help us improve our capital maintenance and renewal program with a very future-focused strategy. We heard from the Auditor General that we really needed to do that, and the department has been working to make sure that process is in place, which I think is going to have a positive impact long term on the work that we're doing on capital maintenance and renewal. It remains a high focus. Again, I think it's often a better investment for us than new dollars. We have to find a balance between both.

The largest challenge on this, both for us and our partners, continues to be making sure we have enough construction capacity and trade workforce to be able to meet both the ambitious housing strategy that Alberta is implementing while at the same time continuing to maintain our assets.

Mr. Singh: Thanks for the answer, Minister.

Through you, Madam Chair, my next question is on investment in seniors programs. On page 145 of the business plan under the initiatives supporting key objective 1, I read that \$572.8 million will be allocated in grants and low-interest home equity loans through seniors financial assistance to support seniors with low income to meet their basic needs. I'd like to hear more about the investment through Budget 2025. Would the minister explain the seniors programs that comprise this \$572.8 million investment?

Mr. Nixon: Well, Budget 2025 has got a lot of money in this area, which, again, I think shows the importance of this investment to the taxpayer; as the member said, Madam Chair, \$572.8 million. It enables several things but in particular, I think, five programs that we should probably talk about in the context of the hon. member's

question. The Alberta seniors benefit program, which is budgeted over \$437 million and provides that monthly supplement that we've already discussed for about 197,000 eligible seniors.

There's also the supplementary accommodation benefit, which is budgeted this year for over \$96 million and provides financial assistance to over 13,600 low-income seniors living in a designated supportive living or long-term care facility, ensuring that they can afford their accommodation charges and retain minimum disposable income each month.

There's also the special needs assistance for seniors program, which is budgeted over \$17 million and assists over 23,000 eligible seniors.

As well – I see I'm running out of time – the seniors home adaptation and repair program for \$11 million.

And, of course, we've talked about in detail the seniors property tax deferral program, which has a budget of \$10 million and is helping those seniors in that area.

Again, a significant increase in the space. I think given what we're seeing with population numbers in the seniors sector it makes sense that that would take place. We're going to continue to invest heavily in those who built our province by making sure that we have very successful programs for their unique needs.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll head back over to the Official Opposition. Please proceed with your questions, Member.

Member Irwin: Thank you. It's unfortunate that I didn't hear any clear numbers from the minister regarding the navigation centre, and it does worry me greatly that he can't show that his government is interested in an evidence-based, data-driven approach. Let's move on; he still has an opportunity to return to some of the many questions that are left unanswered in my previous section.

Let's talk about rent subsidies as noted on page 145 of the business plan. Last year we saw an increase from about \$79.3 million to \$86.6 million, an increase of \$7.3 million, which worked out to 550 new rent supplements for the whole province, which is a wholly insufficient number.

4:00

This year according to the data provided by the entity's financial information rent assistance will be increasing from \$92.8 million to \$114.4 million, which is an increase of about \$20 million, but no information has been provided about the number of new supplements for Albertans who are on those wait-lists that we talked about earlier.

Page 78 of the fiscal plan indicates that increases mainly address pressures in rental assistance from market conditions. I would like to get from this minister a bit more clarity on how that 20 or so million dollars will be used. Presumably, if the amount given correlates to the number of subsidies, we should be seeing around 1,600 additional subsidies for Albertans, but I'd love to hear those numbers clearly from the minister.

Myself, my office, I know many of my colleagues here, and the Member for Edmonton-Decore has heard from a lot of folks in his riding as well who've sat on the wait-list for a subsidy for years, some as long as eight years, and have been told that they will likely never receive the subsidy even if they are approved.

In fact, for months here in Edmonton Civida's RAB and TRAB programs were not even accepting applications because they are so oversubscribed although we've seen that they've actually just reopened those applications. For folks watching at home, RAB is the rental assistance benefit and TRAB is the temporary rental assistance benefit. I shouldn't use acronyms like that.

I've also heard from Albertans who receive the subsidy, but even with that bit of extra support, they're just unable to make ends meet and remain in very dire housing need due to, you know, exorbitant rent increases and other pressures.

In fact, even in the government's strategic plan on page 30 rent subsidies are listed as a performance indicator. I would ask the minister, through the chair, of course: does he think that he's doing all he can to strengthen this program?

I have a few more questions specifically to this program. Given this minister's reluctance to provide rental protections for Albertans, can he just kind of outline how he feels the current rental assistance program is meeting the need? I don't see it, and my colleagues don't see it, either.

Will the increase that's being provided in funding in this area be used for new rent supplements for people on wait-lists or will it just be increasing the amount that folks are currently getting due to market pressures? Specifically, how many new rent supplements will be added? How many of the current supplements are RAB and how many are TRAB? We can't find this, and I'm happy to be proven wrong, but I couldn't find this anywhere throughout all of the government budget documents.

You know, I also have a question specifically. This is an important one, I know, to my colleagues in status of women as well. On page 69 of the fiscal plan, it notes a \$6 million increase in rent assistance under the federal national action plan to end gender-based violence. Is that incorporated in the \$21.6 million increase? Is it a separate pot of money? Who is tasked with administrating those subsidies? Does it go through RAB? Again, we would like some clarity on exactly how those dollars are being allocated.

As we've talked about many times, rents in Alberta have grown at a record-setting pace, and Alberta is actually the largest province that has no temporary restrictions on rent increases. We know the minister is opposed to caps on rent. He's noted that Calgary rents have stabilized, but that's only after many, many, many consecutive months of rapidly increasing rents. Even though he can say that, yes, in some parts of the province we've seen decreases or stabilization in rents, that doesn't make up for the double-digit increases we've seen over years previous. People are barely able to tread water. In fact, the latest rental data from rentals.ca for Edmonton shows that rents in Edmonton continue to climb.

What is the minister doing to help the many Albertans who are at risk of losing their homes due to out-of-control rents? I ask him to please be specific. Albertans are watching.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

We'll head over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Nixon: Madam Chair, the NDP have really struggled with this. I don't know if it's just the socialist leanings of their political movement, but the rent control side of things is what would destroy the market. We see it take place in places like New York, the provinces who have tried it in our country. Places like Toronto and Vancouver have seen devastating impacts as the result of it. The challenge is supply. Now, this is why rent supplements work better because we're not reducing the people entering the market by them not being able to make the rent that they would need to be able to build homes, particularly in the inflationary market that the country has seen over the last couple of years.

If we had gone down that NDP approach, it would have been devastating. One of I think the best quotes on this is from an economist, again, who's a socialist economist of all things, Assar Lindbeck, who said, and I quote: In many cases, rent control appears to be the most efficient technique presently known to destroy a city except for bombing. We don't want that. We want the

opposite of that. We want to continue to see increases in capacity. We doubled down on making sure that capacity went up. Calgary is always the leading indicator in our province – Edmonton soon usually follows – when it comes to the housing market. We went in, and we got homes built.

This is one of the few things we agreed with the federal Liberal government on, was that this was a capacity issue and we had to go make sure that we'd done it. Province-wide we saw an increase of 32 per cent on housing starts: Edmonton, we saw it up by 39 per cent, Calgary up by 24 per cent, Lethbridge by almost 200 per cent, and Red Deer by 84 per cent. Now, if I had done what the NDP had wanted, which was bring in an economic policy the equivalent of bombing our cities, we would not have seen numbers like this, and we would not have seen rent in Calgary dropping by 7.2 per cent right now with some of the latest reports and capacity numbers in Edmonton starting to look like they're going to level off, which is great. So our approach has been working.

Now, you have to do both. The Premier and I have been very clear on this from the beginning. We have to make sure that the market housing goes up. We have to make sure that supply is restored to the supply situation in our province, which was the fastest growing place in the world for the last year and a half or so, and, at the same time, we have to do strategic investments inside affordable housing.

I will point out to you, Madam Chair, that when the NDP were in government they didn't build one net new affordable housing unit. The wait-lists went up by 76 per cent to get to affordable housing. This government has created 5,100 units during the first mandate and about to do significantly more than that and are on track to create 82,000 affordable households across the province, which is key. But, you know, what's going to keep it affordable is making sure that supply is high enough; otherwise, that rent will continue to go up inside the affordable sector, which will be subsidized by the taxpayer for sure. But at some point we're going to have the same challenge that everybody else is having paying rent if we don't get supply into the market. Supply works.

The other thing that we needed to take place, particularly in Calgary and Edmonton, is a strong investment situation where purpose-built rentals would be built. If we don't see more things like apartment buildings coming on or people investing in specific units that people could rent, we are going to continue to see staggering challenges like you've seen in Toronto and Vancouver when it comes to rent. One of the things I think is most impressive about the work that's taking place is that in 2024 there were 9,903 new apartment starts, which is about a third of all of the starts across the province.

So, you know, instead of doing dangerous rent control, which would have devastated the economy, which would have created no new units, would have seen mass challenges and rent ultimately going up, again, just like New York – New York is, you know, a great testimony to how that type of a policy would really destroy a community. Instead, what we've seen is that focus on the industry, the focus on reducing red tape, our partnerships with both the city of Edmonton and the city of Calgary. I have to say that both mayors and their councils stood up to the plate and said: how do we move these regulations and bylaws and permits out of the way in an effective way to make sure we can continue to build safe housing in the province? And we've done so. I think it's something that should be celebrated. I know CMHC has said that Alberta is the only bright spot anywhere in the country.

I will just quickly double back as well for the last 30 seconds. When it comes to the navigation centre, we've given the list of statistics for the nav centre over and over. We did it earlier in estimates. I'd be happy to keep listing them all. It's extraordinary

what the ADM and her team have accomplished with it. I'll be touring it tomorrow with people from the federal government that are interested in it. We have provincial leadership of all stripes, including NDP Premiers, calling up and saying: how did you guys pull this off? It has worked. It's helped people. I think what we should do as a Legislature is celebrate that people are getting help, not continue to try to attack the individuals helping them.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll move back over to the government side. I understand Member Johnson is next.

Mrs. Johnson: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister. Again, thank you for your team that has shown up today and done all this hard work and taking so much time to sit and do this. I'm going to redirect a bit. We've been talking a lot about homelessness, and I'm going to redirect to FCSS, family and community support services.

May I have shared time, Madam Chair?

4:10

Mr. Nixon: Of course.

The Chair: Yes.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you.

We all know how important FCSS is in each of our communities and, I want to say, especially in rural. That's not to demean our big city centres at all because they're doing very valuable work there, but it is sometimes the only resource we have in our rural communities. It is such a valuable resource there.

I want to take the time, too, to shout-out all our FCSS workers and to thank them. They're on the front lines doing a lot of really great work and especially Crystal and her team in Lacombe and Shannon and her team in Ponoka and they're going into the surrounding communities as well, into Blackfalds and Clive and Alix, and just doing things that can't be done otherwise.

We know that prevention programs are critical to helping ensure Albertans can meet life's challenges and avoid the need for intensive intervention supports later. Looking at page 146 of the business plan, key objective 2.4 instructs the ministry to support municipalities and Métis settlements to design and deliver preventive social programs which help to address key social issues in their communities.

Madam Chair, through you to the minister, would the minister please explain the types of preventive social programs that are now being funded through this key objective? Then, as a follow-up, are there any specific programs the minister believes are particularly impactful in helping Albertans to foster their well-being and becoming more resilient? If I could add to that, perhaps: are there any discrepancies between urban and rural and the differences that you're seeing there?

Mr. Nixon: Well, let me start with the last question first. There is extraordinary difference between urban and rural FCSS. Both are doing great jobs but both have often different jobs. I think it's just a reflection of the communities that they're in. I would say that even with rural, I mean, there's certainly a difference. Some people would call Lethbridge rural. I would not – it's our third largest city – but some people would. I think there's a big difference between that and Rocky Mountain House or your home in Bentley.

We do see different types of programming that are taking place in those communities. I think that is the value of FCSS, that it puts money in a partnership with municipalities. We should recognize that municipalities are also funding this with us. Every time I

commit a new dollar to FCSS, I'm committing municipalities as well to invest their ratio of that investment.

Because you have that type of programming in unique communities that can work with whatever is taking place in that community, you end up with very focused supports for preventative services that makes sense to that community.

As you know, Madam Chair, and as the hon. member knows, I represent, I think, 34 towns, counties, and school boards, or something like that at the moment. I can tell you each of those towns approaches this very differently based on what is taking place there. That's something that we want to keep taking place and that we want to build upon.

Some of the stuff that can be invested in are things like mental health, senior supports, transportation supports. There are referral and system navigation supports, short-term counselling, mentorship programs for youth, and, of course, a lot of programs to help seniors inside our communities.

The other thing I would note about FCSS that I always find interesting is that I think it's often also funding in a way that helps support another organization or an organization that does other things as well in the community besides just FCSS. You see a lot of places that do FCSS in some of our communities where they also have areas where they're doing even things like home care and other things inside the community that might be outside of the scope of FCSS, but it certainly provides some sustainability to that organization.

On the cities, obviously, they have again, sometimes similar issues, certainly on the senior side, but there will be often a lot of other resources that already exist in that community. You know, homelessness, for example. People in my communities are trying to interact through FCSS to try to help with some of the homeless challenges they're seeing. In places like Edmonton and Calgary as we've already established today the government itself is investing a quarter billion dollars, roughly, in homeless supports, which you would not be seeing in places like Rocky Mountain House or Sunde. FCSS often finds themselves trying to step into that space.

Mrs. Johnson: Through you, Madam Chair, thank you to the minister.

If I can expound upon this a little bit more, perhaps the minister can explain what some of the preventive social programs are that we're looking at because we know that does save us a ton of money in the long run, and it promotes quality of life for all Albertans. In what ways is FCSS meeting these preventive social programs?

Mr. Nixon: Well, I'll go to Sunde FCSS, my hometown. I know they've got a program right now that is providing information and referral services to help residents connect to mental health supports and as well to connect to food banks and transportation options. I continue to say and say all the time that the biggest social services challenge in the entire province is actually transportation, and the more rural you get, the more that challenge is a real challenge for our communities. Those staff, though, as well at Sunde I know are also assisting them in getting subsidies, connected to housing, or different things through government agencies. They're often the connection point, particularly in the smaller towns, to government, where obviously we can't have offices in all those communities.

I've also heard first-hand how important it is to helping people to connect to all the supports also available to the community, not just from the government of Alberta but other supports that may be available to community members that have already been built maybe by the municipality, maybe by other nonprofits that are operating in the sector.

I think those are some of the examples. There are a lot of unique examples. Again, I always find it interesting each time I drive to one of my communities to meet with FCSS how different it is from community to community, but I do believe that is in the design.

Mrs. Johnson: Again, thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister for highlighting some of those differences and how they are so unique and successful.

I'm going to switch a little bit here. We have talked a little bit about AISH and employment and how that's being affected. Employment is a bottom line to so many of the different programs that you offer, so I'll go that direction with employment supports and take the opportunity to look at key objective 2.1 on page 146 of the business plan. This focuses on employment supports. From what I read, these supports include "digital service options, job matching with employers and on-the-job support" for Albertans experiencing underemployment and unemployment including individuals with disabilities. Madam Chair, through you to the minister: could the minister please highlight specific examples of the different employment supports available through his ministry?

Mr. Nixon: Well, you know, there's a lot that takes place in the ministry in this area, but we've heard lots from me today.

I haven't got a lot of ADMs to speak, so I'm actually going to get ADM Schneider, who's on our income support side of things, including AISH, who has certainly spent a lot of time on this and is the one that usually briefs me. I'll give him a moment to expand upon that.

Mr. Schneider: Thank you, Minister, through the chair. The ministry uses a work outcome reporting project to assess the effectiveness of career and employment services, and I really want to highlight that we found that workforce development services can be very successful. The services include simulated work sites. The program supports job seekers who have experienced barriers to employment and helps connect them with employers. Paid on-the-job development combined with short-term courses provides the credentials and employment that employers need. Albertans who participate in these programs have postintervention incomes that are about \$4,850 higher than the incomes of individuals who did not receive these services.

Would you like me to continue?

Mr. Nixon: I don't know if the member got her question answered, but she could let me know if she didn't, and you'd be able to expand upon that.

Mrs. Johnson: Well, sure. Thank you. In this final minute I will just expand upon a little bit more. Albertans with disabilities often face greater barriers to employment than those without. What supports is the ministry providing specifically for Albertans with disabilities?

Mr. Nixon: Well, you know, we've talked about a lot today, and it would be hard to cover all that in a minute. The department is, again, investing \$3.6 billion in the overall disability file. That's more than every ministry in government with the exception, of course, of this ministry, Health, Education, and, I believe, postsecondary, which I think shows you the scale of it. You're addressing everything from children with disabilities to adults with disabilities, income supports, employment programs associated with disabilities, and investments around developmental disabilities specifically through the PDD program.

The first and foremost job of the government in that space is to be able to make sure that we're providing stable income for those

with disabilities through things like AISH. You know, it's about a \$1.6 billion investment in this budget by Alberta taxpayers. That is the number one area, but the second area is then to continue to make sure they've got supplementary supports for things like employment and other areas like that.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll move back to the Official Opposition. Who's up next?

Ms Renaud: I am.

The Chair: Please proceed, Member.

Ms Renaud: Sorry. Do you want to go back and forth?

The Chair: The member has asked whether you would like to go back and forth.

Mr. Nixon: No. I like block. I'm really enjoying it now.

Ms Renaud: Oh, that's too bad. I was ready to rumble.

The Chair: Okay. We'll go with block time, please.

4:20

Ms Renaud: I'd like to talk about the new Canada disability benefit that's coming. It should be out by July of this year. Now, disability poverty is a thing. I'm sure most people understand that. Unfortunately, this ministry doesn't have very good metrics about it, but it is a thing. There are a lot of costs disabled people incur for things that, you know, typically nondisabled people don't: equipment, medication, different therapies, certainly transportation – we heard the minister go on at length about how important that was – retrofits, renovations to their homes, particularly if there's something like a brain injury or an injury of any kind, really, and special diets, all of those things. All of these things combined push people into deeper poverty.

Now, I think all of us make more than \$1,900 a month. I think we can all understand that trying to live on \$1,900 a month is very difficult. Even if you can find an affordable rental – let's say that a really good affordable rental is, I don't know, \$700 or \$800 – you're still trying to survive on what's left, and that's almost impossible. So the extra \$200 coming for the Canada disability benefit actually makes a real difference between having to go a couple of times a month to the food bank or not.

You know, \$200 doesn't sound like a lot. I know the minister will say: well, it's going to support the AISH program to make it sustainable. But the reality is that when people sink deeper into poverty, we're going to see all kinds of problems, like we already are. We know this. We're smart people. We understand that when people sink deeper into poverty, it results in people losing homes or having unstable living arrangements. We know they end up using . . . [interjections] Excuse me?

The Chair: Please continue, Member.

Ms Renaud: We know that when people end up sinking deeper into poverty, we have all kinds of problems, whether it's with public safety, whether it's with homelessness, whether it's food bank usage. Through you, Madam Chair, I don't think – although I am thankful that there is money going to food banks, because the need is enormous right now, that isn't the answer.

My question is to the minister. You know, we've not had a really great track record today of getting any kind of answers, but let's hope we get a couple. What we're looking for, very simply, is: has this ministry done any sort of assessment whatsoever about the cost

or benefit analysis to clawing back the \$200 Canada disability benefit that would typically go to AISH recipients and income support recipients? A pretty straightforward question. Have you done any kind of assessment whatsoever understanding that, you know, pay now or pay later? You may not pay right now, but you're going to pay later in terms of having to augment the other services to meet with all of the other issues that will come out of deepening poverty.

The other question I got zero answer on – it's very, very simple – that I know, clearly, this ministry is trying to – I don't know – fancy dance around answering is just a very simple question. How many people currently, how many children and their families – but how many children are currently approved for services? They've met eligibility, they're on the FSCD wait-list, and they have not yet received any services. No services. How many people are on that wait-list? Same question for adults, people over 18: how many people are on the PDD wait-list right now?

My next question, that I've asked probably four times this morning, we still don't have an answer to. And if there is no plan, that's an answer. Just say: there is no plan. When can Albertans expect accessibility legislation? We continue to fall further behind. If we really want to open up pathways to employment – because that really is the goal, to find jobs for people that want them and can do them. Good jobs. But we have not done that. We have massive unemployment for people with disabilities and no new pathways. When will we get that accessibility legislation?

The other question I have is around – the minister has talked a little bit about adding some staff along the way to this ministry to deal with whether it was AISH or ADAP or PDD or FSCD. But what is really interesting is that I know that a number of staff were laid off. There was a bunch of staff hired when the other Nixon minister made a \$25 million announcement in 2023, and that was specifically, I believe, to address the wait-list at the time. I don't know if it was just FSCD or both. But that announcement turned into staff that were going to do this work. That was my understanding based on the presser. So I'd like to know: why did you fire or lay off those staff when now you're rehiring people? Isn't that, like, an extra cost for doing all of that hiring and training? I mean, it just sort of seems like yet another waste of money with a government that doesn't seem super competent at long-term planning.

Those are my questions. Hopefully, we can get some answers this time.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

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

Mr. Nixon: Well, we'll start with the question about staffing. We have not reduced FSCD or PDD staffing. Nobody has been fired. The member is referring to temporary increases in staff – staff that were brought in specifically to do a specific project around wait-lists that was clearly to be a temporary project. That project was completed. Earlier in estimates – and I'd refer the member to *Hansard* if she would like to get that answer a little bit later – I went through what are the requirements industry-wide of this government, where we are on staffing on both PDD and FSCD, showing that we are on the high end of it and will continue to be when it comes to that investment.

The member started off her questioning in regard to the Canada disability benefit and AISH. The Official Opposition continues to ignore the fact that when it comes to our AISH program, Alberta is a leader by far, by much more than a country mile, Madam Chair. I've said the numbers already. I'm happy to say them again. Our AISH payments in this province are \$554 higher a month than

Manitoba, \$533 higher a month than Ontario, \$515 higher than Saskatchewan, and \$417 higher than B.C.'s equivalent programs. We want to continue to be a leader in this space. That's why we maintain very, very high AISH monthly payments. We're going to continue to. I don't want any rumours, despite certain individuals trying to spread those rumours, that somehow that would change. It'll be \$1,901 this month.

The federal government's Canada disability benefit. Yes, it is time for them to start paying their fair share. We have been calling, as have other provinces, for the federal government to step up. If the hon. member is concerned that other provinces pay too little, I would actually lean towards her argument in that case. But I'm not the social services minister in Manitoba that's paying \$554 less a month. I'm the social services minister who's paying the highest AISH payments in the country, and I will continue to work to make sure that we have a program of that magnitude going forward.

The federal government came out with \$200. We think it should be higher. I have not heard the member get up and condemn her leader Mr. Singh, who's been holding up a Liberal government in Ontario, on this issue ever. You know, what I also haven't heard, shockingly enough, is that the number one concern we hear from people on AISH is that as they get to age 65 and transition to federal benefits, they pay a massive, massive at times pay reduction as they move into the federal program. That's something that maybe they should take up, again, with their federal leader – although I suspect they're out of time – before the election. That may be where I think we should put some emphasis on, lobbying the federal government to do the right thing to care for those individuals.

The federal government came out with the Canada disability benefit. They have set a threshold that they want the provinces to meet of \$1,814, which is taking CPP and old age security and putting them together. As we've covered in great detail, Alberta already exceeds that by a significant amount, which is good. We're not going to reduce that down to \$1,814, not even consider it. We're going to maintain that strong gap. It'll be interesting to see if the other provinces meet what the federal government has asked and raise their payments up to \$1,814. We've already done that, though. Now it's time for the federal government to help support the disability community in our province. We're going to continue to have \$1,901, the highest payments in the country currently. We're going to continue to maintain that program going forward. Again, it just shows the importance of it.

There were a couple of other things the member got to, but I don't think there'll be enough time to completely do it. I do want to make clear, though, on food banks that – you know, again, the member can't have it both ways. Criticizing and likely, I assume – I won't want to predetermine a vote in the Legislature, Madam Chair, but likely they're going to vote against the social services budget yet again, which not only would be voting against people on AISH getting the highest payments in the country; it would be voting against continuing care money, seniors' money, FCSS, rent supplements, investments in affordable housing. It would also be voting against the only government in the history of the province who's helped participate in trying to help organizations invest in food security, with a large focus on helping food banks build capacity that they would need to be able to meet that challenge in the province. She doesn't think that we should. I disagree with her. I think that's an important area for us to focus on.

Again, I'll be looking forward to seeing, when the budget hits the Legislature floor, whether or not the Official Opposition are going to vote in support of these types of important programs.

4:30

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

I see that Member Petrovic has joined us. Member, would you kindly introduce yourself for the record?

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

The Chair: Okay. We're on the government side. I see Member Boitchenko is indicating to me that he's up next. Please proceed with your questions, Member.

Mr. Boitchenko: Sounds good. Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Minister, it's great to see you here today. You are doing an amazing job explaining and telling us and sharing the information you have done in this province. It's a lot of information, and some of it is new to me but not surprising because we know that you're doing an amazing job in your portfolio. We all know – well, before I probably go forward, may I ask you, Minister, to share time with you, please?

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. Of course.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you very much. Thank you. That's very nice. Many of us – and then it's not a surprise to us – already know that you're a big man with a big heart, and you're taking your portfolio to your heart, and it's good news for Alberta. As the parliamentary secretary to Indigenous Relations I've been travelling the province last year and visiting many First Nations as well as every single Métis settlement in our province, and we had a lot of conversations, and that feedback is good. You know, Métis settlements and First Nations are happy with the work you're doing.

I have some specific questions – and I stayed back a little bit here – to ask you on the Indigenous file. If I may start with my first question, it would be on the key objective of 2.4. on page 146 of the business plan. It references a preventative social program designed and delivered in collaboration with municipalities and Métis settlements. I'm glad to see mention of the Métis settlements as a parliamentary secretary, obviously. As these programs are very important, I would like a little more clarity on these programs. I've got to say that I like seeing two things in my questions: preventative, because we know preventative measures are a lot cheaper than, you know, dealing with the problems when they occur, and another good thing in my question is that Métis settlements are a big part of the preventative programs here.

My first question would be this. How is the minister working to ensure Indigenous communities are receiving culturally appropriate support through Budget 2025? The second part of that question would be: what are some examples of preventative social programs that the ministry is funding through Budget 2025?

Mr. Nixon: There's a lot of work taking place on the Indigenous file with the department that I think Albertans could be proud of, and it's going to continue to take place. I'll try to pick a few projects to talk about them a little bit and then see if the member has got any more detailed follow-up.

I'll start off with one that I often talk about. I think it's just spectacular what is taking place in the city of Lethbridge, the decision by our government to turn over the operation of the Lethbridge shelter to the Blood department of health. We're now working with the Lethbridge Housing Authority to build a new permanent shelter in that community. I've just seen staggering results in the community. I know the Blackfoot Confederacy, particularly the Blood Tribe, is very, very proud of the work that they're doing down there. I've spent a considerable amount of time in homeless shelters over the years, and each time that I get an opportunity to go down there, I'm just blown away at the passion by that community. I see the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West

here, and I did see him nodding his head. I know he's seen – it's just incredible, that work.

I think from that we went on to continue to expand that to things like the Enoch shelter here in Edmonton to try to build on that relationship. We continue at all of our treaty tables to have conversations on how we can continue to empower First Nation leadership in this space. I think that example, what we see taking place with the Blood department of health in Lethbridge, is an example that we should be copying elsewhere in the province.

The other one is that the Premier and I really focused, at the beginning of this term, on the fact that when there is a fire and there is damage to homes on First Nation communities, we all want to keep care of all Albertans, but underneath the federal acts there's no doubt that the primary Crown who's responsible for that treaty is the federal government. It's often we find ourselves pushing the feds to make appropriate investments in this space. You know, I've said before that at one point we looked into this. We were spending almost as much on security in the Enoch shelter in Edmonton as the federal government did on all of Indigenous housing in the province. So I think we can all agree that they're falling extraordinarily short when it comes to First Nation housing and their responsibility on-reserve in particular.

We have stepped up for elder lodges off-reserve and other capacity issues that are important, and we should continue to do it. But one thing that we recognize is that if we were going to call on the federal government to do that, we had to recognize that we, the provincial Crown, actually are responsible for our Métis settlements, so we've increased the Indigenous housing fund as a result of that.

We made a decision in early 2023 to invest in East Prairie, who had lost 14 units of housing. We recognize that if we were going to continue to tell the feds that they need to do their job, we had to make sure we were doing our job. We immediately invested \$7 million. I think that was in June or July of 2023, and I'm happy to say that because of that, we were able to get 14 families into their homes who had lost their homes because of fire before Christmas in a very remote community. It was an extraordinary accomplishment, I believe, by the department and by the Métis settlement. But it's really a clear example of us saying: hey, if we're going to call upon the federal government to meet the responsibility on treaty, then we need to make sure that we're meeting our responsibility when it comes to the Métis side of things.

We also continue to invest, as I've talked about earlier, in the Indigenous housing capital program. We have an increase of \$25 million, and we've approved over \$74.5 million for 22 projects already, totalling 521 units in 15 communities, which is an extraordinary amount of money. I think it really shows that we need to partner in those areas and that we want to.

The other space that you're hearing a lot from chiefs on right now and we are working with them on is around elders lodges, so their seniors lodges. First Nations are seeing the same challenges that we are as a whole, with 2,500 more seniors a month coming into our population here in the province, so they've asked us to step up and do so. We're working with Enoch on the first elder lodge that we're participating in with the feds on-reserve. That comes with a unique set of challenges because the federal legislation is not easy to deal with. That's another thing that we're having conversations with the federal housing minister about.

Then, of course, we also make sure that Métis settlements receive funding through the FCSS program to provide preventative social services. Under FCSS Métis settlements have the discretion to allocate their funding based on their local needs, and we know that Métis settlements are ultimately in the best position, just like our

towns, to figure out what the best way is to make that investment in social services in their community.

Over the next three years, until 2027, my department will also be funding community projects to deliver culturally appropriate care, access to resources at home supports for older adults and seniors in the First Nation communities, \$5.1 million through the Carya Society of Calgary . . .

The Chair: I'm so sorry, Minister. You've been on such a good roll, but there's a five-minute max, and Warren just told me that there was a little glitch with the set-up and now it needs to go back to the member.

Mr. Nixon: Beautiful.

Mr. Boitchenko: For sure.

Well, thank you very much. Honestly, it's amazing to see how the Indigenous communities have been a priority in your ministry and the amount of work that's being done in the First Nations across the province and Métis settlements as well. As a parliamentary secretary I just want to say thank you again for making First Nations, Indigenous communities a priority in your file.

I would like to move on to my second question here. With Alberta's health care system being refocused, a notable change for Seniors, Community and Social Services is that the minister is now taking the role as a sector minister for continuing care. On page 143 of the business plan it notes that the ministry takes an integrated approach to delivering support and services to vulnerable Albertans. It goes on to indicate that this approach will be used to help improve continuing care under the new provincial agency assisted living Alberta. That's the new name, assisted living Alberta. My question would be this: would the minister explain to this committee here how this integrated approach will improve continuing care for Albertans, and how is Budget 2025 specifically working to assist with this approach?

4:40

Mr. Nixon: Madam Chair, I think it's a really important question. I hope the member, when we circle back to him, will actually open up with that so we can give it the full answer that it deserves. With only 10 seconds left what I will say is that Alberta's government, through the refocusing program, particularly when it comes to continuing care, is focused on making sure everybody is in the appropriate place for the care that they need. We have too many people in the wrong place, and we're going to get that fixed in our province.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We're going back to the Official Opposition. Please proceed, Member Sigurdson.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you. I'd like to refer to government estimates, page 194, section 11, which is, you know, several line items regarding continuing care. These items are new to the ministry, as continuing care and home care responsibilities were transferred to Seniors, Community and Social Services in the fall from Health. Sadly, despite the transition nothing has really changed according to the operators, care providers, families of loved ones receiving services, and the seniors themselves. This is tragic as there are so many challenges that are continuing to go unaddressed by the UCP.

On page 148 of the ministry business plans the facility-based continuing care review is referenced. This review was completed back in 2021. Each year, without fail, the UCP references this review in the budget documents, which identifies

42 recommendations that would improve the lives of seniors. Sadly, Madam Chair, nothing changes year-over-year. The UCP has been in power for the last six years, and the issues persist. I would say that, in fact, the situation is getting worse for seniors. Evidence of this came from the protection of persons in care program.

For the 2023-24 annual report employees investigated hundreds of reports of abuse, most of which originated from continuing care facilities. There is a sharp increase in founded allegations, three times more than the previous year. The failure to provide the necessities of life such as medical attention, proper nutrition, adequate hydration are some of the most prevalent issues in the continuing care system. Clearly the well-being of seniors in continuing care is getting worse through the poor management of the UCP. When will the minister listen to seniors, families of residents, workers, operators, and indeed experts in the field to ensure seniors are well supported?

I want to refer the committee to estimates 11.1, program planning and delivery. In the spring of 2024 the UCP eliminated the minimum daily care hours from the continuing care legislation. It is well accepted that 4.1 hours is the minimum standard across Canada. Serious and significant consequences have already been seen in the sector due to this change in legislation. Staff are having their hours cut, and families cannot rely on their loved ones receiving the care they need to live in dignity. Families can no longer turn to the law to advocate for appropriate care because the law has stripped these minimum daily care hours. When will the minister change the legislation so that 4.1 minimum daily care hours per resident are required legally, Madam Chair?

Another concern is the cuts to pharmacy services that came into place on November 1, 2024. This destabilizes the interdisciplinary model and significantly reduces the time clinical pharmacists can spend on-site at continuing care facilities supporting residents, families, and care teams. Twelve follow-up appointments are now cut to only four. The annual care plan funding is cut from 100 to 70. The consequences of these poor policy choices mean increased overall system costs and increased workloads for those already overburdened staff. Increased medication incidents due to this situation will lead to resident harm. When will the minister reverse this poor decision?

Line 11.3 in the estimates, grants to assisted living Alberta, and the ministry business plan, pages 147 and 148, focus on ensuring Albertans receive quality care and staff are well supported. Sadly, I've heard numerous reports from operators of continuing care facilities that the funding model actually that exists underestimates the time needed to deliver quality care in the seniors context. Tasks often require more time. For example, helping a 98-year-old out of bed in the morning is not a quick process. When will the government recognize the need for higher staffing levels to provide responsive and compassionate care? The case-mix index, the CMI, can change rapidly in a facility but is only updated on an annual basis. This can underfund operators. Is the minister creating a timelier funding response to these changes in resident acuity?

We know there are significant workforce issues, of course, in continuing care; high turnover in this sector due to low wages and lack of benefits. Often workers don't have full-time work. We saw the disastrous consequences of this during the pandemic, where workers spread the virus to residents and staff as they worked at more than one facility.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

Over to the minister now for his response.

Mr. Nixon: Well, a lot to unpack there. Let's start with the increase in investigations. You know, I was talking to the Minister of Health

as this was coming over to our ministry, and one of the things that she found – and I think this is quite shocking and very typical of the Official Opposition – when she looked into it: there were 10 years, including when the NDP were in government, of backlog complaints, which is why you see the number going up. Because what the minister did, and we will continue to do it, is she added 17 more people to deal with and investigate those complaints. Before it was moved over to us – because it actually won't officially be moved over to us till April 1 – she was able to reduce that backlog by 85 per cent. I don't know why the NDP didn't do that when they were there. But that is the increase in it, because the minister has been busy cleaning up the NDP backlog, where they just ignored investigations.

Now, I haven't had time to look into it. I suspect that most of those investigations may have been ignored in union facilities, with a focus on private facilities by their government. I hope that's not the case, because I think we need to make sure everybody is cared for no matter what facility they're in. But that's why we've increased the staff capacity, and the result of that has been an 85 per cent reduction in that backlog. I think that investigation team will be able to get that done.

The other issue that was brought up by the hon. member was around hours of care. The NDP had, in the legislation that they're concerned was changed, legislated 1.9 hours for that care; our current numbers would be significantly higher than that 1.9 hours that were ultimately previously mandated in nursing homes. In fact, I think double. In 2024-25 type A continuing care home operators are funded to provide an average of 3.7 work-care hours per resident, per day. In '24-25 type B continuing care homes are operated and funded to provide an average of 3.07 hours. So significantly higher than the legislation that the NDP had in place when they were in government, and a pretty significant increase going forward.

I think their concern, Madam Chair, is that it doesn't remain in legislation. I think this proves why it shouldn't remain in legislation. Circumstances change; legislation is the hardest thing to change. Making sure that there are care hours needs to be legislated, for sure. But you have to be able to make sure that in the future things can get changed, not have to use the Legislature to be able to make sure people get the care that they need for changing circumstances, and not to limit ourselves based on what is in legislation. So good for the minister for changing that. I'm glad that she got that legislation done before I got here.

I will say that the pharmacy question is actually a question for Health, and they will continue to do that. Happy to have the member ask that question at the minister's estimates. If she didn't get a chance, I hope that she'll take the time to discuss it with the minister in question period.

The assisted living transition is a big transition. It's because the government has recognized that the continuing care sector was not being properly managed inside the monster health care system that we had in the province, that it needed a very clear focus to be able to care for people that needed care outside of acute care. We have seen challenges like alternate level of care patients. I think there are, like, 1,600 or so right now in acute-care beds that need to be brought into appropriate levels of care. It is the wrong spot for those individuals to be. That has to be where the focus is.

It's disappointing that, you know, governments of the past did not do that, but this government is going to get it fixed. We're working through a process with wide consultation, a transition team that is chaired by the hon. member for Leduc and co-chaired by Dr. Sayeh Zielke, a cardiologist from Lethbridge – I think she just got the key to the city the other day; very well respected in that community – is leading a team of experts across not only continuing

care but homelessness, housing, disabilities, and other aspects of where we need to make sure individuals are being cared for in the community.

4:50

April 1 will be the legal start date of assisted living Alberta, and you will see us begin to systematically change the system to be able to make sure that it's caring for the people that are in it. And, most importantly, the number one job is to make sure that people are in the place that they deserve care.

Unfortunately, again, under the NDP government we saw people lying in acute-care beds that no longer needed acute care. Madam Chair, we have studies that show that individuals in that circumstance deteriorate by 15 per cent a day. Clearly, that's unacceptable. What we're going to do is focus on making sure that we're investing money in continuing care, but ultimately that will also help save our acute-care system, so we'll get both done at once.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We are going to move to the government side. Member McDougall is up.

But after this exchange is done, I think we'll take our break if that's agreeable to everyone.

Okay. Please proceed.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you, Madam Chair and to the minister, through yourself. One of the major things that I've been hearing about from constituents and experiencing for myself, frankly, is the concern over the rising cost of groceries. You know, one of the things that concerns me, because obviously it is going to impact many people that the minister's department is caring for, is these increased prices.

It's problematic because, I think, in many ways we shoot ourselves in the foot on this issue. We cause the issue to be worse than we want it to be. In economics we call it the law of unintended consequences; where you put policies in place that have effects other than what the intention was, and of course one of these things is the tax, which has increased the prices of everything, but it certainly increases the price of food and does so perhaps more significantly here in Alberta, where we are not blessed, like in some other parts of the country, with energy that comes from non carbon-based sources like nuclear or hydro.

One of the foremost experts in this country as an economist, in the issue of food, is a gentleman named Dr. Sylvain Charlebois at Dalhousie University. He has written widely on this issue and particularly highlights the fact of how food costs have been increased because of the carbon taxes that have been applied by our federal government, which leads to higher grocery prices, over and above the fact that it can be a burden on farmers and, you know, very limited environmental benefit from this carbon tax.

It brings to mind, you know, during my master's program we had a group project where the professor was asking us to provide a policy document to government on how to adapt a supply management program to some different impact that was happening within the marketplace, and we had the weekend to work on it. You know, we sat down and we said right off the bat . . .

Member Irwin: Point of order.

The Chair: A point of order has been called, everyone.

Member Irwin: Yeah. Sorry. I've been listening passionately for the last two and a half minutes, and I've yet to hear any references to any ministry business plans, anything like that. So under 23(b) I

would argue this is a point of order. I've given him a lot of latitude. I'd like to hear from you, Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Member.

Mr. Lundy: Sure. Well, I would suggest, Madam Chair, that I think there's been quite a bit of latitude given for preambles to all members here. It might have been, I think, 14 seconds left on the shot clock for the first block they had before a question was asked. I clearly do not think this is a point of order. I think the member is doing a great job providing examples in his community about a question that I'm sure our minister will get to.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Okay. All right. I do not see this as a point of order but just encourage the member to, please, if you could move to a question, that would be great, and if you could tie it to the estimates, that would be awesome.

Mr. McDougall: Okay. Well, I think it's important to recognize that, you know, the taxpayer and the government of Alberta are spending significant money on a number of social programs, including assistance for food, and we should understand the reasons why this problem exists as we talk about what the government is going to do about it.

The other issue, of course, is tariffs and the tariff program with the federal government. [interjections] Well, I'll get to the point. You know, we listened patiently to you folks while talking about . . .

The Chair: Member, if you would please direct the conversation through the chair, that would be awesome. Let's avoid the back and forth. You have the floor right now. Please proceed with your question to the minister.

Mr. McDougall: I recognize the members in opposition don't like to understand the implications of some of the policies that they're following and are supporting like the NDP, Liberals in Canada. Supply management is an issue that is important, and it is causing food prices to be higher in Alberta. You know, Team Canada doing this to Alberta and Albertans, that we have to pay for and respond to. So let's be clear about what has happened.

Anyways, on that note, as food prices rise, we now have more people that need support for that. Would the minister be able to outline measures to address food security in the 2025 budget?

Mr. Nixon: It is interesting, Madam Chair, to see the Official Opposition not actually understand how it's connected to the social services budget, but it actually is. I'll start with the tariff threat, but I will finish off with talking about food security, which the hon. member brought up.

I don't know if they know this, but as the economy struggles, and certainly the tariff situation with the United States could cause significant pressure – I think we would all agree – on the Alberta economy and certainly on Canada's economy as a whole, the reality is that more people are going to need more help. You're going to see things like unemployment rates go up. A direct result of that is that this department will then need to step in to be able to help support people. That's what happens when governments get bad economic policy in place.

This year alone I think we're anticipating around \$300 million in increases to income supports. Some of that's in anticipation of the unemployment numbers that we're seeing from Finance, as they projected it in their budget. Certainly, we're looking towards potential other implications as a result of what's taking place in the trade war that could impact people's livelihoods. We've got \$38

million in my budget right now ready to be brought to bear, specifically in the early days, if we need to during the tariff process. Obviously, then government may have to step in even more beyond that. But when you have that policy, you end up with a significant cost to the social services sector. There's no doubt about it.

The carbon tax was no different. You know, we've been saying this for a long time, the entire time I've been in this portfolio, everywhere I go, the social services sector was begging to see support from the government to remove the carbon tax. It was creating a tremendous amount of inflation in their area. Increasing things like their heat costs, the fuel to be able to do their jobs, and food was no different because everything associated with food comes by truck or train, and trucks and trains don't run on unicorn farts; they run on diesel. The reality is when you bring in that carbon tax, it increases the cost of your carrots and your kids' Christmas presents. That would have a bigger implication, frankly, on lower income individuals than it does on higher income individuals, who can absorb that level of inflation, which is why we've seen some challenges.

Now, I will say, on food banks, that when I was in Finance, we had to announce a pretty significant surplus one year, and we really wanted to put some money in to deal with the affordability crisis. That's when we came up with doing the gas tax reduction, which did see a reduction in inflation. But one area where we just couldn't find a lever on, that the government had direct control of, was actually food security. I don't think there is one that is in the direct control of the government. You don't want to accidentally create more inflation, also, with the solution, which is how we, I think that I would argue, we've been in this inflationary market because of COVID supports from multiple national governments, in particular.

What we wanted to do instead was really focus on trying to empower the great nonprofit organizations that we have all across the province who are working in that food bank space. They'll be here in good times and in bad times. Rather than us trying to figure out how to buy food, which they have abilities to do – they also have great donation networks, which is excellent. Albertans step up to the plate to help care for each other. It's something we should be proud of. But we still need to be able to make sure that we're investing that money more targeted in helping those food banks build capacity. So over the last little bit we've invested in 113 member food banks with our investments. We'll be doing similar types of investments this year, with a large focus on things like fridge capacity, building places for their volunteers to work out of, you know, some stuff as simple as shelves and different infrastructure that those communities might need, which has really been our focus. It's just: how do we empower those individuals to do the work that they're trying to do inside the community?

I will say this though: the number one way that we help Albertans that are struggling needs to be talked about the most. It is the biggest job of this ministry. It's the biggest job from a numbers perspective, and it's certainly the biggest job in many ways from an operational perspective, and that is the billions of dollars that we invest in income supports. The fastest way that we can help individuals is through that. We're getting money into their bank accounts while they face the challenges that they're facing so they can pay their rent, buy their food, feed their kids, and then, hopefully, through other programs that we have in the ministry, move things forward. This ministry this year is going to invest – I have to sit down and try to calculate it all, but I bet you it would be in the neighbourhood of 6-plus billion dollars in exactly that. And that has to be the number one focus that we have because that's what's having the biggest impact on people that are facing those challenges.

5:00

Again, when governments make bad policies, whether it's carbon tax or bad tariff policies or, you know, chasing all the investment out of the province, like we saw between 2015 and 2019, people lose their jobs, people suffer as a result of that, and because of that, we make sure that we have programs here to be able to invest in. But if we want to lower those costs, we've got to make sure governments stop making silly mistakes like we've seen with the federal NDP coalition around carbon taxes or the Alberta provincial NDP when they brought in a carbon tax between 2015 and 2019.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll move over to the Official Opposition. Oh, sorry. Break time. Five minutes, everyone.

[The committee adjourned from 5:01 p.m. to 5:06 p.m.]

The Chair: Welcome back, everyone.

We'll resume with the Official Opposition. Who is up next? Go ahead. Please proceed.

Member Irwin: Okay. Awesome. I'd like to turn now to affordable housing and the social housing stock. On page 97 of the fiscal plan it shows that capital funding will build 6,300 new affordable housing units over the next three years, adding to their already built 3,300 units since 2021, which is a total of about 9,600 by my math, which gets the ministry on their way to their goal of 13,000. The remaining units required will be about 3,400, and we see that on the fiscal plan on page 97.

This may seem laudable, but even if Alberta were to reach this goal of housing units, it remains woefully inadequate as this province currently has the lowest number of social housing units per capita in all of Canada. It's estimated that by 2030 Alberta will need 43,000 more affordable housing units, and through this government's leading documents, stronger foundations, they're planning to increase affordable housing stock by just over half of that by 2031. Now, we've seen – the minister has talked about it; many folks in the House have talked about it – record population growth, increased affordability concerns, and, of course, the research that shows that current social housing stock is inadequate. So why would we continue to use the targets set out by stronger foundations as a road map? And why would we not adjust those numbers to reflect the Alberta of today, which, again, you know, I alluded to earlier in my point around the targets around affordable housing as well?

The minister should know that investing – I mean, everybody at least on this side of the room knows that investing in affordable housing is very much an economic opportunity. Investment in social housing today will lead to economic growth and cost savings in the future. Studies show that investments at the levels needed could increase Alberta's GDP by up to \$30 billion by 2030. You know, I don't need to tell folks in this room the cost savings, because I've talked about those a lot, on our health care system, income support programs, the justice system, child intervention systems. These are all well documented, right? The saying that housing is health care: it's very much fitting here. So a robust plan from this minister and this government to build affordable housing and to invest in it appropriately just makes sense.

Let's talk a little bit about the increase in funding for the Alberta Social Housing Corporation. And there's also some – I've seen, and it was talked about a little bit earlier, the piece around the Indigenous housing capital program as well. I would just like the minister to break down the \$250 million increase to the affordable

housing partnership program. The one thing I'm not sure about is why in the Indigenous housing capital program it was budgeted at \$25 million yet only spent \$8 million. If the minister can just outline that for me.

Now, we talked a lot earlier, actually, in the previous session about the conditions of the affordable housing units, and as outlined on pages 167 to 168 of the fiscal plan, the Auditor General noted that the UCP stopped tracking and stopped reporting the amount of deferred maintenance, amount of renewal dollars, and there's no priority system in place for how they approve maintenance projects. Many folks, including myself, rang alarm bells about this when the Auditor General released his report in November. He noted that those affordable housing units need to be around a long time. Like our vehicles, like our own homes, we need to maintain them. They will serve Albertans much, much longer if we maintain them, and he noted, which I very much appreciated, the impact on the real people affected by deferred maintenance, people that I hear from who live in my riding of Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, people who live with poor ventilation, mould, bugs, extreme temperature fluctuations. These folks deserve so much better than what they're getting from this UCP government.

The business plan does mention continuing to enhance a long-term maintenance and renewal strategy for affordable housing properties, yet we still see no concrete plans that include any metrics, any sort of performance measures, and, again, any sort of outline maintenance strategy. Like I said, this is incredibly alarming, when this government has said it's a key priority, yet they're not willing to address it at all.

I have a number of other questions that I continue along this line. Again, we're talking about real people, our constituents, constituents of all the members in this room, who suffer because of the lack of a plan from this government when it comes to affordable housing maintenance. So I'd like the minister to address those questions and please address them specifically.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.
Over to the minister.

Mr. Nixon: We'll start with the Indigenous capital question. This is a \$10.6 billion operation ministry plus capital; \$8 million is part of our overall multiple-year capital plan. That's how we fund with capital. We don't specifically do it by each year; we focus on multiple years, so it could just depend on where projects are at specifically. But we will and the department will continue to deploy those resources into Indigenous communities, as they do with projects. Again, I think that's why we don't budget specifically to one year, to make sure they can get that work done.

On the capital maintenance and renewal I already did allude to that, Madam Chair, I believe, in some answers to my colleagues on the government side of the aisle. The Auditor General did do a report on that, which is great, and we had already actually instructed the department to begin to work on that new capital maintenance and renewal plan. I gave that job to the deputy directly. She brought in a consultant team, who has put together a new plan, which I believe will be very adequate for the Auditor General's concerns. So we got 'er fixed. I found myself fixing a lot of things when I took over this ministry, and I will point out that that capital maintenance and renewal challenge predates certainly me and goes all the way back to when the NDP were there. I'm not sure why they didn't fix it when they were there, but I am going to fix it while I'm here, Madam Chair. You can count on that.

The hon. member asked about the overall capital investment in housing. A couple of things that I think she's not taking the time to point out, in addition to direct investments in affordable capital, like

builds on the new unit side, which can happen through capital investments by our department and capital grants that we're giving out to our nonprofit partners to get to that level, is that it's not just new builds that can get us that number. There are two other areas that I think that we need to significantly focus on. First is options that don't include building. We do see investments taking place, which we've already discussed with our time here together, around rent supplements, for example, which then create existing units to help make those existing units into an affordable unit through rent supplements without having to build. Now, there's diminishing return at some point on that as a tool, but certainly a tool that the department uses and will continue to use significantly as we work on that.

Then second is actually the overall capacity in the system. We talked earlier today. The NDP just really struggle to understand that the issue on housing right now in Alberta is capacity and the more units that get built, the more affordable housing that we create just from being able to ensure we restore affordability back to our market.

5:15

The department has to focus on both sides of that file. There's no solution to this just focusing on one side of the file. If you focus just on affordable housing and you don't deal with the capacity inside the file and inside the market, you're never ever going to get there. The price per unit will continue to be driven up, even on the affordable side, and you will not create it, and that is why we have focused on all of those issues: rent supplement, building affordable housing units, capital maintenance and renewal dollars, bringing units that were offline to be back online to make sure that they can be part of that process, and, of course, the tremendous work that has taken place in the province overall on building capacity.

You know, again I'll stress this. There are very few things – this will not surprise the Official Opposition – that the United Conservative government in Alberta would agree with the federal government on. What we did agree on, though, is that the housing challenge the last couple of years was capacity, which is why you did not see the federal government coming to town even trying to build affordable housing units. They were laser focused on restoring capacity to the market in Canada. I think that they probably have failed in most other jurisdictions because they took the wrong approach, from my perspective.

But in Alberta they certainly have not failed, which is why we have seen the numbers on that side of the file take place. We have thousands of new affordable units coming online. We have tens of thousands of market units coming online in the province. We have Indigenous units coming online. We're investing in rent supplements. We're investing in that capacity all across the housing sector. It's why CMHC continues to say that we're the only shining beacon here in the country when it comes to housing. I think it's something that all Albertans should be proud of, because it certainly was them who got it done. Rest assured, we're going to continue to focus on that, and we will continue to see significantly more take place.

Lastly, I don't think the numbers that the hon. member is referring to also continue the large investment on the health care side of things in continuing care, long-term care spaces, which also have an impact on social housing and have thousands of new units that will be working through that process. Part of the niceness of merging this together is we'll be able to communicate all those capacity issues at once and make sure that we're headed towards the right direction. But so far we're exceeding our expectations in Alberta.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Back now over to the government side, and I believe it's Member Lundy.

Mr. Lundy: Well, thank you so much, Madam Chair. Minister, I know you've been able to touch on the new sector responsibility for continuing care that is part of your ministry, of course. I believe that's referred to on page 143 of the business plan at a minimum when it talks about what this is going to mean for your ministry. My colleague from Drayton Valley-Devon was just in the middle of talking about an integrated approach to continuing care, so I think it's really important that we give you the chance to make some comments on that, Minister, and to maybe talk about what you think, you know, assisted living Alberta – how they're going to be able to take advantage of that integrated approach. I think it's something that the sector is very much looking forward to. They're very interested in how our health care refocusing is going to improve efficiencies, is going to improve outcomes. That's certainly something that would benefit all Albertans, including those seniors who need support or anyone who would be in need of these services. I would certainly like to ask through the chair: could the minister please explain to this committee how this integrated approach will improve continuing care for Albertans?

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, through you, Madam Chair, to the member for the question and also thank you, through you to him, for his work on the assisted living transition team. He's also worked really hard co-chairing the lodge review and other aspects of this. I think we mentioned at the beginning of estimates today that he formerly worked for the department before he joined elected life and crossed the floor to the politician side of things. He's been a great resource for us as we work through this across the province. I certainly appreciate his help and advice and all the effort that he's put into it.

Look, we're seeing challenges in our province, frankly, just starting with population growth. You can't continue to have the population growth that we have seen in Alberta and not expect challenges to exist in the system. Look, this happened quick. I mean, in 2019 we were dealing with the opposite thing. We had too many units in Calgary. We were looking at the largest price decrease in energy resources in the history of the world. That was all before COVID. It was headed in a different trajectory. It changed quick, which is great news for Alberta, that we got ourselves back on track, but that does come with pressures throughout the system: health care, of course, but also other aspects of the social services system.

Of course, it comes with pretty significant pressure on the seniors' side of the space, though I want to stress that seniors are not the only part of continuing care and assisted living, which I know the member knows, but they're certainly a big part of it. Right now we have 800,000 seniors in this province. I think I also mentioned earlier, Madam Chair, that 2,500 more Albertans are either moving here that are 65 or older or are turning 65 each month in our province. So it's a very fast-growing demographic. The demand for continuing services over the next 10 years, I believe, is anticipated to grow by 80 per cent, showing that there needs to be a tremendous amount of focus on that challenge or we're going to find ourselves, frankly, probably in some of the similar situations we found in housing as a result of what was taking place there.

At the same time, though, the government was concerned that there are other individuals and other people in the community that need help from the continuing care system beyond just seniors, particularly those who are facing homelessness, different types of vulnerable populations, certain aspects of the disability community

who have not been well served by the current health care system because of just the way that it's designed.

We wanted to make sure that we are creating a health agency, a health organization that is focused on health being part of the equation and providing appropriate health supports but also recognize that, at the end of the day, continuing care is about building community. It's about housing. It's about transportation. It's about making sure that wraparound supports for elsewhere in the community are brought to bear on the challenges. It's about income support. It's about making sure that grandma and grandpa are able to participate in the community and get transported to their social events inside our community. It's much more broad than just health care. Health care is an important part of it, but it's not the only part of continuing care. By opening up assisted living Alberta, as we start that process on April 1, that will allow us to build an organization that is focused on that. I always say, Madam Chair, that we'll bring the full power of the entire social services system to bear on that continuing care challenge. Obviously, there will continue to be health care provided to individuals within that sector, but there will be so much more provided to be able to make sure that we get it right.

The other challenge that we've really seen is the fact that the system has been set up to really see people in the wrong space, and when we continue to see hundreds and hundreds of people at any given moment in acute-care spaces, as an example, that just shows you the system ain't working. By us separating so that there's a focus on a continuing care organization focused on getting people to the right spot for what the care is that they need, also to the highest level of independence that they can have – that'll be very different for different circumstances – that will free up space for those who are working hard in the acute-care space to do their job, which is to help people who have heart attacks and car accidents today and to focus on things like cancer treatment, surgery times, and these critical issues by us alleviating that pressure.

It has the added bonus of not only making it more efficient in acute care, Madam Chair, but of also being better for the people that are in the system. An acute-care bed, if you need it, if you are in acute-care trouble, is the most important place in the world to be. If you don't, I think any of us who have been in the hospital know that is not the right place to be long term and certainly not a place where I want to see our parents or our grandparents continue to be through our system. But that's happening right now in our province because the system just has not been managed right. So we're going to work through that process to make it happen.

You know, Madam Chair, as I said, the hon. member has been a big part of that transition process. It's a lot of work that has to take place. It's a \$3.9 billion portion of the Health budget moving over to this ministry, a significant increase in scope that all the assistant deputy ministers that are here with me today have to work forward with. But we've put together a really good transition team of sector leadership from all aspects of it – continuing care, traditional seniors' housing, homeless supports, disability supports, senior advocates, on and on – that are around the table, some of the most competent people that I've encountered in my time in government, that I really believe are steering us towards what will hopefully be a pretty significant change in our system that I believe will benefit Albertans for another generation to come.

The Chair: Sorry, Minister, I don't mean to interrupt, but that's your five minutes.

Mr. Nixon: Thank you.

The Chair: We turn back to the member.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister, for your full allotment of time there, but I think it's incredibly important. You really highlighted sort of the impetus behind what we're looking at and, you know, some of the leadership that we can look forward to as we continue the refocusing, as we see ALA come into focus here. It's incredibly important.

Madam Chair, I would like to switch gears a little bit, maybe close the loop on some disability services. I noted that – I believe it was one of if not the first – a question or, maybe more accurately, commentary that the members opposite made was just a concern about people with disabilities and their ability to, you know, access the workforce and the state of the economy in general. Of course, I'm referring to outcome 2 on the '25-28 business plan, which is to support Albertans to participate in community life through employment, volunteerism, and other opportunities that foster their well-being and resiliency. I would like to ask you a little bit about some of those supports that are available.

5:25

I would say that I did note with a little bit of irony their concern over the economy. Of course, supporting the Liberal-NDP coalition does nothing but harm our economy, so I was a little interested in why they're so concerned all of a sudden.

Through the chair, I would like to ask about some of these supports. How have the Provincial Parent Advisory Committee, Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, and the office of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities informed the work being done through Budget 2025?

Mr. Nixon: All of those groups and others are absolutely critical to the work that the department does. I'll start with the disability advocate, somebody who I think is just an extraordinary human being. Greg is actually a practising lawyer who faces a significant physical disability and is in a wheelchair and other significant challenges and manages to do his day-to-day job but also advocate on behalf of the disability community. We appreciate his advice. We've gone to him on aspects of all sorts of things that we've discussed on disabilities. He also regularly interacts with the assistant deputy minister of disabilities and certainly is a go-to resource.

The Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities: again, Madam Chair, you're part of that council; thank you for your participation in it. But it also has individuals from all walks of life, including parents, those who are facing disabilities, and they continue to provide excellent advice to the department and exactly are individuals that we need to do so. Happy to talk more about it in the next segment if you'd like.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Over to the Official Opposition. Please proceed.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you. I'd like to refer to page 194 of the government estimates and look at line item 11. I'm going to continue asking questions about the continuing care system facilities. I was beginning to talk last block about workforce issues. We know that that's a significant issue within the continuing care system and a very important one because, of course, to be able to support vulnerable seniors, you need to have a stable workforce, but we don't. We don't. We have a high turnover rate due to low wages, lack of benefits. Often workers don't have full-time work. We saw the disastrous consequences of this during the pandemic, where workers spread the virus to residents and staff as they worked at more than one facility. It seems we haven't learned anything from that experience, and staff are still cobbling together shifts in different facilities to create a full-time job.

In addition, the government introduced support for licensed practical nurses to have a ladder process to becoming RNs. That's a good thing, but an unintended consequence of that is that LPNs are moving to the acute-care system, where they get better pay, and as they move up the ladder, they are not able to retain these nurses in the continuing care facilities. That puts them in a very difficult situation. So what's the government doing to retain these workers and support health care aides to advance within the continuing care facilities?

The minister did refer to this, Madam Chair, a little while ago, but we know that a significant issue in our acute-care system is that emergency departments and acute-care facilities in general have Albertans occupying beds that are at a different level of service than they need. These are referred to as alternative level of care status, ALC, when someone occupies a bed but does not require the intensity of care offered in the care setting. What budget amount has been set aside for home care and supportive living that will help reduce the number of people with alternative level of care status in the acute-care hospitals?

Also, again looking at the issues within the acute-care system and page 194 and line item 11, last year an elderly patient who had experienced a stroke was discharged from the Royal Alexandra hospital and brought by taxi to a motel in Leduc. The patient had expected to be moved to a continuing care facility. When the taxi pulled up at the motel, he thought it was some kind of a joke. He was in a wheelchair, and the room he was given did not accommodate that chair. He was given fast food and little support.

The minister may remember that this seriously improper treatment of a vulnerable Albertan was dubbed "motel medicine." This is an egregious example of poor government policy. Concerningly, both the Ministers of Health and Seniors, Community and Social Services refused accountability as to how this situation could happen, and neither of them, after days of this becoming known, had bothered to investigate how it happened. In fact, as I stated, the Minister of Health told Albertans that all policies and procedures were correctly followed. Clearly, this is not the case. Can the minister agree that this type of health care is highly inappropriate and ensure that no more Albertans will experience this type of treatment?

I want to move to home care now. I understand that this is also subsumed in line item 11. There are some real, fundamental flaws in our home care system in Alberta. One key is the lack of qualified, available staff. Staff are paid low wages, again, and thus often do not have proper skills, training, or education. Stable and reliable staff are important as those needing support are vulnerable. What standards, Madam Chair, are in place to ensure that home care workers are qualified to serve vulnerable Albertans?

Another issue is the allocation of hours for home care. I've heard many stories of inadequate allocation of support to properly maintain vulnerable citizens in their homes. This situation puts the citizen at risk, which may lead to hospitalization and eventually moving to a continuing care setting. How is the minister addressing this issue?

In our managed care system families experience many challenges due to the administrative burden from the human resource responsibilities that families do not know how to manage or do not want to manage. Thus, some families contract with agencies. However, agencies often require families to pay up front before government funding is received, large sums that many cannot manage. Thus, home care becomes a service, even if it is the right service, which is unaffordable for the family. What is the minister doing to address these issues so that seniors may age in the community and receive the appropriate home care that they deserve? We know that that's where they want to be.

Mr. Nixon: Well, again, it never ceases to amaze me. The hon. members just go out of their way to get it all wrong. I don't know if they need better writers or better researchers. Let's start with the Contentment situation that the hon. member referred to. Again, it's not helpful to the people of the province when things are just made up because then you can't solve things, right? That situation that's referred to in the hotels is a very serious situation, and I'll talk about what took place and the consequences of the individuals that were involved in a minute. But implying that those individuals were still receiving health care is completely false. Any individual that was involved in that situation certainly had left the health care system, had been medically discharged and was not in the health care system. They weren't even in the continuing care system, meaning that their medical situation did not determine that that's where they would be discharged to.

Now, unfortunately, there was a provider who was taking individuals' money who should not have been, and we have moved forward with a pretty serious investigation in regard to that, which I will talk about in a minute. But I think it's important that we stress that and also stress the extraordinary job that the department and these fine folks around me here from the public service did during that process. Rumours about people being discharged to hotels in the news, with no accurate information, required me to dispatch these assistant deputy ministers to random hotels in Leduc till I could locate some individuals. Then, what was determined is that those individuals, many of them on AISH and PDD and other programs, of which that money is provided to those individuals and their families for their care, made a decision to hire this organization and then to move into those apartments.

Those individuals, again, not contracted by the government, not associated with government continuing care, no licensing aspect that would be associated in government, no different than any one of us who could choose to go and hire an organization, were taken advantage of by a very bad actor, who bizarrely moved them into one hotel; not only one hotel, two hotels. My team dispatched quickly, stabilized that situation, made sure those people were cared for and that they were all back in their apartments. None of them were part of the acute-care system. They had all been discharged. That's absolutely false.

Now, what is true, though, is that that provider was taking money from those individuals and appears to not have been providing the services that they should have, so we triggered multiple investigations, and we, the Alberta government, Madam Chair, are now suing that provider to recoup the money that was taken from those individuals. The Edmonton Police Service has now filed charges against people involved in that for taking away individuals' money, and what that looks like: we'll let that play through the court system. Clearly, though, I think we can all agree that that type of abuse is unacceptable, which is why we responded firmly, and we'll make sure that we do so any time that we see that in the future between multiple different ministries that would be involved when that type of abuse is taking place. Again, these were not people receiving health care services in a hotel; that is categorically false.

5:35

With the other questions on workforce capacity our government has done over \$112 million over the past year to address staffing challenges in continuing care to support the workforce. We know that making sure that we have a strong, resilient workforce is absolutely critical. Our commitment is to invest \$1 billion over the next three years to transform the continuing care system in response to that facility-based continuing care review, which the hon. member referred to. That strategic investment is helping to enable a shift to allow for the

provisions of more care in that community, enhance workforce capacity, increase choices and innovation, and, ultimately, to improve the quality of care.

I would add to this. The other aspect of this is that we've made as a government a decision that this ministry and currently me as minister but future ministers also sit on the collective bargaining cabinet committee process with the Finance minister to be able to make sure that we're articulating both the challenges from a public-sector perspective that overlap with our ministry but also articulating the challenges to both our ministry from not a collective bargaining perspective but as well to our great nonprofit partners and other organizations that are working with us because that voice has often not been heard during those negotiations, and it has a tremendous impact on the thousands of providers that we work with. I think this was a smart decision by Minister Horner, and both the deputy and I sit during that process. I can't tell you any more about what's taking place around that table because of the way that cabinet works, but I think it's important to know that going forward this ministry will be there, being able to make sure that we can advocate for some of those challenges that we see in the workforce capacity similar to education and health.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll move back over to the government side. Mr. Singh, I see that you motioned to me. Please proceed.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. Shared time if it's okay with the minister.

Mr. Nixon: Of course.

Mr. Singh: My questions are on living and aging in place. As we age, we become more reliant on others. As much as we might wish this wasn't the case, for most of us it is or will be a reality. For many seniors a little bit of assistance is all that it takes for them to be able to age in place with dignity and independence. On page 148 of the business plan I want to highlight an investment of \$178.4 million which is allocated for home and community care initiatives through the bilateral Canada-Alberta aging with dignity funding agreement. In reading further, I see there are a variety of initiatives listed, and I would like to learn more about what is all entailed with this investment. Can the minister please speak to how this funding will be used to help seniors live and age with dignity?

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, Madam Chair, to the hon. member for the question. We're allocating in this budget \$178.4 million from the aging with dignity, which is the Canada-Alberta agreement signed with the federal government in 2023. That funding will continue to enable continuing care transformation investments to ultimately support seniors and anyone who requires continuing care services to live and age with dignity. The total aging with dignity funding agreement provides Alberta with \$627 million over five years, until '27-28, which helps Albertans age with dignity close to home with improved access to home care and with quality care in continuing care homes when needed. Funding for home care supports aging in place for expanded home and community care services, including supports for caregivers and expanding wraparound and nonmedical supports so that Albertans can receive the services they need where and, most importantly, when they want them. For individuals that do not require residential care, the funding ensures Albertans have equitable, consistent, and timely access to the services they need to ensure that their well-being and quality of life are maintained.

Mr. Singh: Thanks, Minister, for the answer.

For many seniors transportation to and from appointments becomes an issue. Will any of the funding go towards transportation initiatives for seniors?

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. As I said earlier, I think that transportation remains one of the biggest social service challenges in the province. I think it's just the nature of living in a province that is many times bigger than most European countries. My constituency alone is bigger than the country of Belgium, Madam Chair – I don't know if you know that – and with that come significant transportation challenges for people in those communities getting to services. In 2020-23 \$3.5 million was invested through healthy aging Alberta to deliver on provincial assisted transportation programs. As an example, in 19 rural communities that funding is going to continue in this budget to help with that important issue. The program specifically focuses on addressing transportation challenges in municipalities without transit systems or in low-income transit systems that may exist in the province.

I think, Madam Chair, you and I made an announcement once in your constituency in Camrose, as an example of where we're investing that money. We're also providing \$200,000 this year to Drive Happiness as part of a three-year, \$600,000 commitment to expand their seniors assisted transportation volunteer driving program, that already supports 25 communities all across our province. Those are just a couple of examples of where we're trying to strategically invest to address those transportation challenges that we see, not only in seniors but also in different social services challenges in the province.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, for the answer.

Through you, Madam Chair, my next set of questions is on continuing care transformation. In addition to assuming responsibility for the continuing care sector of health care, I know that the ministry is taking steps to make significant improvements to the existing system. Under outcome 3 on page 147 of the business plan, key objective 3.1 entails modernizing and transforming “the continuing care system to improve quality of care, increase choice and innovation, [and] shift to enable provision of more care in the community and support the continuing care workforce.” I can only assume that such a significant transformation will require investment. Can the minister please tell this committee how much funding is being dedicated to the transformation of the continuing care system and how this transformation is being accomplished through Budget 2025?

Mr. Nixon: Well, the number, Madam Chair, is significant. Budget 2025 continues the three-year strategic investment of more than \$1 billion that was started last fiscal year to transform the overall continuing care system. That continuing care transformation focuses on efforts to enable, first, a shift to more care in the community by investing in community-based services to support and ensure that Albertans are getting the care where they need it. We are also focusing on enhancing workforce capacity to provide continuing care now and ultimately into the future and also increasing choices available for Albertans to be able to decide where they want to be and where it is best for them or for their family members as well as encouraging innovation amongst our continuing care providers to be able to accommodate that. And then a real big focus on improving quality of care across the continuing care system.

As part of this budget the province is also allocating \$397.9 million to continuing care transformation and \$178.4 million from aging with dignity to the continuing care transformation of the entire system. The aging with dignity funding includes home care

and continuing care home funding as well as funding that Alberta is forecasting to receive through a pending amendment for additional funding towards health care aides and related professionals in this space, which hopefully we will have more to say about during this fiscal year.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister. As we know, the task of caring for a loved one can be a very time-consuming and stressful endeavour. Can the minister please speak to what is being done through Budget 2025 to support the continuing care workforce, including supports for family and community members providing care?

5:45

Mr. Nixon: One of the big areas that we're focusing on in this budget and this space is efforts to address continuing care staffing challenges and support caregivers, which include actually increasing funding for health care aides in particular and investing in supports for health care aides who are training to work ultimately in continuing care to support. We're also bringing forward efforts that are going to focus on expanding programs and services available to caregivers, including effort on respite supports, as well as education and awareness to support caregivers. I've spent the last two years of my life being a caregiver for a family member who's been through a pretty traumatic medical situation, so I certainly do appreciate the enormous stress on those caregivers, both professional caregivers as well as family who need to support the individual going through circumstances like that.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, for the answer.

Through you, Madam Chair, my next set of questions is on fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Now I would like to talk about supports for the individuals and families impacted by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, or FASD. In looking through the main estimates, I see that funding has increased to just over \$27.6 million per line 4.6 on page 193. Reading the description, this funding is provided to fetal alcohol spectrum disorder service networks to provide a continuum of co-ordinated services to meet the needs of those living with FASD and their caregivers. Could the minister please outline how the funding through Budget 2025 will work to support individuals and their families who are impacted by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder in Alberta?

Mr. Nixon: Madam Chair, a really important topic with a lot taking place in the department. I hope that maybe during the next block the member will quickly revisit so we could fully give him the answer that it deserves. With the 30 seconds, though, I do have left in this block, I will say that in Budget 2025 the ministry is providing \$27.6 million in funding to provide a continuum of co-ordinated services that meets the needs of those living with FASD and their caregivers. That funding ultimately ensures continuity of supports through the network, including \$2.4 million annually to maintain wage increases for front-line FASD workers.

The Chair: All right. Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll go over to the Official Opposition. Please proceed, Member.

Member Irwin: Thank you. I'd like to return to my concerns that I was raising earlier about deferred maintenance of affordable housing and the grave concerns as well that the Auditor General raised in November. Detailed reports regarding the condition of social housing stock used to be included within annual reports. The last report where that is a case is from 2021-2022, and in that annual report it was noted that there was already at that time a billion

dollars in deferred maintenance. This leads us to believe that the minister or the government, I should say, has known for years that this is indeed a significant concern but did nothing if anything to act.

We do know that the ministry responded in Budget 2025, saying that they're aware of the recommendation and the same recommendation had been made to them as well in 2022. So why has it taken the ministry so long to implement some kind of reporting mechanism when it comes to affordable housing stock in this province? As I said earlier, we're talking about the homes of Albertans, that they live in right now, that are deemed to be unsafe. Very clearly, has the ministry established facility condition information, performance measures? Have they established oversight processes for addressing the critical and urgent health and safety concerns I outlined earlier, that are identified in the Auditor General's report? If yes, well, where can we find that information, and if not, what is the minister doing and how is this ministry determining which housing stock is being prioritized for maintenance?

My colleague from St. Albert here actually flagged for me an important issue as well, and that's between this issue and accessible housing. Last year's budget estimates: the minister actually stated that there are 5,000 barrier-free affordable housing units. I know first-hand – my colleague beside me does – the need for affordable accessible housing. In fact, the Member for Calgary-Klein and I had the opportunity, oh, a couple of months ago, not that long ago, to tour Accessible Housing Calgary and got to see first-hand just how critical these units are.

To the minister through the chair, of course: if this number of units remains 5,000, we'd like to know how many of those 5,000 units are uninhabitable because of deferred maintenance. How many of those 5,000 barrier-free units are more than 25 years old? Of course, standards change, which we would know more about if we had accessibility legislation in this province. Which budget line in your government estimate documents house the funding for barrier-free housing? Again, who's being involved in those decisions?

Okay. I'm going to ask as well – you know, I'm curious who it was. I'd asked about it earlier as well. Page 167 of the fiscal plan notes that the department hired a consultant to complete the work, that I've mentioned multiple times, recommended by the Auditor General. Can the minister update us on what the procurement process was and who was selected for this project?

Again, my colleagues across ministries in estimates have flagged serious concerns with procurement processes. I think Albertans deserve some clarity on that. In fact, that reminds me, too, that the member beside me from St. Albert would like to ask this minister once again about Deloitte and if there have been any procurements or any contracts with Deloitte, because that's an important question that has not been directly answered.

Let me quickly switch here to market housing. We've seen housing starts increase as the minister has talked about, yet the building rate has not kept up with the current need. Last year the builds were occurring at the rate of 4.3 people per household. However, the building rate for Alberta should be around 2.5 people per household.

As I've said many times today, hundreds of thousands of Albertans need immediate support and relief to continue to afford housing. One year of moderately higher housing starts is just truly a drop in the bucket to address the housing crisis in Alberta. And one of the concerns is that when this minister talks about housing starts, he's focused on market housing; he's not talking about any sort of increase in supply for low-income folks. So it's really important that he needs to acknowledge that these gains don't

benefit all Albertans who are in need of housing. In fact, it's estimated alone that here in Edmonton since 2011 for every one unit of nonsubsidized affordable housing built, the city has lost five. It's incredibly concerning when the minister, you know, floats these numbers around but doesn't consider that low-income folks are being left out of the equation.

I'd also like to ask about what the minister and the ministry is doing to address the extremely low vacancy rate of affordable housing units. How is he planning to address affordable housing?

The Chair: Thank you so much. We'll move over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Nixon: Well, first let's just start off with what we inherited from that member's party. Again, wait-lists for affordable housing up by 76 per cent while the NDP was in power. The former minister who's at the committee today didn't build one affordable housing unit during that period of time at all.

Then along comes our government, who has been doing nothing but building housing both on the attainable side and on the affordable side. I know that my government colleagues here have heard the numbers over and over and over. I'm happy to continue to talk about the enormous investment on both sides of the file. Since 2019 Alberta's government has invested \$851.3 million to build 5,282 units and 899 shelter spaces. This includes projects we've committed to that are in progress and that are complete. We committed to 1,191 housing units. That's about \$150 million. We have 470 other housing units in place, which is \$86 million. We also have 3,621 housing units for \$615.8 million that are complete, Madam Chair. A large increase from zero in affordable housing and wait-lists going up by 76 per cent.

Under this government leadership – and it's growing – we've increased affordable housing capacity by 40 per cent at the same time as restoring stability to our market, which ultimately restores affordability at a much larger rate. We've discussed this ad nauseam today, the fact that the NDP can't seem to understand that and wants to continue to adopt market-killing socialist policies like rent control that have devastated places like Toronto or Vancouver.

You know, Madam Chair, in the last year there have been newspaper stories of people commuting from Calgary to Vancouver to work and go to school because they couldn't afford their housing. So we're not going to adopt the NDP's plan, that would bring in catastrophic housing conditions like you've seen in places like Toronto and Vancouver.

5:55

Happy to continue to list the tens of thousands of projects that are taking place across the province. On capital maintenance and renewal we've talked about it already a lot. I'm happy to get the ADM to expand upon it. All that work is done. He's done an excellent job. I'll queue him up to do that in just a second.

I already reiterated on a different issue that in the national building code, the 2019 Alberta edition all projects funded in whole or in part by the government of Alberta are to include at least 10 per cent of new units that are barrier free, which is what has to take place in our province. The assistant deputy minister of housing confirms that that is what is taking place in our province, which is excellent and what we're going to continue to do.

Specifically on capital maintenance and renewal, I will – actually, there was a question about Deloitte. At the time that it was asked by the hon. member, it was, I think, in regard to – I feel like it was the navigation centre, but it might have been wrong. I did check with my officials. I mean, my department has thousands and thousands of contracts, but it sounds like we have two Deloitte

contracts, none of which have anything to do with the topic that we're on at the moment.

I'll turn it over to ADM Williams to talk about the great work he's been doing on capital maintenance and renewal in addition to saving the entire housing sector in the province. I think he deserves a tremendous amount of credit. Go ahead, ADM Williams. You've got a minute and 33 seconds.

Mr. David Williams: Excellent. Thank you, Minister and to the hon. member through the chair. In stronger foundations in 2021 one of the commitments there, 5.4, I believe, under the strategy, was to complete an operational and a maintenance strategy that was scheduled for implementation starting in 2024. In 2024 we worked through a public procurement process, an RFP process, and engaged KPMG to help us with that work. That work is ongoing, including consultations with housing providers as to how best to move through and address some of the recommendations from the Auditor General. In addition, to do the long-term maintenance work, we have – Budget '25 provides \$6.8 million to help us implement the affordable housing strategy, which would include some funding towards doing the facility condition assessments that have been ongoing, and work has been accelerated over the last year in order to get those done.

Part of the work that we've asked KPMG to do is to help work with us to come up with a proper performance measure because the facility condition index measure in and of itself was not necessarily an appropriate one. It didn't measure the usability of the assets. A lot of it had to do with the mathematical formula that talked about, you know, that had to do with the replacement value of the asset versus the value of the asset, but it didn't actually talk about the usability of the asset. So to get to the question around, "How useful is the affordable housing asset?" we really wanted to take a better look so that a measure that we could . . .

The Chair: I'm sorry. The time goes by so quickly.

We'll move over now to the government side. Member Johnson.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair and again through you to the minister and for his staff. Thank you for all the hard work that you have done in preparing for this and what you do all year long. If it's okay with the minister, I would like to pick up where my colleague left off with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. I would say that this is one that is rather special to me. I don't if "special" is the right word but one that I take very seriously. As a former registered nurse I remember writing a paper on this during my time as a student nurse. It's very serious, and I'm really delighted to see that this is getting attention, that it is being addressed.

If we could come back to perhaps where my colleague had left off there, talking about the \$27.6 million on line 4.6 of page 193 in the main estimates. Reading the description of this, the funding is provided to fetal alcohol spectrum disorder service networks to provide a continuum of co-ordinated services to meet the needs of those living with FASD and their caregivers. Could the minister maybe outline how this funding really does work to support individuals, maybe expound upon that, where this is going, how it goes to their families who are impacted by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder in Alberta? And then: what initiatives are taking place to advance supports for individuals with FASD?

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. Thanks for that, Madam Chair. First off, as we were saying just before we switched blocks, just to reiterate, the budget this year has \$27.6 million of funding to provide that continuum of co-ordinated services. We hope it will meet the needs of those living with FASD and their caregivers. That funding ensures that we continue supports through those networks,

including \$2.4 million annually to maintain wage increases for front-line FASD workers.

Look, we're working, Madam Chair, in the department on a strategic plan. I should say it's not just us; it's a crossministerial advisory co-ordination committee that is in the process of a three-year plan between 2024 and 2027. We're in the second year of our three-year plan with the budget that we're talking about. This includes 10 government departments and agencies. They are working to make sure that stakeholders are able to monitor the progress of that process, to continue to exchange information and best practices, and to strategically align resources across ministries to achieve that shared objective on this important file.

Programming is tailored by the FASD service networks depending on their respective communities and needs. Examples, Madam Chair, of specialized programming include Lakeland FASD network's second-floor Women's Recovery Centre, which provides residential addiction treatment for up to 28 women annually who are pregnant or at risk of becoming pregnant, as well as the South Alberta FASD Network, which is partnered with the Lethbridge Police Service to provide support for up to 15 youth annually to support high-risk youth that are involved with the justice system. The FASD youth justice officer supports 37 youth with shorter term interventions, making referrals to agencies, and responses to information requests pertaining to at-risk youth.

Those are just a couple of examples of that process. I think it's, again, important to stress that it's a crossministerial approach; and not only that, we're working with multiple government agencies and outside of government agencies to make sure that we're working together. As I have found for most of the things in this file, Madam Chair, that's the best way to get 'er done.

I do also just want to reiterate what I think was a very good decision by the ministry to increase those wages for front-line FASD workers, something we heard loud and clear from the sector that needed to be done to be able to continue the important work that they're doing.

Mrs. Johnson: Well, thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister. I see we're at the finish line here. We've got less than half an hour left. It's been a long day, and this is a heavy topic when we're talking about social services and the really heavy needs of Albertans and those who are most vulnerable in our province.

Maybe I can switch up a little bit here and talk about something a little bit more fun, and that is dogs, specifically service dogs. If you look at page 193 of the main estimates, element 6.3, labelled as Family and Community Safety. Looking at the description on page 191 I see that this item "provides grant funding to municipalities and community-based organizations to provide community-centred services to Albertans." This is through the civil society fund and the service dog program. To focus on the question of service dogs specifically, first, what portion of the funding for element 6.3 is allocated to the service dog program, and what does this program do? Maybe more broadly, how are service dogs helpful to Albertans?

Mr. Nixon: Well, first of all, everybody likes dogs, though the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, I think, likes cats more, if you follow her Twitter account, but I don't think she's got any problems with dogs.

I think the work that's taking place on service dogs with the department and, more importantly, the sector, is exciting stuff and for sure more fun to talk about than some of the topics that we have here. You probably saw my officials all excited when you started to talk about service dogs because of the work that's taking place in the department when it comes to service dogs. I also think it's

important to emphasize that while it's fun to talk about, it's absolutely critical. It's life-changing for different individuals who have been able to get access to service dogs, particularly people with visual impairments but also with other areas where service dogs provide valuable support. Our budget is going to maintain the investment that we have in service dogs, \$400,000 for service dogs programs, to help increase access to qualified service dogs.

Also, just recently I signed a process that would change the ministry's qualified list of service providers, bringing the total number of qualified service providers in the dog space in Alberta to 14, adding on some critical trainers and organizations that provide dogs. I think the hon. member knows, Madam Chair, that I raise bird dogs. They're pretty smart, but they're not nearly as smart as these dogs, and I'm certainly not qualified to be able to train these dogs. It takes an exceptional trainer to be able to deliver that work, which is why we wanted to make sure that we increase that qualified list.

We also have organizations on the qualified list and the ADI schools operating in Alberta who are eligible to apply for a service dog program grant. Organizations can apply for funding for the following activities: \$6,000 a dog to partially subsidize the cost to produce and place a service dog, \$150 an hour to provide preassessment training for owner-trained dogs, \$350 with assessments to conduct service dog qualification assessments. The service dog program grant may not cover the full cost to make a service dog available. The full cost to produce a service dog, ultimately, is upwards of \$25,000 to \$35,000 per dog, but the Assistance Dogs International school provides their dog without charge. Then, you know, there's an application fee and a process that works for the equipment.

6:05

I should also point out that there's a lot of work done in this space in partnership with the Lions group in particular. There are probably other major nonprofit organizations that partner to help create seeing eye dogs in particular for people that need them in Alberta. I've enjoyed learning about the service dog program in this ministry. I can tell you that when I was minister of environment, we had the conservation dogs. Their job was very different, which was to find zebra mussels and chase invasive hogs, but the same thing: it's pretty incredible what the resource can do to be able to help people.

With that, Madam Chair, I'll check if the hon. member has got a little bit more questions about dogs because we'd be happy to talk about dogs all day.

Mrs. Johnson: Well, thank you, Madam Chair and through you to the minister. I did have a few extra questions. You've kind of touched on them already. You were obviously anticipating what I was going to say because you, obviously, love dogs, too. I will say these questions anyway. Maybe you can expound on them a little bit more fully. Dogs are great. One of them is: how are they accredited? You touched on that. Is there more to that, about how these dogs are accredited? Obviously not with the dogs that you're raising.

Then you did touch also on how Budget 2025 is working to make it more affordable for people to get a certified service dog; \$25 to \$35 K per dog is, obviously, not achievable for a lot of people, and you did touch on that. If you could expound a little bit more. How could somebody get one if they don't have those funds?

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. The certification is done, I believe, through Assistance Dogs International, ADI. My assistant deputy minister of preventative services will send a note up if I'm wrong on that.

But there is a qualification process, obviously, for that training. It's a high level of training. You know, we off-set those expenses, make sure that we're creating training capacity in other areas in the dog space, as I alluded to earlier in our conversation. We're about to – that's ADI. I was right, it turns out. Real quick because we're running out of time, in '25-26 the department is actually going to fund 33 dogs for \$200,000 as well as 840 hours of training for \$126,000 and then the assessments, which is not a simple process; 215 assessments to be done for a total of \$75,000.

Again, a space that we continue to invest creatively in and can have a real big impact on the Albertans that end up with those service dogs, on their quality of life.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're going to head over to the Official Opposition. Please proceed, Member.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Thank you. Thought I'd correct the record. I guess I'll be on page 194 of the government estimates, talking about housing, which is line item 9. The minister, through you, Madam Chair, has presented some alternative facts for us, and I just want to clarify the record. When I was minister of seniors and housing in the Notley government, \$1.2 billion was invested in affordable housing, several thousand units were built, and this was four times the previous Conservative government. We created the first ever affordable housing strategy. The minister is not well informed.

Now I'd like to talk more about the changes to continuing care. Of course, we have significant need for continuing care beds. The minister just referred to it not too long ago. I guess I'm looking at line item 11, again on that same page, 194. That 1,600 continuing care beds would be created over the next three years: the minister said this in a press conference, so I just want to know where he is at now in terms of creating those beds and how many new spaces have been created. The minister also said that 10,000 beds were needed over the next five years. I think that was kind of a loose number. Obviously, we know that the seniors population is growing at a very rapid rate in our province, so I just want to revisit that with the minister and make sure that that's still the number that he's using to forecast what's needed in Alberta or if that has increased because of our rapidly growing seniors population.

I'd like to know how the minister calculates the need for continuing care beds in Alberta. Is there a national per capita standard that he's following? Is he looking at G-7 countries? How is he sort of determining what number of beds that we need? How's he forecasting that? That would be very helpful to know.

I also want to talk about a difficult situation, where there is co-location of seniors with mental health patients. Of course, both of these populations need appropriate care, and it's very important, but a policy has been created by the UCP government that these two populations should be co-located, and it's created much difficulty. There's a specific case in Calgary, the Colonel Belcher continuing care facility there, where veterans – so these are people oftentimes who have PTSD. They have some challenges because they've obviously served in wars across the world as representatives of us in Canada. Of course, we should be treating them with respect and dignity. You know, a younger population of people with mental health issues are also being co-located there, and they have very different needs than the seniors. Both populations need the supports, but putting them together doesn't make sense.

A lot of the seniors are afraid to leave their rooms, which we know is very unhealthy for them. This situation has been going on for months and months, years, actually. Certainly, we've presented this to the UCP government over many times, but nothing seems to change. They don't see this as an issue. I'm wondering what the

minister is planning to do about that. I also just would like the minister – and he did refer to it earlier, so perhaps he can give us some numbers on Albertans under 50 years old who are actually living in continuing care facilities. People are in those facilities for different reasons, and sometimes it is a challenging fit because it's predominantly a seniors population, and so sometimes it can create problems for both populations.

I'd like to move now to investing in preventative programs. Of course, we know that when people are supported to age in community – I know the minister has talked about nonmedical supports. Those are very important, and that's good, and I'm glad that program has grown and expanded. There are deferred costs because of that. People don't end up in those higher, more expensive services. They don't end up in hospitals as much. They don't end up sometimes involved with the criminal justice system. I'm wondering what the minister is directing his department to do about just understanding sort of the deferred costs of those kinds of programs. Is he sharing any of that information with us?

Mr. Nixon: Well, so much to cover in so little time. I'll try to be quick. The commingling issue, though, in regard to the facility the hon. member was referring to. I think it's important to make clear a couple of things, and then I'll answer how we're addressing it. That was a policy decision. The commingling policy decision about complex mental health patients with traditional continuing care patients was made by Alberta Health Services. I would submit to you one of the many I think problematic decisions that have been made by AHS. I'm happy to inform you, Madam Chair, that one of the very first decisions I made, after being named the second minister responsible for continuing care in our province, was to instruct my department to begin to move those complex mental health patients into a more appropriate facility and to make sure that commingling was done with appropriate long-term care patients, particularly with our veterans in the context of the Colonel Belcher but also across the system. You can anticipate that there will be other policies that we will reverse as we work through our role with assisted living in Alberta, taking over continuing care going forward. I agree, and that's why we're fixing it.

The member asked some questions about spaces, which I think I'll focus most of my time on. As of January 1, 2025, there are a total of 29,606 spaces staffed and in operation in both type A, B, and C in continuing care homes. Of these spaces 16,205 type A long-term care spaces, including 480 subacute spaces, make up part of that number; 13,121 type B designated supportive living; and 280 type C hospice spaces. There was an increase of 190 continuing care spaces between March 31 and January of 2025, but there are more en route. In fact, the process that we're putting in place right now is working through Budget 2025 and before as we invest in strategic capital, particularly the continuing care capital program, which is going to see \$649 million over the next three years. This will include the Bethany continuing care centre in Calgary, which is, I believe, \$57.1 million over three years; the Good Samaritan continuing care in Edmonton, which is another \$63 million over three years; also, \$760 million over three years, specifically \$178.3 in this fiscal year, creating – I think the hon. member had a much lower number, so if I quoted that at a press conference, I was wrong. It's higher than that: 2,800 more continuing care spaces.

6:15

I would be happy to provide the breakdown by zone, in case the hon. member is interested. The south zone has 1,011 type A beds, 2,183 type B beds, and 20 type C; the Calgary zone has 6,374 type A, type B is 3,634, and type C is 121; central zone is 2,336 type A, type B is 2,180, and type C is 20; the Edmonton Zone is 5,236 type

A, type B is 3,725, and 104 type C; and in the north zone there are 1,248 type A, 1,399 type B, and 15 type C, which is the breakdown of those beds. As you can see, there are a considerable number of beds that are already in place.

Yes, we anticipate that we will need more spaces than that, though with 2,800 units coming on, that is certainly a really good start. We continue to determine our numbers through a variety of different sources. I am not the one who calculates it even though I like that the member thinks that I am. The department works through this process both on anticipated population growth and consultation with the sector, with providers within the sector, within the medical community on what would take place.

We are also co-ordinating with Health in general on the pressures that they're seeing come through their system as well, which obviously has a bearing on future decisions as a department, and then, of course, the work that we're doing with Mental Health and Addiction, that fourth health care sector, which has a lot of overlap in some of the aspects of continuing care, where we have to understand what they're building and what they're not and then what will fall to us. This is something that's actually being managed between the three ministers as well as, actually, directly with the Premier's office to be able to make sure that we're starting to think about it.

I think the biggest thing, though, is that previous governments and AHS had not actually made a long-term plan on anything to do with health care capital. I know the Health minister has talked about that before. So we're driving very quickly right now to lay out what the needs will be over the next several years so we can make sure that the entire government and, in particular, this ministry when it comes to continuing care is flying that airplane towards a destination of what we'll need for that 2,500 more seniors entering our province a month.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll move over to the government side. Member Petrovic, please proceed.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, if you're okay with it, I'd love to do shared time.

Mr. Nixon: Absolutely.

Mrs. Petrovic: Wonderful. I know we're short on time, but I just wanted to dive in on just a couple of quick questions in regard to FCSS. I'm a big fan of FCSS, especially in rural Alberta. When I was lucky enough to be the mayor, I was able to work closely with our families, communities, and support services, and I know that . . .

Mr. Nixon: I don't think they like rural.

Mrs. Petrovic: I'm not sure they know where rural is, to be honest with you, Minister.

That being said, I know that you've been able to meet with some of our FCSS directors down south as well, and exactly, what they're doing is amazing. If we can just jump to page 147 of the business plan, I see an initiative allocating \$105 million through family and community support services to municipalities and Métis settlements to develop and deliver preventative social service programming. I understand that this initiative is in support of key objective 2.4 on page 146 of the business plan. Through you, Chair, would the minister outline what sort of preventative social services programming is being developed and delivered through Budget 2025?

Mr. Nixon: Madam Chair, the number the hon. member is referring to, the \$105 million for FCSS, family and community support

services, is correct. I do think it's important when we're talking about CSS funding beyond just the programming, which, of course, is important, to actually also point out that that is a partnership with municipalities as well, who fund a portion of that. We obviously fund the majority of it, but each time that we commit to all the FCSS, we're also committing your local municipalities to participate in that process. I know the hon. member knows that well, but just in case others did not.

I also think it's really important to emphasize how the funding is distributed across the province. The other five major cities besides Edmonton and Calgary received 10 per cent of that total line item, Calgary receives 30 per cent, and Edmonton receives 22 per cent, and then the rest of the province receives 38 per cent. Now, obviously, that's being done through population and other aspects of it.

I think, though, as you look at communities like what the hon. member represents and I represent, that are more rural in nature, there is a discrepancy in how we fund FCSS, because the reality is that Calgary and Edmonton, which have significant needs, and we need to continue to fund them, also have major social services investments taking place within those large communities that you would not see in some of these smaller communities.

Homelessness, for example, of late is where we see a lot of FCSS organizations wanting to get into that space. It's kind of probably even beyond the original mandate of prevention, but they're stepping in because of what's taking place in our communities. They would not be seeing investments like a quarter billion dollars in homeless supports that you're seeing take place in places like Calgary and Edmonton. As we have that conversation about the future of FCSS, one thing that we've committed to their new president on is that we will sit down and have a conversation, as aspects of rural Alberta are stepping into different spaces that they never found themselves having to step into, on whether FCSS's line item is the best place to fund it.

That does not mean that we would not partner or fund those FCSS organizations in those communities, but, for example, if we determine that some of those FCSS organizations and some of these communities are going to step into the homeless space, it may make more sense to directly fund them to support homelessness in their communities through other line items in the budget rather than continue to just increase the FCSS budget and then distribute it by that breakdown. We see that the work that's taking place is critical, but I do think that this is kind of a nuance that's starting to develop with some of the conversations, particularly in rural Alberta.

The services, as we've discussed elsewhere today, Madam Chair, are very diverse. Those of us who have the privilege of representing multiple communities will know how diverse they are. It never ceases to amaze me how things are so different to when I hang out with Rimbey FCSS or Sndre FCSS. I think that's because they're focused on what the community needs, but there's everything from transportation to senior supports to be able to make sure that you're helping with navigation supports and whatever the community may need. Food banks is another place where we see FCSS organizations participating of late. I think that's exactly how the program was designed. It was to be diverse and make sure that it's responding to the unique community's needs.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Minister, for the answer. I think this is going to be a long list, but do you mind outlining which communities will be served by this funding, even perhaps just in my constituency?

Mr. Nixon: Madam Chair, it is a long list. I'm happy to do so. I do think my NDP friends will find it enjoyable, because I'm not sure

if they've heard of some of these communities, but I'm happy to do it. I don't think I'm going to give you the breakdown of each dollar, because I think I'll run out of time for sure. Alberta Beach, Athabasca county, Big Lakes county, Birch Hills county, Brazeau county, Camrose county, city of Airdrie, city of Beaumont, city of Brooks, city of Calgary, city of Chestermere, city of Cold Lake, the city of Edmonton, the city of Fort Saskatchewan, the city of Grande Prairie, the city of Lacombe, the city of Leduc, the city of Lethbridge, the city of Lloydminster, the city of Medicine Hat, the city of Red Deer, the city of Spruce Grove, the city of St. Albert, the city of Wetaskiwin, Clear Hills county, the county of Grande Prairie, county of Minburn, the county of Northern Lights, the county of Stettler, the county of Two Hills, the county of Vermilion River, the county of Wetaskiwin, Cypress county, Flagstaff county, Foothills county, Kneehill county, Lac La Biche county, Lac Ste. Anne county, Lacombe county, Lamont county, Leduc county, Mackenzie county, Mountain View county – my home – the municipal district of Opportunity, the municipal district of Bighorn, the municipal district of Bonnyville, the municipal district of Greenview, the municipal district of Lesser Slave River, the municipal district of Peace, the municipal district of Pincher Creek, the municipal district of Ranchland, the municipal district of Spirit River, the municipal district of Willow Creek, the municipality of Crowsnest Pass, the municipality of Jasper, Northern Sunrise county, Parkland county, regional municipality of Wood Buffalo, Rocky View county, Saddle Hills county, Smoky Lake county. I'm only one page through, hon. member. I'd be happy to continue if you want to hear them all, but I think it shows you, to your point, the large breadth of communities that are supported from the FCSS program.

6:25

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Minister, for that. I heard a number of my communities on that list, and I'm a happy camper with that. I appreciate it.

One last question just before we wrap things up. I know we've discussed a lot of numbers today. We've gone over an astronomical number of details. I was hoping the minister would highlight what he's most excited for in Budget 2025 in terms of the positive impacts for Albertans. First is: what is the minister's top priority for 2025-2026? And what is the biggest expected challenge in 2025-2026, and how is the ministry working to address it?

Mr. Nixon: Well, the challenges are diverse, as we've heard today. I think the unknown of the tariff situation is an unknown for all of government and, obviously, this ministry, which has a significant responsibility to support people in times of crisis. I think that is a large unknown that we are prepared for, but we just don't know exactly what we may be called upon to do. But watching this ministry in the time that I've had it, the team here and their capability responding to things like fires and other natural disasters is second to none, so I have the confidence that they can do it.

I do think that we're going to continue to see significant pressure from population growth in all the programs. We've discussed multiple income support programs from AISH to income supports and everywhere in between. Those population numbers put pressure, obviously, on the system to be able to make sure that we fund it. I think the ministry has done a great job of getting a pretty significant increase in a tight budget time to make sure that we're prepared to do it.

I continue to be very excited about the work that we're doing on homelessness. I talked a little bit about the work that we've done with the Blackfoot shelter, particularly, in Lethbridge, which is one of my favourite projects. Again, I watched the NDP Member for

Lethbridge-West actually nod his head on it. I know he's seen the work that we're doing down there. It's significant, and I'm very much looking forward to this year seeing them open their new shelter and to see them continue that work going forward.

I anticipate that we're going to continue to see the affordable housing number increases that we have seen this last year or even more.

I'm excited, obviously, about the merger of continuing care into our department to make sure that we can bring true wraparound supports not only to our elders and the people that built this province but to others that have been forgotten by the health care system, including those facing disabilities and the homeless. I'm excited about that transition work that the department is about to undertake and very, very confident that they're going to get it accomplished, and I'm very confident we're going to continue to see staggering market house numbers that are going to continue to make Alberta the best place to live and retire in.

We continue to have the only large cities in the world that have anywhere near affordable rent. It doesn't mean that it's not challenging, but we're certainly lucky that we're not Toronto or Vancouver or New York or those types of places, that have seen devastating socialist policies that have destroyed their economies and made it impossible for people to live.

So those are some of the things that I'm looking forward to and happy to look forward to announcing them all in the coming months.

The Chair: Minister, thank you so much.

Member Irwin.

Member Irwin: Thank you. Disappointed I still didn't hear answers to many of the questions I posed in my last two blocks, which, in fact, my colleagues posed as well. On the procurement piece I would also like to ask if the ministry has any contracts with Rubicon.

Back to affordable housing. We've got a shortage of affordable housing units and many issues – many issues – in communities

related to skyrocketing rents. I know that Albertans are watching, believe it or not, many advocates who hear every day the heartbreaking stories of people who are losing their homes because they can't afford rent. I think of the folks at ACORN in Calgary, who've been working tirelessly to address this issue. Why isn't the minister taking seriously the serious, serious issue that so many Albertans are facing when it comes to struggling with housing?

I also wanted to get Jasper on the record. A shout-out to the incredible Jasperites who've been through so very much despite being abandoned by this UCP government.

In my remaining time I just need to again get it on the record, as I started out earlier this morning, to say that this is a government that's cutting homelessness supports. It's in this minister's budget documents, despite whatever spin he continues to employ in this room, at a time of record homelessness, at a time of record deaths on our streets. This is a government that's cutting homelessness supports. Albertans deserve a whole lot better than the cuts, chaos, and corruption of this UCP government, and I know that Albertans are continuing to push back against this government and will change this government when the next election comes around in 2027.

With that, thank you to all the advocates who joined us today. Appreciate you so much. I'm sorry that this government has abandoned you, but we won't.

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded. I'd like to remind committee members that we're scheduled to meet tomorrow, Tuesday, March 19, at 8 a.m. Did everyone get that? Members, 8 a.m. – 8 a.m. – tomorrow to consider the Ministry of Children and Family Services.

The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 6:30 p.m.]

