

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, April 22, 2003**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2003/04/22

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

Let us pray. Dear God, author of all wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, we ask Thy guidance in order that truth and justice may prevail in all of our judgments. Amen.

Hon. members, would you please remain standing now for the singing of our national anthem, and we'll be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau. Would you please join in in the language of your choice.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Please be seated. I guess, hon. members, it goes without saying that even with the thunderous voice of Mr. Paul Lorieau, that wasn't enough to allow the local boys to overcome their destiny on Saturday past.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In my capacity as co-chair of the Advisory Council on Alberta-Ukraine Relations it is indeed a great pleasure to introduce to you once again a very special guest in our Assembly, His Excellency Dr. Yuri Scherbak, ambassador of Ukraine to Canada. The ambassador is now completing the end of his mandate, and in fact this will be his last official visit to our province. But I would say that as a result of his tremendous efforts over the years that he has served, our government as well as businesses, academic institutions, and numerous individuals in our province have benefited economically, socially, and culturally. Our hon. Premier's historic mission to Ukraine in May 2002, the first ever by an Alberta Premier to Ukraine, was a great success, and that is just one of the many ways in which Yuri Scherbak has assisted us. Alberta is home to nearly 300,000 Canadians of Ukrainian descent, and we all appreciate and applaud the ambassador's many achievements.

[Remarks in Ukrainian] Your Excellency Ambassador Scherbak, we are all deeply grateful for your efforts on behalf of the citizens of Alberta and Ukraine alike. We sincerely thank you and wish you the very best in the future. [as submitted]

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, may I just say on behalf of our Premier and on behalf of our Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations and all members of this Assembly and indeed all Albertans that I express our sincere and profound thanks to Ambassador Scherbak for his incredible role. I see him standing, and now may we all wish him well with our thanks for his services.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great honour to be able to stand and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly three people that are the most important people in my life and that are here today. First is my wife, Elaine, my eldest son, Harrison, and my youngest son, Graeme, who are attending the Legislature to see where daddy works. It's great, and if they could have the warm welcome of the Assembly, please.

My second introduction, Mr. Speaker, is my assistant, who is attending with them today, and I'd ask Evelyn Oberg to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

Mr. Herard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very proud to introduce to you and through you to all the members of the Assembly my youngest son, Christopher. Chris is a music teacher at St. Mary's high school in Calgary. He's a founding member of the acclaimed a cappella group the Heebie-Jeebies, who have won four CARA awards and are, I understand, the only Canadian a cappella group to ever make it to the finals in the United States. In his spare time he also directs a large choir and two marching show bands. I'd like him to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure for me to rise today and introduce some special guests. We have nine people from the community of Crooked Creek in my riding, and the students attend Rosedale Christian school there. They are accompanied today by Mr. Trevor Penner, Mrs. Kathryn Penner, Mr. Arvid Thiessen, and Mrs. Linda Thiessen. They're in the gallery, and I would ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of our Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It also gives me great pleasure today to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a group of very well-mannered, energetic young men and women from the Lakeland Country school in Dewberry. They are accompanied today by their teacher Miss Chandelle Isaac and by their helpers the Baergs, the Thiessens, and the Loewens. I would ask them to rise and please accept the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutilier: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In the members' gallery today I have a longtime supporter and his wife. I want to say that not very many people in this Assembly have driven 400-tonne trucks, but in fact this gentleman is part of securing Canada's energy future by working and driving trucks for Suncor. Bliss Watling has been a longtime resident of Fort McMurray. I'd like to ask him to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 38 students from J. Percy Page high school in Mill Woods. Percy Page is the high school that proves that multiculturalism does work. They're a leader in technology, and it's also the home of the Panthers. They're

accompanied by teachers Mr. Garth Hamilton, Mr. Brian Ross, and Mr. James Kosowan. They're in the public gallery, and with your permission I'd have them rise and receive the traditional welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly 13 students from Metro College accompanied by their teacher Mrs. Phyllis Townsend. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two constituents of mine who are active on a daily basis helping the elderly and on issues of elder abuse in our province. Lou and Ruth Adria are in the members' gallery, and I'd like them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

1:40head: Oral Question Period

Postsecondary Education

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, a well-educated workforce is essential to economic prosperity in Alberta. A study released today by TD Economics entitled The Calgary-Edmonton Corridor states that this government needs to, and I quote: make investments in education a "high priority." To the Premier: given the importance of postsecondary education to Alberta's success why is Alberta's completion rate for postsecondary education in 2000-2001 only 59 percent, a rate below the national average?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, these comments on postsecondary enrollment come from a paper by the TD Bank that also said in regard to the Calgary/Edmonton corridor that this corridor is the "only Canadian urban centre to amass [a] U.S. level of wealth while preserving [a] Canadian-style quality of life." You know, I anticipated this question, and I guess one can only trust the opposition to jump on the negative in what is otherwise an overwhelmingly positive report.

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, the statistics were out of the advanced education Learning department's budget, not out of that report.

Why has this government let overall per student funding for postsecondary education in real terms fall to a point that only 43 percent of high school students decide to move on to postsecondary education?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't agree with those figures. Again going back to the TD report, an economist in the report is claiming that postsecondary enrollments in Alberta are lagging behind those in other provinces because of tuition fees. I don't know if tuition is a formidable barrier to postsecondary enrollment, but I do know that in recent years Alberta's postsecondary institutions have seen some of the greatest enrollment increases in the country, and that is statistically correct. Between 1994 and 1999 enrollments increased by 5 percent, while the national average increase for enrollment was only 1 percent.

Dr. Nicol: Again to the Premier: how can this government claim that

education is a priority when Alberta's high school dropout rate is 13 percent, again a rate above the national average?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know that to be true, and the hon. Minister of Learning isn't here. But, you know, for every statistic that the opposition throws out, there is an equally responsive and positive answer. All I know is that according to our statistics we have one of the most highly educated workforces in the country and we have a postsecondary completion rate, maybe not all university, that is second to none in any jurisdiction in the country.

Just over 55 percent, as I understand it, of Albertans have a postsecondary education, making this one of the most educated provinces in Canada. The national average, as I understand it, is 53 percent. Fifty-nine percent of 18- to 20-year-old Alberta high school graduates have taken courses leading to a degree, a diploma, or a certificate. This is especially important: a degree, a diploma, or a certificate. Postsecondary education alludes not only to university but to NAIT and SAIT and Grant MacEwan College and Mount Royal and all of the other junior colleges and technical institutes. Mr. Speaker, by the time they reach 22 to 24 years of age, the proportion is even higher. It reaches 75 percent. Those are not bad statistics.

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, again, I was quoting the government's own statistics.

Education Funding

Dr. Nicol: The basic instructional grant given to schools increased by 2 percent in the last budget. This gives an instructional grant for schools of \$4,454 per student for next year. To the Premier: how did the government decide that an increase in the basic instruction grant of only 2 percent was enough?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, it was based on anticipated enrollment, but I will take the question under advisement and have the hon. Minister of Learning provide a more complete answer when he returns.

Dr. Nicol: Has the government ever costed out what a school can buy with \$4,454 per student and whether that is enough to truly give them a quality education in the classroom?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again, I guess that depends on how large the class size is, but again I'll take the question under advisement and have the minister provide an appropriate response.

Dr. Nicol: Again to the Premier: when will the government fund education based on a school's actual costed needs?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we do that today, and the budget process anticipates what we must reasonably spend to ensure a good education for our K to 12 students.

Private/Public Partnerships

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, this government has made P3 financing a top priority in its three-year business plan. Unfortunately, this method of financing public infrastructure means nothing more than empty promises and added costs for Alberta's taxpaying public. Despite the fact that P3 financing is more expensive than public financing, this government claims that P3 financing will result in cost benefits. My questions are to the Minister of Infrastructure. How can P3 financing be cheaper for Albertans when private corporations borrow money at a higher rate than the province and include profit margins in the costs that they pass on to the public?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, to say that this is our cornerstone of financing new construction is just totally wrong. The fact is that it is one tool in the toolbox that we're looking at, and I would think that Albertans would be only too happy that we're looking at alternate ways of financing and operating infrastructure, the buildings in this province. The hon. member will see the process that they have to go through when any proposals come forward. The fact is that we will be looking at the lifetime costs, relating that back to present-day value and what it would cost for government to do it, and it will have to show a favourable result or we just simply would not proceed with the P3 project.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, the minister didn't answer my question. How can P3 financing be cheaper for Albertans when private corporations borrow money at a higher rate than the province and include profit margins in the costs that they pass on to the public?

Mr. Lund: Obviously, the member wasn't listening, Mr. Speaker, because I clearly pointed out to him that a P3 is not just about financing. If that was the only reason we were looking at it, as a means of financing, then he probably would have a point, but that's not what this is all about.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: can the minister tell this House why such a highly skilled and motivated group of people as the minister's staff are unable to find the same efficiencies as the public sector?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The more questions the member asks about this, the more I'm totally convinced that he doesn't understand it at all. We have never said nor have we ever pretended that if you were just going to use it as a means of financing, it was going to be cheaper, but there are a whole host of other issues that need to be taken into account. For example, when one off-loads all the risk, what is that worth to government? When one looks at the operation over time, what is that worth to government? What is it worth to government to have a facility constructed and in use earlier than if we were going to do it ourselves? All of those things are very, very important variables that will figure into whether a P3 project would proceed.

We're certainly finding extremely interesting results as we move forward on a proposed P3 for the courthouse in Calgary. That's going to be a very exciting project as we move forward. We'll be interested to see how all of these variables play out and how this will work for the benefit of the province and the taxpayers in the province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

1:50

Softwood Lumber Policy

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Closed-door negotiations to resolve the softwood lumber dispute are taking place between the U.S. and Canadian governments in which the federal government regularly consults with lumber-producing provinces. Alberta's forest-dependent communities are very concerned that their jobs and livelihoods may be betrayed in exchange for getting softwood lumber tariffs lifted. The town of Hinton recently approved a resolution opposing any change in Alberta's forestry policies without thorough public debate. My question is to the

Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations. Can the minister inform this House as to what changes Alberta has agreed to make in Alberta's forestry policies in order to resolve the softwood lumber dispute with the United States?

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, while there have been regular meetings with industry and with the MLAs involved in constituencies with softwood lumber industry and we have followed very carefully the developments that are taking place regarding negotiations with the United States, to this point in time there has been no commitment to any particular change in our forest management policies. Those policies have served us well to this point in time. We realize that in order to keep access to the American market, we will have to make some changes, but that matter is being approached very, very carefully, and to this point in time there's been no commitment to any specific change.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Will the minister admit that the government is prepared to consider trading away provincial forestry policies which require companies to build sawmills and other processing facilities in nearby communities in exchange for the right to cut timber on Crown forest lands?

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, I would not confirm that. That is not the case. There are a whole host of options that we have been discussing in the meetings that I've referenced. We want to get through this difficulty to gain better access to the American market but not at any cost.

I would ask the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, if that's acceptable, to supplement.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Yes, as the member questioning mentioned, forestry continues to be a very important industry in Alberta. Close to 50 communities in Alberta depend on forestry as their major source of income and also job creation. Over 54,000 people work in that industry, so it is very important. We are working very closely with the Alberta Forest Products Association, who represents most of the forest producers in Alberta, and also the industry to try and determine how we are going to make sure that our industry continues to be stable. One of the questions, of course, is the issue of forest management agreements. The tenure of our agreements is a security for our industry out there, and we want to make sure that it remains intact as much as possible.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Will the minister reassure Alberta communities such as the town of Hinton that no changes to forestry policies affecting forest-based communities and workers will be made unless there has been thorough public debate and consultation first?

Mr. Jonson: Well, Mr. Speaker, once again the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development may wish to supplement, but as I indicated earlier – and I'll put it a different way – we have been meeting regularly as a group with the MLAs that represent the softwood-producing areas of the province. I'm sure that they have been communicating with their constituents on a regular basis with

respect to this matter. The Forest Products Association is not somehow disconnected from the communities that they serve either. They are certainly in touch with their workforce and keeping them abreast of developments that are taking place. So there has certainly not been any secrecy or desire to keep the fact that we do have a major challenge facing us that we hope to work through to the betterment of the industry.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

EPCOR/Aquila Billing Practices

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over 1,500 Albertans in the Aquila service network have made complaints to the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board about their EPCOR bills. Complaints continue to roll in to my office from Whitecourt-St. Anne constituents. My question is to the Minister of Energy. How effective has it been for those that have made complaints to the EUB, and have they received credits for their overcharges?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The total number of complaints through two billing cycles, or 700,000 incidents, has been 1,491. That's roughly 213 thousandths of a percent. The number of customers who received an adjustment as well as a \$75 credit was, in fact, about 838 customers. Now, that represents 119 thousandths of a percent.

Mr. Speaker, relative to the policy, which included the deficiency regulation, interestingly enough, of the 838 accounts 486 bills were adjusted downwards. Not only did the customer receive a \$75 credit, but there was also a downward adjustment. Interestingly enough, there were 352, or about 42 percent, of the bills where, once they were examined, not only did they get a \$75 credit, but the bills were in fact adjusted upwards. So throughout this process we have seen about 1,500 files, of which about half precipitated some sort of billing action.

Mr. VanderBurg: Again to the same minister. Still the concerns come to my office about the inaccuracy of the bills. How long will it be before the RRO customers in this network can be sure their bills will be accurate?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that the companies, EPCOR and Aquila, have maintained their work. They've worked with the hon. member and his constituents. In fact, when you take 700,000 bills and they receive .2 percent complaints, that's a 99.8 percent correction rating. So, you know, those aren't bad marks.

Mr. VanderBurg: My last question to the same minister: what's been the cost of these deficiencies even though they're very small?

Mr. Smith: Well, on the deficiencies, Mr. Speaker, it has actually cost the company a substantial amount of money to put this operation in the EUB. The company pays completely for the operation, and none of that money is billed back into the rate base. I don't have an accurate account of the total amount, but given that 58 percent were adjusted upwards and 42 percent adjusted down, it looks like it's pretty close to a breakeven.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Electricity Prices

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Each and every year since this government foolishly deregulated the electricity industry, the government has promised Albertans that next year we'll see the start of lower electricity prices. But each time a new year rolls around, Albertans have to figure out how to pay an even higher power bill, including the expensive add-ons called deferrals. My first question is to the Minister of Energy. How could the Minister of Energy state on April 3, 2003, "I also think the introduction of Direct Energy into the marketplace is going to make a difference" when the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board has not yet approved Direct Energy's entrance into the Alberta marketplace?

2:00

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, in the preamble that the member has started with, he talked about foolish deregulation, and then he talked about promising year after year that the rates would go down. I don't recall the move being foolish, nor do I recall promises of the prices going down year after year. Therefore, the preamble is so erroneous that it makes the question hypothetical, and regrettably I couldn't answer a hypothetical question.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the Minister of Energy: if the minister is so confident that Direct Energy will enter the Alberta marketplace, what criteria are being used by the EUB to determine whether or not Direct Energy can enter the marketplace?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member knows full well that the decision over the sale is in front of the EUB. The EUB is a quasi-judicial board; therefore, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on that outcome at this juncture.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the Minister of Energy: given that electricity consumers who purchased a home in Alberta after electricity deregulation occurred are now being charged on their monthly bills the 2000 deferral rider and the 2001 regulated rate option shortfall, why are these consumers charged for someone else's electricity consumption?

Mr. Smith: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, if he would have just got to the nub of the question earlier, we could have saved the House a great deal of time, but I'm more than pleased to provide detailed information on this final question. In fact, that was realized and brought to the attention of the Minister of Energy and I think it was the Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne, who through due diligence in his constituency came up with the issue that homeowners, when purchasing, were also picking up deferral accounts and meters.

Subsequent to that, Mr. Speaker, that is the policy that's been associated with the meter, but it's also an item that can then be put into negotiation with the house purchase. In fact, what this government did was it responded to the inquiry from the Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne and issued a notice to the real estate boards of Alberta, to Calgary and Edmonton, to rural Alberta, to ensure that when this part is identified in closing and adjustments or is identified in part of the negotiation, the transaction of a real estate property in Alberta, that part, that deferral account, for the time that it lasts – and it's important for me to add at this juncture that those deferral accounts with the exception of Enmax will have disappeared off the bill by the end of this year – that information will enter into the

appropriate commercial transaction of the buying and selling of real estate in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Federal Tax Deferral on Livestock Sales

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. They say that there are two things in life that we simply can't avoid: death and taxes. However, I understand that we can defer the taxes for a while. My constituents have been asking questions about the federal tax deferral on livestock sales due to drought. Well, as you know, last summer many livestock producers in Alberta were forced to sell breeding cattle to keep their operations stable. These producers were eligible for the tax deferral offered by the federal government. My question today is for the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Can the minister explain if and how the federal tax deferral on breeding livestock sales applies to Alberta's livestock producers?

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mrs. McClellan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The federal tax deferral on livestock sales is really intended to be used as a management tool for producers when they experience severe drought. I should just mention to the hon. member and to others that actually in 2001 and in 2002 our entire province was granted the right to use the tax deferral. While we had a major drought last year, we also had a very extensive drought the year before, so all of our province was eligible for the two years. The way it works is that producers in affected areas, in this case in Alberta, can defer their taxes to the first year that their area is no longer prescribed under the tax deferral notice.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, my second question is for the same minister. Given that many of these producers are still suffering the effects of the drought, will the government be pursuing another year of tax deferral so as not to put further stress on already stretched producers?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated, the tax deferral is really a federal government responsibility. It is their program, and it's contingent on the federal Minister of Finance granting a tax deferral status. They base their decisions on recommendations that come from PFRA, Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration, and the indications this year are certainly much better than we've had. We've had some winter moisture, we've had some limited spring moisture, and while we still have some areas of concern, the indications are much improved. So my first hope is that drought is not a concern. However, we do know that in parts of the province in particular pasture recovery can take more than one year, and it would take maybe above-average conditions to allow some of those pastures to carry cattle this year.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is for the same minister. So, then, what is the process for designating certain areas of Alberta as eligible for tax deferral?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, we use a number of reference points, because certainly we work very closely with the PFRA to base a

recommendation to the federal Minister of Finance. We have a Drought Management Committee in this province. There are a number of municipal people that sit on that as well as producers. We have extensive weather satellite stations around the province. We monitor those. We look at our forage reports that come from Ag Financial Services as well as our research associations, which are widespread across the province. We look at information from our own field staff, from the agriculture field men that are there, and certainly they give us advice, as do municipal governments. Members would recall in the last two years of drought where our municipal governments in many cases declared their municipalities a drought area.

We take all of that information, Mr. Speaker, and we pass it on to the PFRA. I should say that it is uncommon for the federal government to make a decision on this before fall. Last year the decision was made in July because of the severity of the drought, but I would not anticipate hearing an answer on that till fall.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Toxic Mold in Foothills Medical Centre

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the U.S. one in 10 hospital-acquired infections is the result of toxic molds. Despite these alarming statistics the Alberta government does not seem to treat mold found in hospitals with the same concern or care as they do mold found in courthouses or schools. My questions are to the Minister of Infrastructure. Given that a school in Sundre was shut down for cleanup for an entire week this winter when toxic mold was found, why has the renal dialysis unit at the Foothills hospital in Calgary continued to operate uninterrupted despite the discovery of toxic mold on two separate occasions?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, it is true that the school in Sundre was shut down for a period of time while there was a complete cleaning of the school. It's not just for the situation with the mold, however. There were found to be some air quality issues that had to be addressed as well as the mold, and those were incorporated at the same time as the cleanup of the mold. Now, you have to realize that in order to get at the mold, they did have to tear apart a great deal of the school, move lockers out, and it would have been extremely disruptive had they tried to do it while the students were in the building.

Dr. Taft: To the same minister: given that an independent evaluator was allowed to conduct air quality tests for toxic mold at the Calgary Court of Appeal, why are the same tests by the same evaluator not being allowed at the Foothills hospital?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member seems to be indicating that it's a function of Infrastructure to decide on who does what in those cases. In the case of the Court of Appeal in Calgary, that is a building that we own and operate. The regional health authority operates the Foothills hospital; we don't. The same situation was in Sundre. We do not operate the school. We provided some assistance, but the board of education that operates the school were the people who were in charge of the cleanup. In fact, they presented the results to the public, and they invited the regional health authority to come in and assess the results before the students were permitted back into the school.

2:10

Dr. Taft: Well, perhaps the Minister of Health and Wellness would

like this one then. Given that individuals with weakened immune systems are at greater risk of suffering negative health effects from toxic molds, what steps is the government taking to ensure that toxic molds in health facilities across this province are not endangering the health of patients and staff?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not a microbiologist, but I am advised that there are many different types of molds that may appear in a building. The first thing that I would want to say is that I'd caution the hon. member about using the word "toxic" mold. There's no evidence at this point that the renal dialysis unit, unit 27, at the Foothills hospital has any kind of toxic mold. There is the presence of mold, but the regional health authority is taking all required steps to ensure that patients and staff are not at risk. We are working with the hon. minister responsible for occupational health and safety on this issue. I have spoken with the regional health authority about this. I'm assured that they are taking the appropriate steps to determine what kind of mold this is that appears in this facility. But, again, there are many different types of molds, and very few of them would in fact be dangerous to one's health unless you directly inhaled them or stuck them in your mouth.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Net Income Stabilization Account

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many of the farmers in my constituency are concerned with the new net income stabilization program that's at the heart of the risk management chapter of the agriculture policy framework. Previously Alberta has opted out of NISA because it didn't meet the needs of agricultural producers. My first question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Why are we now participating in the new NISA program when we didn't participate in the previous one?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, I should say that we aren't participating in the new NISA program, because of course the program hasn't been signed off for implementation. However, we are very actively participating in the negotiations on a new NISA program.

Alberta opted out of the NISA program as a contributor from our provincial revenue in 1996 because the program simply was not doing what it was intended to do, and that was to provide a net income stabilization. We found some very severe lacks in it. One, it didn't deal with beginning farmers and/or developing farmers, who are maybe unable to put up cash in a particular year and couldn't build an account, and secondly, we found it very difficult to support a program where there were hundreds of millions of dollars in it in Alberta, in fact billions across Canada, yet producers were still telling us that they needed assistance. So, frankly, the triggering mechanisms were not working in the old NISA program. Today we believe that at least some of those shortfalls in the program are being addressed, and that's what we're aggressively negotiating now.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what will the new NISA program look like, and what are the advantages over the old one?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, any person in the agriculture industry and many of the MLAs in this room will know that you cannot

describe the new NISA program in a one-minute answer. However, there are some key points, I believe. The new NISA program is designed to integrate stabilization and disaster coverage into one program. The other key change is that producers would be covered based on a production margin rather than a gross margin, which was the old program. Another significant change, somewhat unpopular, I might say, with some producers, is that government funds would only be accessed when the account was triggered. One of the key elements in it is that government would pick up a higher share of the risk in a disaster situation, but in the lesser risks the producers are expected to cover more of their margin.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Thank you. My final supplemental to the same minister: what kind of support is the agriculture industry showing for this new program?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, we've been consulting with the industry in our province over the course of the development of this program, and certainly I know that my colleagues in the government caucus have been asking to be kept apprised of any changes. We had about 60 people from the industry, both producers and commodity groups, in a meeting in Calgary about 10 days ago. I would suggest that they're cautious. I would suggest that they are concerned about the affordability and the effectiveness of the new program. However, many of them are acknowledging that we have to change the way we're doing things and that conceptually they like this program better, but the jury is out until they see the final triggers and some of the costs.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Women's Shelters

Ms. Blakeman: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. A survey by the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters shows that over 45 percent of abused women cite a lack of affordable housing and welfare support as the main reasons for returning to an abusive relationship. The council's most recent figures show that 8,400 women and over 9,000 children were turned away from shelters last year. My first question is to the Minister of Children's Services. When more women and children are turned away than granted shelter, why is this government not stepping up to the plate and properly funding shelter space?

Ms. Evans: Over the last four years this government has consecutively added a million dollars a year. When I took this ministry over, we had about \$11.67 million. We are over \$15 million per year to support shelters, and it is not the only source of funding, Mr. Speaker, that this government actually provides. Some shelters receive funding through the Wild Rose Foundation. Some receive capital support through Community Development.

Mr. Speaker, in Children's Services we have provided additional supports this year for salaries so that they would be equivalent to others in the sector. We have provided in co-operation with the Council of Women's Shelters some support for the new RCMP protocol, which is helping with the abused women and domestic violence issues at the local level. Through the child and family services authorities we have co-ordinated with their supports and their services additional supports for children who are victims of family violence, the emotional victims as well.

So, Mr. Speaker, certainly, clearly, we're not all the way there yet,

but we've made huge strides in the last four years, and I believe that the hon. member actually knows that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. You're going backwards.

To the same minister: given that the statistics also point to a lack of second-stage housing available for abused women, has there been any concrete collaboration with the minister of seniors and housing to implement an aggressive plan to address this?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, there are a number of partners that are on the front bench here that work with the Council of Women's Shelters: clearly, the Minister of Seniors, who is responsible for social housing, can speak for himself; the Minister of Human Resources and Employment; the Minister of Community Development. I have engaged all of the ministers in dialogue with the Council of Women's Shelters to explore some of the ways that we can actually do that.

Mr. Speaker, there are a number of initiatives that have begun. We are looking carefully at their identified plan for a commission so that we can understand better how to serve them through all of the various government departments, but in terms of actual housing supports there have been plans that have been put in place just recently for the women that are entering the Kerby shelter. We've provided \$75,000, prompted by the Member for Calgary-Buffalo, who came forward with the Kerby Centre issues on a very recent basis.

So, Mr. Speaker, we are regularly addressing this issue as well as we can, but we are only one partner. The community is a partner. The federal government is a partner. It takes a whole society. Let's never forget that the one that perpetrates violence is not this government. It is somebody out there somewhere that's putting these women in shelters, and it's abhorrent, and we should all object to that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

2:20

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Did the department consider the effect upon abused women and their children when the decision was made to raise the SFI rates by only \$20 a month?

Mr. Dunford: I think that in the previous answer the Minister of Children's Services was really onto something here. I think that we really have to look to the communities to see if there's not some way that we can bring into play what we've actually tried to do here through legislation.

One of the biggest issues that I have in this whole area is that when we have a husband or a father or a common-law male, whatever the case is, who beats up on the woman in the home, perhaps even beats on the children, why is it that the woman and the children have to leave their homes? I mean, this is asinine the way we do it. Now, I understand from the police services that they can't provide the protection and keep the abuser, the assaulter away from them, but there's got to be a way within communities that we can start to look at this and keep the women and the children in their homes, where we can then look at reasonable levels of support. This has to stop, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Infectious Diseases in Corrections Facilities

Dr. Pannu: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, a recent survey by the federal corrections service found that federal inmates had rates of HIV and hepatitis C infection 10 times those of the general population. If similar rates existed in provincial corrections facilities, this would pose a serious risk to public health, especially when these inmates were released back in the community, unless they were free of these infections upon release. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Does the government monitor rates of infectious diseases like HIV and hepatitis C in provincial correctional facilities, and if so, are they higher or lower than those of inmates in federal prisons?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I think this is a good question, but I'll have to take the hon. member's question under advice.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: what safeguards does the government have in place to ensure that infectious diseases do not spread into the general population when inmates are released back into the community from provincial correctional facilities?

Mr. Mar: Again, Mr. Speaker, a good question, but I will take that under advice.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I may as well put the third question on record. The minister may take time to answer these. What policies or steps does the government have in place to ensure that when inmates are released from provincial correctional facilities, those who may have been exposed to infectious disease while incarcerated do not pose a risk to themselves or to others?

Mr. Mar: Again, Mr. Speaker, the same response, although I will simply add that I will undertake to obtain some information for the hon. member from the Solicitor General as well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton Ellerslie.

Toxic Mold in Foothills Medical Centre

(continued)

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As has been raised in a previous question, there is concern about a possible toxic mold in unit 27 of the Foothills medical centre in Calgary. My question is actually to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Could the minister tell us what action his ministry is taking to deal with mold at unit 27?

Mr. Dunford: Well, first of all, Mr. Speaker, we have to take this situation seriously, and of course we are. [interjections]

The Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. minister does have the floor. As he's indicated, this is a serious matter.

Mr. Dunford: The complaints that we received have been coming from the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees and the United Nurses of Alberta. Now, thus far in the investigations, hon. member, we still haven't reached any conclusions about air quality. Until we

reach that, we really don't have a definition at this point in time of whether unit 27 is hazardous or even as a matter of fact about the influence of the mold that was discovered. Again, like my hon. colleague the Minister of Health and Wellness, I think it's very important that we be careful about using the word "toxic" at the current time. Right now there's simply no evidence that would support this, and as you might know and I'm learning, there are various types of molds, of course, that appear in buildings, and really only a few of them are harmful and then only if they're inhaled or ingested.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what actual actions is your ministry taking in dealing with the mold in unit 27?

Mr. Dunford: There have been a number of investigations, but also we've really been working with AUPE, with the Calgary health region, and of course our officials, and we've agreed to set up a committee of experts to investigate the air quality concerns that are within unit 27. So that's ongoing. Each of the parties that I've mentioned will of course provide a representative. Our ministry has engaged Dr. Kenneth Yu, we believe a recognized expert from the University of Alberta, to assist us in this work.

Now, one of the organizations that I didn't mention was the United Nurses. They've been invited to participate, of course, in this situation. I think that to date they've just requested a written proposal, which we've prepared and sent to all of the parties. So we're currently awaiting a response from UNA, but in any case we're not holding up the investigation waiting for them. We'll continue to move forward.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: No further questions. Thank you.

Ecological Footprint of the Provincial Government

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, April 22, today, is Earth Day. It's a chance for all of us to consider what impact our actions have on the natural world and to find out what we can do to become more environmentally friendly, but before we can do that, we must first know the nature and extent of our environmental impact today. My question is to the Minister of Environment. Has the minister measured the ecological footprint of the operations of this government?

Dr. Taylor: Well, certainly, Mr. Speaker, we can talk just about emissions from this government as one of the major ecological footprints that we have, and as you know, our greenhouse gas emissions have declined in the neighbourhood of 22 to 24 percent at the end of 2001. Under the Kyoto targets they were supposed to have declined by 6 percent. So once again this government is a leader across the country in reducing its ecological footprint.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, given that this minister knows that that is only a very small part of an ecological footprint study, how does he intend to manage if not reduce Alberta's footprint?

Dr. Taylor: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, we continue to reduce, as I've said. I can give you another example of how, a very good example thanks to the Minister of Infrastructure. We have said: we will

purchase 90 percent of our power from green power by the year 2005. If that's not reducing, if that's not a good step – I even think the member opposite would agree, and I thank you for these positive questions.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, he has a responsibility to undertake a footprint study, and my question to him is: does he ever intend to do so?

Dr. Taylor: Well, I'm not sure what she wants me to study, Mr. Speaker. As I've said, I've given her examples. I can give you many more examples of where the government has reduced its ecological footprint across this province. Certainly, we will continue to do that. We'll continue to put in regulations.

Let me give the member another good example. We've asked the Clean Air Strategic Alliance to come back to this government and suggest what our new levels of reductions in emissions should be for nitrous oxide, sulphur oxides, and greenhouse gases from electrical generation, so we will monitor that as we go forward, Mr. Speaker.

Once again, you know, I think these are positive-direction questions from the member so that we as a government can get out the good news.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy to supplement.

Mr. Smith: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I think this is an appropriate time to reflect on the fact that industry without government regulation is doing its job to reduce the industrial footprint on land, to use global positioning techniques for zero impact seismic for reducing the industrial disturbance, for reducing the industrial footprint on environmental lands, and in fact that has paid off with dividends, with even more wells being drilled carefully with good corporate stewardship in environmentally sensitive areas.

head: **Members' Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

University of Calgary Energy Efficiency Program

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased with the announcement over the weekend by our Minister of Municipal Affairs that he is considering a major energy savings initiative across the province. This is because I'd also planned to make a few statements myself regarding the important benefits of energy retrofit programs and highlight some of the success stories that forward-thinking institutions in our province have already achieved and are achieving as we speak in regard to energy saving initiatives.

One such institution is our own University of Calgary, who began working on their energy efficiency program in June of 1996 through a performance contract with Siemens Building Technologies. A performance contract is a form of P3, a public/private partnership, in which a company specializing in energy retrofits and finding energy savings in buildings offers to install and finance energy-efficient technologies in a building at little or no cost to the building owner. Then the company is paid back, including their profit, entirely through a percentage of the energy savings they achieve. If they don't achieve any savings, they don't get paid anything, which is why it is called performance contracting. Building owners benefit by not having to come up with any capital investment. They take no risk, and they can even end up with positive cash flows from energy savings that they might never have achieved otherwise.

At the University of Calgary seven buildings have undergone

energy retrofits ranging from lighting retrofits to a roof replacement. Annual savings are now about \$1 million. Beyond that, building ventilation rates have improved, laboratory odours have been minimized, and there is improved quality of lighting, temperature control, and reduced numbers of lamps and ballasts to maintain in the future. Also of great significance is the reduction of 25,000 tonnes of CO₂ into the atmosphere that would have been emitted otherwise.

The U of C is also leading the way in building design with their new ICT Building, which has already qualified for the commercial building incentive program from Natural Resources Canada, and the Canadian centre for innovation technology, which is in the application stages, is their latest building. To qualify for this, buildings must demonstrate at least a 25 percent reduction in energy use as compared to the standard Model National Energy Code for Buildings reference case.

Congratulations to the U of C for their major accomplishments in leading the way in energy saving initiatives in Alberta.

Calgary Health Region

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, the fatality inquiry into the death of Vince Motta sheds light on the troubled and troubling executive culture of the Calgary health region. The judge in the Motta case blasted the health region for providing minimal effort to assist the inquiry, for treating the inquiry as a public relations challenge, and for providing confusing and possibly misleading information. In fact, the judge went so far as to recommend that the Calgary health region review its commitment to the community of Calgary.

How did the CHR come to this? It has developed an executive culture that struggles with political favouritism, conflicts of interest, and management mistakes. For example, many members of the CHR board and management seem better qualified for their political connections than their health care expertise. Individuals who hold or have held powerful positions in the CHR include the vice-president of communications for the Tory party, a former Provincial Treasurer, a former president of the Premier's constituency association, the Premier's former deputy minister, and the Premier's former chief of staff.

The CHR has also engaged in awkward or dubious business deals; for example, the sale of the Holy Cross hospital for a quarter of its value to a well-connected senior medical official, companies that have contracts with the CHR which are partly owned by CHR officials, a former chairman owning a company holding private contracts with the health region while in office.

There are plenty of other issues with the management of the CHR. In all but one of the last five years the region has run a deficit. Then there was the astonishing decision in the mid-1990s in the midst of a population boom to demolish the Calgary General and sell the Holy Cross and Grace facilities to well-connected investors.

It's time for action at the Calgary health region, and no less than sweeping changes will do. When the culture of a major organization becomes chronically dysfunctional, internal reviews don't solve anything. The province should dismiss the Calgary health region board, appoint an independent administrator, and conduct a fully independent review.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Safe Calgary Initiative

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Nestled in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, Calgary is one of the fastest growing cities in Canada with close to 1 million hardworking and enterprising people

with their clear global perspectives. At a ceremony in early April Calgary was the first municipality in Canada to receive two safe community designations simultaneously. The Safe Communities Foundation of Canada presented to Calgary its membership in the Canadian safe community network. The United Nations' World Health Organization presented to Calgary its prestigious designation of the WHO safe community of the world. To date three Canadian communities have received this designation with Calgary being the fourth and the largest municipality in Canada.

The success of the safe community model has been instrumental in mobilizing communities across the country to develop programs to keep residents safe. According to the World Health Organization for every \$1 spent on safe communities, society saves \$40. The Safe Calgary initiative is comprised of two major players: the Calgary Injury Prevention Coalition and the Action Committee against Violence, whose work spans more than 10 years. The group is also made up of various local partners, businesses, and government organizations that are committed to addressing Calgary's safety issues.

As a Calgarian I am delighted to see Calgary become part of the national safe community network. As an Albertan I am proud to have our biggest city receive the United Nations WHO's designation of safe city of the world.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask our Assembly to join me in congratulating the city of Calgary council, administration and staff, and many safety-oriented organizations for their great efforts and outstanding achievements for our fellow Calgarians.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Brain Injury Awareness Conference

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to congratulate the organizers and participants of the first annual Brain Injury Awareness Conference that was held in Calgary and attended by the Minister of Community Development on April 11 and 12, 2003. This was the first time in Alberta's history that brain injury survivors, family members, and service providers met at a provincial conference, and it was a great success. Over 100 of the 285 participants were survivors and family members.

Alberta Community Development was the principal sponsor of this event, which was organized by the Brain Injury Coalition of Calgary and included individuals from Alberta, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and the Northwest Territories. It showcased the great strides that have been made in brain injury research and rehabilitation and gave survivors the chance to share their experiences through personal presentations.

Over the past year Community Development's brain injury initiative has been successful in contracting with community agencies to provide 16 co-ordinators across Alberta, in developing a brain injury survivor guide with a distribution of 2,500 copies around the province, in launching the brain injury provincial training framework, in contracting with community agencies to provide supports for community living to brain injury survivors and their families, and in consulting with communities throughout the province through a community action coalition process that will help build on existing networks of support for brain injury survivors and their families.

Mr. Speaker, I have met with members from the Central Alberta Brain Injury Society who have worked long and hard with their provincial colleagues to help make these initiatives happen, and I know that they are grateful for advances that are being made in

helping survivors and their families. It's estimated that about 10,000 – 10,000 – new cases of brain injury occur every year in Alberta with 5,000 of them resulting from an accident and 5,000 from a stroke or other medical condition.

To the participants in this conference we hope you were able to learn something about brain injury research and meet new friends, and to the organizers of this conference congratulations on a job well done.

2:40head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to table two reports from Children's Services. The first is the required number of copies of the Children's Advocate annual report from 2001 to the conclusion of March 31, 2002. This report is inclusive of a follow-up relative to the cases of maltreatment that were acknowledged in the previous year's report.

I provide that, Mr. Speaker, as well as the Social Care Facilities Review Committee report, which has been provided through the auspices of that committee and its chair, Cindy Ady, for the period October 1, 2001, to September 30, 2002. Some outstanding . . . [interjection] Oops. Calgary-Shaw. I do apologize to the House. This is an outstanding example of work done by community members in terms of their analysis of community facilities serving children and families.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings today. The first is from a little boy named Joseph Landy. It's a letter in which he says:

I am in Grade 2 . . . the library aide, is retiring. Who's going to run the library? And I like our teachers a lot. And I don't want any of them to leave the school. Who's going to teach the classes whose teacher has left? Schools need more money.

The second is copies of a letter to the Premier and the Minister of Learning tabled with permission. It's written by Paul and Lorie Grundy, and they say among other things that "the Government is being disingenuous when it ordered binding arbitration but refused to step up to the plate and fund the result."

The final is a copy of a letter to the Premier and the Minister of Learning expressing great concern about "the current situation regarding the funding of public schools in Edmonton, particularly in relation to the teachers' arbitration settlement."

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've got two tablings today, one for myself and one for my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands. I'm tabling a letter that was addressed to me by the president of the national organization Mothers Against Drunk Driving, known as MADD. Louise Knox writes in her letter that her organization is opposed to the changes being made in the Insurance Act in the form of the new Bill 33. She says that this organization opposes those changes because they are simply not in the best interests of the victims. So that's the first one.

The second tabling, Mr. Speaker, is five copies of a letter written to all Members of Parliament by Brian Payne, president of the Communications, Energy & Paperworkers Union of Canada in which Mr. Payne expresses profound concern about the backdoor negotiations related to the softwood lumber dispute with the U.S. and calls for open and transparent public hearings before the governments decide to move forward in any case.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2003-04**

Seniors

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to present an overview of the ministry's budget and business plan. Generally speaking, we'll see our business plan show that we're going to continue to provide the programs and services and information that contribute to the well-being and independence of seniors and also to the housing needs of Albertans. It also reflects the additional responsibility of the administration of funding for homeless shelters and the office of the Public Guardian. I'll go into more detail on these programs a little later.

For 2003-04 the Ministry of Seniors will continue to target funding to those most in need with over 92 percent of our department budget being used to provide grants and services to low-income seniors and to Albertans in need of basic shelter. For 2003-04 the program expenses are projected to be \$354 million, up \$30 million from 2002-03. The increase reflects funding for the transfer of the two additional programs I mentioned just a moment ago and for the implementation of the Canada/Alberta affordable housing program. Funding for our traditional programs and services remains constant.

The ministry's business plan supports the government's goal that Albertans will be self-reliant and those unable to provide for their basic needs will receive help. This will be accomplished through our three core businesses: number one, providing financial support and information services to seniors; number two, supporting the management of and enabling the provision of family, special purpose, and seniors' housing; and number three, providing planning and policy development for housing for seniors and Alberta's aging population. Under each core business we have outlined a number of goals to ensure effective program delivery. Our 2003-04 budget identifies the resources to deliver these programs.

With respect to seniors' services under our first core business, to "provide financial support and information services to seniors," we have two goals. Seniors' financial assistance, the first goal, is to ensure that "seniors in need have access to financial supports that enable them to live in a secure and dignified way." The ministry has two major grant programs that support this goal: the Alberta seniors' benefit and special-needs assistance for seniors.

The Alberta seniors' benefit is an income-tested program that provides financial assistance to lower income seniors through a monthly cash benefit for basic needs such as shelter and food. Approximately 184,000 seniors, or 57 percent, receive benefits from the Alberta seniors' benefit program of which approximately 125,000 receive cash benefits and full health premium exemptions with an additional 59,000 seniors receiving partial health premium exemptions. The average cash benefit through the Alberta seniors' benefit is \$101 per month per senior or \$122 per month per couple.

Funding for the Alberta seniors' benefit program will increase by \$1.5 million this year to some 156 million dollars. These changes are to the benefit levels which are going to be focused on the low-income seniors residing in lodges. Over the years the average age of

lodge residents has been increasing and is now 85 years of age. This has resulted in increased demand on the kind and level of services needed by these aging residents. Lodge operators are having financial difficulty meeting this increased demand for services and are looking at increasing the lodge fees. The increase in the Alberta seniors' benefit to eligible low-income lodge residents will help these residents pay for the fee increases so that the additional services they will require will continue to be available.

2:50

The special-needs assistance for seniors' program is an income-tested program that provides lump sum cash payments to help low-income seniors who do not have the financial resources to fund onetime or extraordinary expenses. The program helps seniors meet allowable special needs such as medical, optical, dental, and the cost of essential minor home repairs. In March the special-needs program was temporarily changed to consider the rising utility costs as an allowable expense under the program. Funding for the special-needs assistance for seniors' program has been maintained at the current level of \$27 million. In 2002-03 the program helped over 15,000 seniors.

The second goal, information services, is there to ensure that seniors and their families have access to information and educational material about programs, services, and initiatives that are designed to enhance the well-being of Alberta seniors. To achieve this goal, the ministry will continue to provide information to seniors and caregivers on the programs and services available to them through the provincial, federal, and municipal governments and through nonprofit community organizations. This includes our information line, the Programs and Services for Seniors booklet, seniors information offices, and our web site. The level of satisfaction with our information services continues to remain high, and we'll be striving to maintain this satisfaction level over the next three years.

As I mentioned earlier, the office of the Public Guardian has been transferred from Alberta Human Resources and Employment to the Ministry of Seniors. This transfer enhances the co-ordination of services for dependent adults, approximately 50 percent of whom are seniors. The office of the Public Guardian assists private individuals to obtain guardianship orders for adults who are unable to make independent decisions. It also serves as a guardian for those dependent adults who do not have family members or other interested parties who might apply to become a guardian. In addition, it helps people plan for their future through personal directives. The transfer will see almost \$5 million in funding transferred from Human Resources and Employment to Alberta Seniors. The transfer of the office of the Public Guardian will be seamless to the clients receiving the services.

Under housing services our second core business is to "support the management of and enable the provision of family, special purpose and seniors housing." We also have two goals. Housing programs and services, the first goal, is to ensure that

provincially owned and supported housing for low-income families and individuals, seniors, and persons with special needs is efficiently and effectively managed, and appropriately and fully utilized.

Currently the ministry supports approximately 40,000 housing units that house approximately 67,000 Albertans who need financial assistance in accessing safe and affordable housing. As noted earlier, responsibility for management of the homeless shelter contracts and the Gunn Centre has been transferred to our ministry as of April 1, 2003. The transfer of resources, which involves over \$16 million in funding for 15 shelter organizations, the Gunn Centre, and four client support programs will be seamless to agencies providing the services.

Through the homeless shelter program the government provides financial assistance to community organizations throughout the province to cover operating expenses as they relate to homeless shelters and support service programs. The government also operates the Gunn Centre, a provincially owned and operated facility for homeless men with substance abuse or mental health disorders. The integration of the homeless shelters with other shelter programs supported by Alberta Seniors will provide a more comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of the homeless and near-homeless people in Alberta. The ministry is also continuing to review programs such as rent supplements to ensure resources are directed to those most in need.

Goal 2, housing supply. The second goal of this core business is to ensure that

seniors, low-income families and individuals, and persons with special needs have access to a range of housing appropriate to their needs at reasonable cost.

To assist in meeting this goal, funding for the lodge assistance program has been increased by half a million dollars this year to just over \$14 million. These funds will be used to assist with the operating costs of new units that were constructed.

Fifteen million dollars in new provincial funding will be provided annually over the next three years and will be matched with federal funds under the Canada/Alberta affordable housing program. Funds will be used to increase the supply of affordable housing in high-need, high-growth areas of the province through the affordable housing partnership initiative and the sustainable remote housing initiative. The \$15 million in new funding will be used to leverage additional funding from municipalities, community organizations, and the private and nonprofit sectors to build housing units with affordable rents. The new funding is in addition to the \$8.5 million announced in 2002-03 and will further accelerate the development of affordable housing in the province for lower income families and individuals or in areas of the province where housing is in short supply and market rents are high.

The \$8.5 million with matching funds from the federal government and private nonprofit sectors has resulted in eight affordable housing projects being funded. The projects will result in 420 new units being constructed in Calgary, Edmonton, Fort McMurray, Red Deer, and Grande Prairie, as well as northern remote communities, including the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo. I might add that under that program a project in Grande Prairie will soon be occupied, and the same applies to Red Deer. Construction of new housing through the affordable housing agreements will assist the ministry in managing within the current budget level for existing programs such as the rent supplement program and to support community-based organizations. Overall funding for our housing programs has generally been maintained at the current levels to ensure housing operators continue to provide quality accommodations and services to residents.

The ministry's third core business is to "provide planning and policy development for housing, seniors and Alberta's aging population." The ministry will "continue to partner with Alberta Health and Wellness and Alberta Finance to achieve the objectives and targets of the cross ministry Health Sustainability Initiative." We'll also continue "planning for an aging population, promoting healthy aging and seniors wellness, and examining issues around the care and safety of seniors in their homes." Staff will also examine emerging housing trends, best practices, taxation policies as they pertain to housing, and ways of providing additional rural and remote housing.

In carrying out its mandate, our ministry works collaboratively with ministries across government as well as community and private-

sector organizations, to support initiatives that contribute to the government's vision.

We are also working to anticipate future needs in terms of housing and the aging population. As part of effectively planning for the future we need to maintain consistent funding levels for our core businesses. If demands for services increase as expected, increased funding may be required to maintain ministry programs.

That, Mr. Chairman, is a somewhat brief overview of what these estimates are pertaining to, and I would welcome any questions from any hon. members who wish to pose them.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to be able to participate in the budget debate for the Ministry of Seniors, which now also includes responsibility for housing, for homeless shelters, and the Public Guardian.

I'll start out by just asking a very straightforward question, and that is: why was the choice made to move the Public Guardian from Human Resources and Employment to the Ministry of Seniors? I'd just like to hear the thought process that went on behind that as to why it got moved into this particular ministry.

Now, as the minister pointed out, there is about a \$30 million increase in the budget, but as I said, we also have those two new areas coming in as well. I was straining to listen to the minister, but I think I did hear him say that the cost of the Public Guardian program was \$16 million and had come with the program. If I could just get him to please clarify that and put it very clearly on the record. So we have a \$30 million increase from last year's budget for this department to this year's budget for this department, and please explain exactly how much was the additional cost for the homeless program and the additional cost for the Public Guardian. That should leave us with, then, the amount that is an actual increase for the programs that the ministry administered and provided last year and is still providing this year, just so that it's very clear. This minister is fond of accusing me of not getting the numbers straight, and at this point and from here on in any mistakes I make will be entirely up to him. This is his opportunity to put everything on the record and be very clear about exactly where this money is coming from and where it's going to, and I will be reading *Hansard* carefully to understand exactly what the minister has put forward here. There are a couple of instances where that does get a little confusing, and I will come back to that. I've got notes later on.

3:00

So I'm just going to start with some general questions for the minister, and of course I understand that he will endeavour to answer my questions while we're here together in the Assembly. I would ask that he please provide in writing any questions that aren't answered, and I'm sure that with the excellent staff that he has in the department, that will not be an issue. But I will ask if I could please have those answers before we have to debate the final appropriation bill, because that does give me the information that allows me to vote in favour of the motion.

Now, last year's homeless count that was done by the Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing found that there were 755 more people homeless in Edmonton than the last time the count was done, two years earlier, and that included 267 children under 15, which actually, when you think about it, is enough to fill a school. I'm wondering what specific steps the ministry is considering implementing under this year's budget to relieve this homeless situation, particularly when we're looking at the children.

A further general question. By 2026 one in five Albertans is

expected to be over 65, and the figure that I've heard is that approximately 4 percent of the senior population can expect to spend time in what we would call a long-term care facility or institutionalized care. We are aware that at this point there are waiting lists. According to the government's own numbers in the first quarter of 2002 884 people were waiting urgently – and that's the government's wording – in acute care or in the community for long-term care services. So given that we're going from a 10 percent population of seniors in the overall population to 20 percent seniors in the overall population, how is the ministry concretely preparing for this doubling in the seniors population over the next 23 some odd years? That's a 4 percent increase over the same quarter from the previous year and 21 percent more people than at the end of the previous quarter.

The third general question. There has been some discussion in the media this year, and I remember it was about a year ago, I think, that the abused seniors' housing shelter that is administered by the Society for the Retired and Semi-Retired here in Edmonton was having to look for additional funding from the minister, which, I believe, he was able to provide to them to keep the shelter running. I'm looking to see whether we can expect consistent funding for abused seniors' residences or abused seniors' shelters. Will that be coming out of this minister's budget? What line item could I expect to find that under? Will this then become an ongoing funded program? Is the minister contemplating moving the funding of that to some other ministry, or will there indeed be any continued funding? I'm really looking for a very clear outline of how this government through the minister of seniors and housing expects to fund the abused seniors' shelters.

I have spoken repeatedly about the need for standards of care and concerns about how to deal with the cases of vulnerable seniors in situations that are not covered by the Protection for Persons in Care Act, specifically in care centres, boarding situations, and private homes. Once again, what is the minister contemplating? What is the philosophy of the department around detecting and stopping, monitoring, evaluating, enforcing elder abuse in these noninstitutional care situations? I'm expecting that as we get an increase in the seniors population, we will have more seniors that are living outside of institutionalized care in these sorts of boarding situations or two or three seniors being cared for in a private home. They are at this point not under any kind of government legislation or monitoring. What is the government's attitude towards this situation? Will it remain hands-off? Will the government be looking to get involved? Is legislation considered? Is any of that anticipated in this current year?

The next general question. We had extended health care benefits that were reduced back in 1994 and then completely eliminated in last year's budget, the 2002-03 budget, and that took away the partial coverage of dentists and denturists and optometrists and opticians as a universal program accessible by any senior in Alberta. There's still access: money to cover some of those services was transferred under the special-needs program. I'm wondering if the ministry has done a follow-up evaluation to see whether this move to only fund low-income seniors is adequate. Are all those seniors that require this able to access the funds under the special-needs program? How much of the money that was transferred from the extended health care benefits program to the special-needs program is in fact being drawn down or drawn out by seniors requiring this money? I'll come back later to another issue that's developed around reimbursement and denturists. It's coming under a different heading for me.

Last year I was inquiring as to whether there was in existence an age-related benefits committee or any committee of the government that was looking at age-related benefits. At the time, the minister

responded to me in writing that that was not the case. There was no committee of the government, of any backbenchers, any MLA review committee that was looking at age-related benefits. I would like to put that on the record again this year and see whether any committee is examining that in this fiscal year.

One of the other issues that arose directly out of the announcement of last year's budget was an obvious lack of communication between the minister of health and the Minister of Seniors. I'm wondering: what communication methods or agreements have been put in place between those two ministers in the intervening time? I'm referring, of course, to the Minister of Seniors speaking to several different groups of seniors and saying that there would be no reduction in seniors' programs, and then of course very shortly the budget came out and the extended health benefits program was completely eliminated. It appeared that the Minister of Seniors was unaware of this. Now, perhaps he was aware of it. Well, that's a different matter then, but if he was unaware of it, then in fact there was a serious communication gap between the minister of health and the Minister of Seniors. This continues to raise some eyebrows and cause some concern in the seniors community, so I'm asking the question: what concrete communication methods and criteria or methodology, however you wish to phrase it, have been put in place to deal with that?

I have in many years past commented on the need for funding of seniors' centres, which provide a number of services for seniors. The minister did in fact have an MLA report, *Current and Future Roles of Seniors' Centres in Alberta*. This report was assembled. I'm wondering whether the minister is acting on the recommendations of this report. I think it was released last May. Will there be sustainable and ongoing funding for seniors' centres? What line item would I find that under? Is it being done? Is it anticipated? If not this year, is it anticipated for next year?

3:10

I'd like to again check to make sure that the Blue Cross benefits for seniors are not expected to undergo any change in this budget. I listened carefully and did not hear the minister say that any dramatic changes to the programs and services for income and benefits were being altered in this budget, but I'll put it on the record just to make sure that I don't neglect to ask a question and then be unaware of something that's happened.

The recreation, leisure, quality of life issues. These would appear to come under a number of the goals that are being put forward by the ministry. I'm wondering if there's anything specific that the ministry is contemplating there. There are some other cross-government initiatives like the one coming under health for a healthy lifestyle. Is the minister working with the minister of health on anything like this? Is there funding specific to it in the budget, or is there assistance being offered in any other way, and exactly what way is that?

Now, it appears that the budget for special-needs assistance decreased by a hundred thousand, and I'm wondering how that's possible when there should have been an increased demand upon that from the extended health care benefits program, which is why I asked about whether in fact there was any kind of drawdown or significant drawdown or what kind of monitoring the minister had done on that. Why would it appear that we're seeing a decrease in special-needs assistance? Can the minister tell us how many seniors have applied for help under this program, how many received help under this program, and exactly how much money has been disbursed under this program?

I notice that the budget for the homeless initiative has remained at \$3 million. What is anticipated as program delivery under this budget item?

I'm going to just talk about some of the stakeholders that have

been in touch with me. I've heard from a couple of seniors' centres, some advocacy organizations, and a couple of individuals who serve as advocates and serve on a number of seniors' associations. The points that they are making and that I would like to put on the record for the minister are concerns again about understaffing in long-term care facilities. With my mother now in a long-term care facility I'm getting to see this on a much more frequent basis. I think that in most cases the staff are very dedicated and are doing what they can, but I do see a shortage. I continue to be concerned about: who makes the rules here? Who is that wonderful someone that has decided that one bath a week is going to uphold a senior's dignity? If they want more than one, they don't seem to be able to get it. They're told: that's it, one bath a week. That's supposed to be all that is sufficient for seniors' hygiene and dignity.

Mr. Bonner: Especially when they spill more and drool.

Ms Blakeman: Yeah, they do, because when they're in institutional care, they're more likely to not have complete control. They might have trouble controlling saliva. Certainly, one time I found my mother with a nosebleed, and she bled all over everything she was wearing and the wheelchair and all else. So there is certainly a higher incidence rate of spills and problems with things like saliva and blood. It is harder to keep everyone cleaned up, and it does seem to be understaffing that is a holdup. I mean, no one was cleaning up my mother and hadn't for hours, and I had to try and search out whatever I could in that facility to get her cleaned up, which really shocked me. If I hadn't come that day, how long was she going to sit there like that? I have no idea.

There's real concern about the Dependent Adults Act. There doesn't seem to be an onus on the guardian to ensure proper nursing care. Again, this is around standards of care. I continue to press this minister, working collegially with his colleague the minister of health and any other minister that needs to be involved here, with, I suppose, the Minister of Community Development, who oversees the Protection for Persons in Care Act, to develop and implement clear standards of care for those that are in not only institutional care but any kind of care. Now, whether that's another act or whether the Protection for Persons in Care Act has expanded to cover all seniors, I don't have a bias one way or another, but I think that there is a group of seniors here that is not being cared for. What is the minister's attitude towards this? Are the numbers too small for the ministry to pick up? Are they expecting it to be done by someone else? If so, who? Why is this particular group of people that are not in institutional care but who are still in care not being covered?

There have been concerns raised about the effect of the electricity rates and the natural gas rates for seniors, and I noticed that under the environmental factors the ministry does pick up on this quite clearly, that seniors do not have other ways to make money particularly. Therefore, increasing housing rates and utility rates has a tremendous effect on them. The ministry is unquestionably aware of this, but what else is the minister doing or working with his colleagues on to try and work out something?

Canada's Association for the Fifty-Plus also wanted it on the record to rebuild the public health system, to eliminate health care premiums for seniors. Now, I know that the minister had been supportive of that. The government had even talked about it coming in the last election, and then nothing since then. So I'm wondering where that promise was.

The Liberal caucus has been campaigning for some time to have the Alberta seniors' benefits indexed to the consumer price index. I'm wondering what's happened to that.

I'd like to hear a discussion of home care initiatives from the

minister. Now, he's not funding home care, but that's certainly a big part of the aging in place scenario that is promoted by the department. If home care is not available, then we're not able to keep people in their homes, and they do move into the institutionalized care settings.

Has the minister or the government considered financing capital upgrades for some seniors' housing by issuing provincial bonds? This is from the SALT organization. They, again, feel that there's more money needed for medicare. They're asking about the P3 partnerships. There's some concern that this could come out the same way as the deregulation of the electricity and gas systems; that is, the prices just end up going up and up and the consumer, the senior, doesn't see the benefit of it. The other comments from SALT are actually not specific to seniors, and I'll come back to that at the end.

There are some comments that the cutoff level for the Alberta seniors' benefits is too low. Seniors who are a few thousand dollars above the cutoff are still having trouble getting by on their income, and in fact because they pay the whole freight, if they're above the cutoff level, they can end up with less income than those that are in fact covered by the system. Is the minister considering raising the level?

I see that my time is over, and I'll look forward to response from the minister.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll try to answer at least some of the questions.

I believe that in my comments I did indicate that the cost of moving the office of the Public Guardian, the funding for that, was approximately \$5 million. I do believe that in my comments I also indicated that the transfer of the homeless shelters and the Gunn Centre and some other programs was accompanied by approximately a \$16 million transfer. I did that in my opening comments; I guess the hon. member missed them.

There are a couple of clarifications that I would like to make. You said quite a few things with respect to extended care, and although I have a deep and strong interest in it, extended care is provided and monitored through the health authorities and Alberta Health. One of the things that you made reference to was some very poor care in a particular institution. I would like to know the name of that institution, not publicly here necessarily as it pertains to your mother, or anywhere else. Along with the extended care, if you will, there are some formulas and guidelines for staffing that are expected to be followed. If they are followed, the amount of staffing increases with the acuity of the patients. I certainly don't have all those formulas, so please don't tie me down to that, but I do know that there is an expectation that there is sufficient care for the people.

3:20

Now, I've heard comments on that one bath per week scenario, and I found that one hard to nail down, quite frankly, but that's something we might want to look at. I might add that more and more of our lodge facilities, especially in the rural areas, are going for those what we generically refer to as Century tubs to assist in the bathing of the residents. Certainly, the operators that I've talked to don't have a formula of so much per week; it's more as to what is in keeping with the comfort and dignity of the individual. Well, if you have individual situations in lodges specifically where that is not the case, I do want to hear about it, because I've heard this back and forth, and it's very difficult to cut down.

With respect to health care premiums I was on record as being

opposed to health care premiums specifically for seniors. I'm still opposed to it. However, I get outvoted periodically, and that's the life that we're in, so obviously I haven't won that go-round.

You were correct, although I wasn't comfortable with it, in your comments with respect to extended health benefits and things being caught slightly off guard last year. You're correct in that assertion, and the minister of health and I have committed to be in a little bit closer liaison so that we don't see these things happening again. I still am committed to maintaining the programs that we have in place for the seniors, so nothing has changed there.

You had a comment or question with respect to special-needs assistance. I do believe that I did say in my opening comments that there are some – I thought I had the number of seniors that received the benefits in the last year in my comments, but I may have missed that. We can get that to you in writing, the amount of money expended, because I don't have those in my head. I do know that there were sufficient dollars in the budget, that we had a good balance there, and we didn't run into trouble with it. The program has been extremely successful, and it's one of the ones that I certainly would say that we should continue.

You asked about changing our programs. I did indicate in my opening comments that we were flatlining our program expenditures. I also said that the increase in costs of needs may drive us to go up in that.

With respect to thresholds you do have a good point, where the people that are just over, in between are the ones that are of considerable concern to us, and we're trying to get a handle on that and see what we can or cannot do with these particular thresholds to see if we can capture more people in it. My feelings, for example, with respect to the health premiums are that that would be, in my mind, a good way of addressing a part of that in any event, but again we have a process where not everybody gets what they want.

You had various references to abused seniors' housing. That's an interesting area, the whole area of seniors' abuse and what and where it is. In Edmonton there is a group that we've met with, spearheaded by the police and various other agencies, that try to address that. I might point out that we have provided all the shelter spaces that they've required through the Greater Edmonton Foundation. We have put some money into it. We don't have an exact formalized program of funding on an ongoing basis because, quite frankly, I have to have a good look and see what it is, where we're going, and how it's going to get there. A lot of problems are associated with this whole area of seniors' abuse, and we, as you well know, have entered into a variety of educational programs pertaining to it, because I'm more interested in people cutting off the abuse before it starts.

You have indicated quite a bit of desire to have more legislation, more monitoring, and I think, quite frankly, that the best monitors are the close friends and relatives of the people, whether they be in individual homes or whether they be in care. It would be virtually impossible for the government: put in all the legislation you want, but if you don't have the tools to go there and see that it works, it becomes extremely, extremely difficult, if you will.

The whole business, however, with respect to abuse: that's a criminal offence, pure and simple. People who are aware of it should report it, whether it be to the ministry or to the authorities. Quite frankly, there are sufficient laws in place now that pertain to all people, not just to seniors, if they are subjected to improper treatment, whether it be emotional, financial, or physical. There is a mechanism to address it. One of the things that the police have indicated to me, one of the problems that they do have, especially when it comes to things like financial abuse, is that the senior is quite often a victim of a relative, and they're very reluctant to do a

follow-up, which makes the whole process impossible. We've tried to direct some of our efforts in consultation with the various programs to go against, for example, one that I believe was mentioned by a member in question period last week, with respect to telemarketing as it pertains to seniors. That is a very serious one, and I think that more has to be done there. Just quite how and what I'm not too sure, but that is one that comes at them quite regularly.

The other aspect. In question period today there was reference made to one of the questions that you posed, that I had difficulty in moving a senior out of their residence because of some criminal activity, if you will. The shelter is on an interim basis, yes, but resolving the problem is more where I'm at. Hopefully we'll be looking somehow at that situation not only as it pertains to seniors but as it pertains to any member in society, whether it be the mom with the kids or the senior, whomever is being unfairly victimized.

You also indicated the rationale behind the office of the Public Guardian. Quite frankly, I think the move was a very good one simply because close to half the clientele are within the senior category, and that process has to be parked somewhere. It seemed to us that the logical place to have that was within Seniors, and I'm sure that that will work out well because there are not going to be any great, dramatic changes. However, as with anything else we'll be looking at it, and if it seems necessary to somehow change it or go back to it, we'll be going back to my colleagues through a regular process to see just what can and should be done with respect to that.

You indicated some references to what we're planning for seniors in the future, and I would like to once again state that Alberta is in the forefront of the planning for our anticipated blip in the demographic bubble of the aging to come through. We had the Broda report a few years ago, which had some very good recommendations. We also had the impact on aging study, which again had a series of good recommendations. We also had two housing programs that have sunsetted and may at some point be resurrected – we'll see what happens there – one being the supportive housing initiative program, SSHIP, and the healthy aging partnership initiative, HAPI, through health, which was later transferred to Seniors. Those two programs, I might say, really delivered well. We had 1,650 some odd units put onstream. Although we do have some waiting lists, it's variable depending upon where you are in the province. We have some facilities that do have actual vacancies, and we have some with longer lists. Just trying to get a balance going there.

So we're not hiding our heads on it, and we totally have got the whole business of anticipating and planning for the aging population well in hand, far better than, unfortunately, some of the other provinces around, I might add. We're also in a situation percentage-wise where Alberta's population as a percentage, although numerically rising, is not increasing that significantly simply because of the economic climate in the province. We're attracting in-migration of all kinds, so the balance is there, which again gives you a good look towards the future, because the taxpaying people or the working folks are also coming in. In going to housing conferences and whatnot, that's something that does not seem to be a luxury that all provinces enjoy. The level of housing for our seniors, the kinds of things that we're doing, the rates that they're charged – you might say that our housing rates across the country seem to be quite low although it's variable. It's very hard to put in where you fit in. But the fact that we have the lodge program and the self-contained apartment program for seniors – those are good things, and they work very well.

3:30

I think that in my opening comments I referenced some 40,000 units that we oversee in some way, shape, or form that house some

67,000 people in some way that we get involved with. To put that in perspective – I may be a little bit off on this, but to put it into one pot, if we had all the people that we were in some way responsible for through the ministry in housing alone, we'd almost fill up if not fill up the city of Red Deer, and that's quite significant. I'm not saying that we don't have a lot of work to do. We are looking at it. There has been some significant restructuring, I think, in this province. Housing is profiled much higher than it is in many other provinces. Seniors specifically are profiled very highly, and I think there's a lot good to be said to that.

I'm not too sure what you're getting after, the age-related benefits group, but I don't think that there's anything happening there.

We did have a study on seniors' centres through the Seniors Advisory Council, which was a very interesting study, and we've put forward some of the recommendations and found it interesting that the recommendations were asking for logistic support and more communication than anything else. Do I currently plan a program for funding seniors' centres specifically? No. Currently some seniors' centres receive various levels of assistance, as do other organizations, depending upon where they are and what's happening, but to say that we're going to offer a blanket program of funding for all seniors' centres I don't think is reasonable, and quite frankly if we had the money, there are other places where I would have higher priorities for that.

You made some reference to homeless counts, and I find that very intriguing, and it's very much of a challenge. It's something that I guess every major community in the country has to deal with, but it's an interesting observation. The numbers, depending upon how you count and what you count, can go here, there, and elsewhere. All I will say on this is that in the last couple or three years we've increased the number of homeless or transitional housing spots, and that's been by some 1,100 with another couple of hundred to come on stream. The end result of that has been an increase in the number of people requiring them. So I don't quite know what's going on.

I do know that just going out and funding shelter space for the sake of doing it is not the answer. We have to find other mechanisms. Depending upon the calibre of the clientele that are in some of these shelters, perhaps our affordable housing program will have a positive effect there. I'm hopeful of that. But there are other outfits that are involved, as you well know, groups such as AADAC and what not. The imprint on it is very broad. I really don't know what we can be doing there, but I do know that we have to come up with something more than just additional spots here and additional spots there. You have to keep people in out of the cold – there's no question about that – but we are going to be working on and hopefully will be able to develop in collaboration with community groups in the business and other agencies within government and ministries that are involved in it a long-term strategy to decrease the number of people that we would classify as homeless very significantly so that we have only those that truly need to be homeless that you would call such.

Maybe one of the first steps is getting back to the old rooming house concept where you have very affordable, very clean, very good rooms. As you well know, over the past few years, in the rental market at any rate, we've gotten away from that kind of approach to where you have the more expensive, bigger suites that may well not be necessary, because individuals who do have a rather limited income and who are paying rent in some homeless facilities perhaps would be happier and better off with a little bit more privacy in an affordable situation that would give that. We're looking hopefully to get into some partnering with people. On that one, we haven't had too many steps forward yet, but we're looking at that.

I think that in some way I've covered most of your points, and at

this point I'll let somebody else in. Oh, one more thing. You asked if \$3 million to homelessness is a flat charge. That basically goes out to Edmonton, Calgary, and the other five centres: a million to Edmonton, a million to Calgary, and then \$200,000 to each other one. That's seed money put into their various groups; for example, I do believe that Calgary is through the Calgary Homeless Foundation. That's seed money that's done a very, very good job of leveraging. For example, some have carryovers because of projects they're doing. It's not intended as an operational fund. It's more to get others involved in it. I don't intend on increasing that at this point in time in any event. As you know, we've had some excellent support and participation in the provision of shelters through the federal government.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and with that I'll take my seat.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise to make a few comments, observations on the budget for the Department of Seniors. The minister has already addressed many questions that were asked of him by the Member for Edmonton-Centre. As a starter I think I, too, want to on the one hand commend the minister for taking a position in support of eliminating seniors' health care premiums, but on the other hand I express disappointment at his failure, the second year in a row, to be able to move at all on this. So if he is disappointed, he should know that there are lots of seniors across Alberta and in my constituency who were looking forward to relief at least on this front and basically would be very, very disappointed.

Similarly, the sort of supplementary health care benefits which provided some assistance in the area of vision care and dental services is another area on which I've been hearing a great deal from seniors. They find that elimination of that benefit was a serious blow to them, and they were hoping to see those benefits restored, and that certainly has not happened here.

In light of the fact that two new programs have been moved into the Seniors department, the net increase in the budget is really very, very small, and that shows up, then, in how the moneys are allocated within the minister's budget. It's clear that in housing, homeless initiatives, homeless Albertans really can't expect any improvement in the government's financial commitment to their problems compared with last year. I'm looking at this government estimate for 2003-2004, and on page 327 under other housing services grants I notice that the amounts are not changing from 2002-2003 to the current fiscal year, 2003-2004. For example, the item I'm referring to is 3.5.2, homeless initiatives. The money available was \$3 million in 2002-2003 and remains frozen at that amount. Similarly, the special -needs housing is frozen at \$4.73 million, the same as last year, and other grants have been cut back from \$410,000 to \$150,000. I don't know what those grants are about. Maybe the minister can comment on those too.

3:40

But the point that really I'm making is that in areas of absolute critical need – you know, we're talking about the homeless and the shelter organizations – groups that provide shelter for the homeless are finding it a real disappointment. I have here some information on the Mustard Seed Church in Calgary, that has been running this Sunalta Shelter for the homeless. This is a shelter that provides about 150 spaces for the homeless night after night in the city of Calgary. They were certainly counting on \$650,000 from the new budget in order for them to continue to run that shelter on a year-round basis. They're disappointed that that's not going to be the

case, and as a result that shelter is going to be shut down as of the 1st of May.

That's really a serious blow, I think, to the capacity of the city of Calgary's communities to be able to provide emergency shelter beds to the most needy. Many of these people who use this shelter are people who are the working poor. These are not people who are out of jobs. They are in fact doing jobs, but they're unable to find an affordable place where they have a bed that they can use at night. So this group, the Mustard Seed Church organization, is very disappointed with the problem that this freezing of the amounts in the budget under other housing services grants from last year to this year has created for them.

I'm looking at item 3.3.2, rent supplement. That amount hasn't changed, again, in the new budget from the previous year's budget. It stays at \$15 million, exactly the same amount as last year. The rent supplement is clearly needed under conditions where the rents are going up. The number of people needing a rent supplement is most likely going up, yet the amount available is frozen at last year's level, so something has to give. Clearly, there'll be people who will be eligible for a rent supplement but won't be able to get it because of the two reasons that I've given: the increase in rents in general resulting from if nothing else the inflationary pressures and the special increases in rents that are reflecting now the spike in the prices of heating and electricity. So there's a problem that I see in this area as well.

The city of Edmonton has seniors living on fixed incomes and still being able to live in their own homes faced with among other things not only heating and electricity costs that have been moving up very, very dramatically but also a property tax increase, thanks to the government's breach of its own promise to freeze the school portion of the property tax at \$1.2 billion as the government had undertaken to do in its budget two years ago. So now moving from there to talking about freezing the mill rate in effect means that seniors will be faced with yet another increase, in this case in property tax, for those at least who are fortunate enough to have their own homes.

I wonder if there is any provision in the budget to deal with the desperate condition that these increases will put some homeowners, seniors into where they may not be able to pay their bills. I just was reading a news story this morning, Mr. Chairman, where a senior from Gibbons is faced with a huge unpaid electricity and heating bill, and now she's faced with legal action against her for not being able to pay those increased heating costs and electricity costs. So I'm asking the minister if there's any provision here that will help seniors who find themselves in this kind of desperate financial situation, none of it of their own making.

Some other questions for the minister. The income-based benefits for seniors will increase. The amount that's available will increase by \$1.5 million in the minister's budget, but I want to hear the minister to see what his estimate is about the need out there for this and if, in order to meet that need with a budget increase in this category, which is only 1 percent, not even reflecting the rate of inflation here, it will mean that the minister and his department will have to increase the income eligibility levels in order to respond to this increased pressure in the face of scarce dollars that are budgeted for income-based benefits for seniors. That's my question. Will there be a change, in other words, upwards in the income levels for seniors to be able to qualify, making it harder for seniors living at the edge to be able to qualify for those benefits?

Another question for the minister, the question of affordable housing. The minister's business plan talks about the "satisfaction of housing residents with the quality of accommodation and . . . services" as a performance measure, and that's good that those who are fortunate enough to be able to have these accommodations – their

satisfaction level I think is a legitimate measure of performance. But this begs the much larger question of how many Albertans are currently without access to such affordable housing, and do we ever pay attention to how desperate they feel, the level of desperation as a measure of the effectiveness of this ministry's performance?

So these are a few of the questions. I'm trying not to repeat the questions that have already been asked to allow for other members to be able to ask some questions.

Seniors special project grants. I wonder what that – there's a very small amount there – is about. It's certainly \$100,000 less than last year. Is this a program that's on its way out? Is it being phased out, or what? It's a category there, 2.2.2 in the budget, and I would like the minister to please address that for me. I'm just curious. It's a small amount; nevertheless, I need to know whether this particular program is on its way out.

3:50

The last item there, 2.2.3, special needs assistance grants. The amount again is frozen at last year, and I want the minister's explanation for it. Other than saying that there's not money available, does it reflect his assessment or estimate of the real need out there, and if the amount from last year to this year hasn't changed, has the need also not changed? Will this amount be enough, or will in fact the minister find himself making hard decisions? Hard for him but also creating further hardship for people who need special assistance grants. That certainly is a concern that I have there, Mr. Chairman.

The general issue of the shortage of affordable housing in the province is a chronic problem, and I wonder if the minister foresees at all a day in the next few years when we as a province will have addressed this problem more or less in a satisfactory way or if it is something that remains a sort of bleeding ulcer in our economy and in our communities which we should throw our hands up and simply say: we're helpless; we can't do much about it. I don't think that housing is a luxury. Housing is a basic human need, and as a province, as a provincial community, I think we have to have the political will to say that it's not something that can be left unattended. At least if there is a clear multiyear plan that the minister has in mind, I would like to hear about it. I'm sure Albertans would be very, very interested in hearing the minister's answer to what his multiyear plan is with respect to dealing with the need for affordable housing and dealing with the problem of the homeless in the province.

With those comments, Mr. Chairman, I will close. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I do appreciate the questions and comments from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Start off with some comments on housing. Last week I had a housing conference in Winnipeg, and I would like to say for the record that Alberta is well ahead of every other province with perhaps the exception of Quebec, which may be a close second to us. Having said that, I don't want to indicate or minimize in any way that there is an affordable housing shortage in this province. Also keep in mind, though, that we are in some way, shape, or form involved with some 67,000 Albertans in helping them get roofs over their heads. That's not taking into account the number of homeless shelters that we are currently doing. We are funding through the ministry as of April 1 some 14 different shelters. As you indicated with respect – and I'll get back to that in a moment – to Sunalta, with those shelters there are 1,785 spots, either matched or other things

that we're funding. I guess the question then becomes: how much is the right amount? I don't know the answer to that.

Getting back to the affordable housing. We are the only province – although we signed on in June, others signed on before us; two provinces haven't signed on yet – that has units being occupied, as I speak, from that program where the money was put in two or three months ago. That is because the officials in my department went ahead and worked with the municipalities, worked with the people who are interested in providing the housing. Some of them front-ended it. I'll be very frank with you.

The criteria is based on need, based on, if you will, the vacancy rates, the size of the rents. Well, affordable housing in Fort McMurray is much, much, much higher than it is in Lethbridge or Medicine Hat or, in fact, in Edmonton. So even to use the term "affordable housing" has its own little problem. An average price of a house in Edmonton, I believe – I heard the numbers the other day – is well over \$100,000. In Fort McMurray you could likely pay 50 percent or 60 percent more than that for the same unit. So, then, that says: who can get into them? People in the professions, like policemen, for example, may qualify for an affordable house in Wood Buffalo, but they certainly wouldn't be in that area here. So it's a very difficult target to nail down.

Have we beat the problem? No. When will we do it? I really don't know, but I'd much sooner have the situation that we have where we're trying to play catch-up and the demands are going because of a booming economy than what they have in some of our other places where they are struggling to get moneys not for additional units, just for repairs, where the populations are declining and where their housing stock has deteriorated and they're in dire straights with nowhere to look for any kind of support.

What is our plan? I think that if you take what this province has done in the past two or three years with respect to housing, we started off doing supportive housing and lodges, added 1,650 units there, entered into the Alberta/Canada affordable housing agreement and made sure that it was an agreement that didn't get tied up in red tape. It is the senior officials in Canada Mortgage and Housing and Alberta Seniors that make it run. We don't have to go to Ottawa; we don't have to go here, there, and elsewhere. That was largely due to the efforts of this minister and my officials to ensure that we wouldn't sign an agreement that wasn't workable for us.

Yes, we have to put up matching dollars, and, yes, that means that I have to go to Treasury and wherever else to get those, but I don't mind doing that, because we've now got a commitment. Is it as much as I wanted? No. I want as much as I can get, and I've got a commitment for some 15 million dollars for the next three years. If you double that up, that amounts to \$90 million, and we'll be looking at if we can increase that. But currently do I need any more money tomorrow for that affordable project? No, because we're going project by project to ensure that we get the biggest bang for the buck and that those projects are going where they are needed so we don't have the problem that was created before with the cookie-cutter approach where the housing was put in where it really wasn't of the biggest need.

The rent supplement program is a concern, and that's something that, as long as I have any say in it, we will never go into again, because we are left at the mercy of the marketplace. If we go into rent subs, we're going to stay in it. We're not going to back out; I will grant you that. But if we go into rent subs, they're going to have to be capped so that when there's a sudden change in a community of the availability of things, we're not put at the mercy of putting somebody out on the street or upping the rents unrealistically. You know, every dollar that we have has to be targeted to the right place.

What are we doing with it now? Priority is the people who are the

highest need or the emergent ones in each community. Those needs are being met. Is it meeting the demand? No. Will it meet the demand? No. Will we have to put more money into it? I don't know. Probably, but it's not something I'm very comfortable with, because of where it's going. I'd much sooner have stability in the marketplace wherever we deal with it. You can imagine the beating that we would take in a community. We had some there with the rent sups that we had going in Fort McMurray. You know what happened to the rents there.

Well, what has happened, again through consultation with Canada Mortgage and Housing, with Wood Buffalo housing corporation, is we got involved in a partnership with them in something called Edgewater Court, where it's generated some 180 affordable units that are already open, and that was not a part of any program. It wasn't announced; it didn't have it all over. It was announced locally. We got together – my ministry, the city of Fort McMurray, the Wood Buffalo housing corporation, and Canada Mortgage and Housing – because in order to support the new units that were being built in Edgewater Court, Canada Mortgage and Housing allowed us to move some of our rent sup moneys that were elsewhere. So we got to reconfigure some of it and help a lot more people. We're doing all sorts of activities in housing across this province of that nature that you never hear about. Sunalta Shelter and the Mustard Seed group that you referred to came to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment and the Minister of Seniors via the Calgary Homeless Foundation and asked for some funding for an emergency to cover their operation from December through April 30. We did that. Now, suddenly there's this: make that a full ongoing program. Will that happen? I don't know. Before we go down that path, I have to be personally and the ministry has to be totally assured that it's needed and that it's appropriate and that there is some sort of significant outcome in dealing with the problems, because we have all sorts of places where we can spend these moneys.

4:00

I'm very concerned with respect to Calgary specifically, where 600 and some odd units were added to the homeless inventory in the past two years. That's significant. And what happened? We doubled the waiting list as a result. So I'm not too sure where this is heading, but I want to make sure that we get good accountability, we get a good bang for the buck, and we meet the needs of the people that really need it. That's sort of in the context of where we're heading on that particular aspect.

The utilities and the taxes are of concern. We have been able to give some degree of relief for the utilities to seniors on the lower end through our special-needs benefit program, and I was very pleased to be able to do that. As you know, that happened on very short notice, but it was very, very effective. We got a considerable amount of money out to a good number of seniors. I think well over 5,000 have received cheques already, and I think those who criticize the ministry's efforts of getting it out, saying, "Well, they won't have the cheques until July and August," should give me a written apology so I can read it in the House because those were unfair, underhanded, cheap shots that were unwarranted at the time.

I'm not going to go too much into property taxes, but don't forget that when you freeze a mill rate, you freeze a mill rate. When you have the kind of growth in the province that's going on, the increased need for facilities and everything else, to say that we shouldn't have a mill rate and have an increased amount come in – yes, the province capped it for a while, and I believe the cap is off, but the mill rates, which are the important part, are down. We have to ensure that the municipalities in their assessments and whatnot are acting responsibly.

As it pertains directly to seniors, we've been looking at a variety

of approaches that would have to be a collaborative thing between individuals and the municipalities. I've been having discussions with the head of the Urban Municipalities Association, exchanging ideas – it's only in the idea stage, I might add; it's not going to happen yet – about ways taxes can be forgiven or whatnot and applied to the property when the property is resold or something of that nature so the tax doesn't become a burden, either a portion or a part of it, and we'll see where that leads. Like I say, it's just ideas being exchanged, but there are people a lot brighter than I both within the ministry and outside who have seniors as residents looking at this.

The whole area of thresholds and people dropping through the cracks has been an ongoing and constant concern, and quite frankly I don't have an answer. The one thing I would like is to have the rates indexed, if you will, in some way, but you have to be careful with the indexing also. If you have a 3 percent index and it's every dollar, I believe, that we add to a senior's monthly payout – you can do your mathematics – it's well over a million dollars over the year. So if you're just going to index and give everybody two or three dollars, you drive your budget quite hard but you don't really benefit necessarily the people who need it. So we're looking more at targeting, and this time around we're going to be targeting, as I indicated in my opening comments, as much as we can residents who are of lower income who are living in lodges, because as we know, the lodge rents but the resident pays. The resident's portion must increase, and if you're going to increase rents, the people at the lower end of it, who the lodges are directed at, have to have the wherewithal to be able to pay that increase, and we're trying to target some funds into that area. Nobody loses any.

There's one comment that I think you made an error on. I'm not sure whether it was the seniors' benefit program or special needs. You're saying that qualifying for the benefits is harder. That's not true. To qualify for the seniors' benefit program, it's strictly line 150, I believe, in the income tax thing, and we give it there. As a matter of fact, to ensure that people get on it – we use the previous year's income tax statement, and obviously if you turn 65, you don't know – we'll actually accept an estimate. If that estimate shafts us, we sort of look the other way and then go with the real McCoy the next time around and might reduce the benefits, obviously within reason because we're dealing with people on low income. So you're not going to leave much room for much error, if you will, but we try to do that. We don't let them estimate every year because you know what would happen there, so we go back on the line thing. We don't ask for a return of the moneys if we happen to overpay them. We made the mistake; you keep the money. I don't know how you can make it much easier to qualify in a situation like that.

As it pertains to special needs, we've looked at this this way, that way, and the other way to try and see how it works. There are specific items that they qualify for – some I haven't even heard of – even appliances. I don't think there's another province in this country that will buy you a washing machine. If it breaks down and your income is low enough where you can't afford to replace it, we will. We won't buy you three in one year, but we've had requests for a lot of strange things.

With respect to the extended health benefit program, as you know, that was only partial coverage as it pertained to the dental and optical. Was I happy it was discontinued? Of course not. The money going into helping the lower end seniors I think was appropriate, and I would point out that before we took over the lower end seniors, before the money was transferred under Health last year, even at that time we were giving a considerable amount of money – and don't ask me the number, because I don't remember it, but I know it was considerable – to help seniors with the program, to help

what they're doing. So we do bend over, and I would say that overall for our needy end we have pretty good programs. Would I like to see them better? Obviously I would, but we have to make sure that it's affordable and that if we do something, it becomes sustainable. The worst thing we can do is start doing programs like that, and I think the people in the ministry have been doing a very good job of monitoring, of keeping track of it, of bringing forward the needs that are there. Again, you know, we'll have to look at the thresholds to see where we're at on that one.

In the last couple of years there have been significant increases, especially on the utility side of it, but so have groceries and other things gone up. So we have to look at that whole thing, and what we want to do is get the biggest return on the dollar, whether it be in the housing end of it or in the seniors' support programs, and make sure that people don't fall through the cracks. I think that on that basis, we've done pretty good. I think people in the province have a pretty good understanding of it. I do believe from discussions with staff earlier on that fully 90 percent of the people who applied for utility support in this temporary program were eligible, which tells me – and the ones that were rejected were not eligible either; they're outside the program or whatever – that the information with respect to the programs out there is pretty good. I think you'd have to agree with that.

I think I've covered most of your stuff. If you have some others, I'll try and get back on it. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I had a number of questions. In listening to the other members and their questions and the minister's responses, many of them have been answered, but I still do have some on my list.

First of all, knowing that there's data and information kept in the department, I'm just wondering if you've seen a shift upward or in any direction – but, hopefully, it would be upward – in personal income for Alberta seniors, say income from pensions, RRSPs, other investments; in other words, less reliance on the Alberta seniors' benefit by seniors. Also, with respect to an aging population I'm always pleased to hear demographics being referred to even though it was clarified that perhaps with our younger incoming population in Alberta, that's maybe being slowed down somewhat presently.

4:10

Regarding housing for the lower income seniors especially, for the aging senior have you looked at the cost of personal supports and whether the individual pays for those, or would they be covered by Alberta seniors' benefits? Those are not health related; those are personal supports. Possibly would there be an adjustment considered to the ASB for lower income seniors? Also, I hear about the gap in housing between, say, assisted living, or the lodge living, and, say, long-term care. Basically, seniors don't really want to go to long-term care. Is that something that would be the jurisdiction of the Seniors department, or would that be the department of health?

My comment on cancellation of the extended health benefit program. I understand the background of it, but I'm just wondering whether enough lower income seniors really understand that this new restructured plan through the SNA program is there and it's available for them to access and the benefits are much better than what they had under the extended health benefit program. It certainly fits better with the overall philosophy of the government with lower income seniors. I have to say one thing that I've heard from talking to seniors: it's not all complaints; that's for sure. A lot of it is very positive. The new form works better for them. They can fill it out

much easier and quicker, and there is definitely faster turnaround in the payment through the special-needs program.

I couldn't resist making a comment, being a member of the review committee to review the Protection for Persons in Care Act. I think the Member for Edmonton-Centre well knows that the act is being reviewed, has been reviewed, and the report has gone in to the Minister of Community Development, although I certainly appreciated her concerns about vulnerable people, vulnerable seniors in particular.

I just wondered if the Minister of Seniors has considered or would consider the market-basket measure approach to ASB given that there is such a variance in basic living costs throughout Alberta. I know that the other members have referred to the high costs of living, and Fort McMurray has been one of the most common examples.

The hard to house seniors: it's all been said. I just wanted to compliment the minister and the department because I drive by it almost every day when I'm in Calgary at home. On Glenmore Trail they are quickly constructing the Bob Ward Residence for seniors and others with mental health problems. I was there actually for the sod-turning even though it's in Calgary-Elbow. It's close enough to my constituency. They thought it was in Calgary-West, so they invited me to do the sod-turning. I know there was representation from the Seniors department, and that is an excellent collaborative initiative and especially safe for seniors with these needs. I'm just wondering if the minister is looking at any more similar collaborations in other centres.

Also, I think there are many other seniors' issues that are impacted by other departments where it's within that department's responsibility, such as older drivers, the aging workforce. Are we training the older worker? Staffing levels in long-term care were raised, even the importance to many seniors of the grooming of cross-country ski trails. I mean, that's in a department other than the Seniors department. My question to the minister is: is the Seniors department actively involved with other departments in communication, addressing and resolving some of these seniors' issues?

My last one is basically – this is definitely more a personal interest of mine – what about the senior who has sizable assets? That could be a home in the inner city. For instance, in Calgary the value of the asset has increased substantially, but that person is short of income to pay for, for instance, the taxes. I was pleased to hear the minister refer that it's even being looked at as to how we can help that senior stay in his home even though they say they have the asset, but they don't have the income flow. Another approach might be to educate them to use their assets to provide a better quality of life for them and whether we can help out seniors that basically are in need and need some assistance in that way, but it isn't direct government dollars.

Those are all of the questions that I wanted to ask right now. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Yes. I did promise the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. The name that is used is the Mustard Seed Street Ministry. That's the proper term, and I keep slipping on that one also.

Mr. Bonner: Could you repeat that, please?

Mr. Woloshyn: Mustard Seed Street Ministry. Close to church; not quite.

Thank you to the member who brought out the other comments.

With respect to sizable assets and taxes, if we could work out some method where they can stay in there and the taxes get tacked against the assets some way, I'd like that. I am vehemently opposed to do something – and I might as well state it now – like asset testing for seniors before they receive benefits and wouldn't even consider it. Your comment of using an asset to keep them in there in a way with a tax deferral or something I think is excellent, and those are the kinds of things that we are looking at.

With respect to your comments on seniors' issues with other departments: yes, for most departments. For example, Transportation is very good at letting us know. They're looking at driving things and handicap stickers and whatnot. We do have quite a bit of consultation that goes along that isn't, if you will, in the public eye. It's usually at the staff level, but for the most part I'm very pleased with how most of the government departments do interact with us as it pertains to it, and I think the awareness that we have as Seniors ministry has contributed a lot to the consultation, that it is a stand-alone ministry.

I appreciate your comments on the new facility in Calgary for hard-to-house seniors, and, yes, we do have the odd one going on. Yes, we are collaborating on one I believe with Salvation Army. I went to an opening not too long ago under the SSHIP program. I believe it's called Grace Manor. They have some hard-to-house seniors as well as other residents there.

The whole area of the market-basket approach, the basic thought behind it, I agree with the philosophy of it. It's a matter of how we implement it and whether we should or can or not, and the collaboration will be with the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment, who has been bringing that one forward all along, and again that is, I think, a good idea. It's just a matter of how we can get it going.

With respect to your comments on accessing optical and dental emergency care, I don't think there's a lack of awareness of the availability of it, but remember: our program isn't all of a sudden broader benefits, if you will. We deal towards the emergent nature of it, so if you want any kind of esthetics stuff, you won't get it. Well, we focus it on need. Obviously, good oral health is good health, and we certainly take that to heart, but we're not into that line of business, the esthetics of it, and the same with glasses. Obviously, the old program had a lot of faults. I do believe you got a pair of glasses repaired once a year or replaced every three years, and it always begged the question of: what would happen if shortly after you got your glasses you lost or broke them or something of that nature? Well, some people who were able to afford it went into their own pocket. Others would come back to us through the special needs. So that has been there, and I still would like to see some sort of comprehensive health program for seniors, but again you're certainly aware of the problems that we're having.

4:20

With respect to the whole area of housing and where people should stay, I personally have a mixed mind on this. I do believe people should stay in their own homes so long as they're comfortable, they feel secure, and they have interaction with people who can monitor them, whether it be a neighbour, a relative, a friend, or whatnot. To just blindly say that they should stay in their own home because it's their own home and send whatever kinds of supports to them, I'm not too keen on it, because one of the things you'll find is that social interaction for people of all ages is very valuable, and if you are housebound for whatever reasons, whether it be fear or lack of mobility, that in itself can become a mental health problem.

I really appreciate your reference – and this is what we are working on with limited success – on the continuum of care as it goes from lodge through to long-term care. This is through the

supportive housing initiative and HAPI and through some supportive assisted living, and we have to define the terminology because apparently people are interchanging terms with different meanings to them. The long-term care is totally out of our jurisdiction. Whether or not the housing portion of long-term care should stay in that continuum is something that I think is worthy of a discussion at some point down the road. We do have a considerable amount of work to do with whether you call it assisted or supportive living, of that interim measure of the person and the help they get so they can remain essentially in a lodge even though their needs are a little bit or considerably greater than other lodge residents. Some authorities have done a very, very fine job of filling in that gap. Others rely too heavily on the long-term care component. We are trying to encourage our lodge operators across the board, including Edmonton and Calgary, to get more into that field of providing more services to their residents.

The question of who pays is a good one, and I think that we can work that one out quite good. If health-related additional costs are defined, then obviously Health or the government should pay. If it's strictly a personal thing, then perhaps there should be a higher level of rent for more requirements, again keeping in mind your ability to pay. But I certainly don't have any difficulty with a staggered rent on a lot of things, if your requirements are higher than others. You know, this one size fits all doesn't necessarily work, but considerable work has to be done on that.

The aging population. We're getting more seniors per se, but the proportion isn't going up, so we can't hide behind the percentage, because the problem is coming in, except where we have I think what I would say a better resource base to deal with it. We do feel, although it's not significant yet, that there is a slight creep of more personal income into seniors; that is, as times goes on, we'll, I think, get much better. If you turn the clock back, we're coming pretty close to the time when pensions, when looking after planning for your future, not relying on the government was just starting to be a thing going. So hopefully the ratio of seniors who will require help will decrease. Although even if the ratio decreases, the number is still likely to increase.

I think I've covered most of your comments. If not, we'll try and catch them in *Hansard*.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It is a pleasure to get up this afternoon and make some comments in regard to the estimates for Seniors. I have a few general comments here at the beginning, and certainly those begin with the profile of Alberta seniors. There are currently in the neighbourhood of 318,000 seniors living in the province. This represents about 10 percent of Alberta's population. I look into the business plans for the ministry, particularly on page 338, seniors income, the first bullet under Seniors Income:

As a group, seniors have lower average incomes than most other age groups. Approximately 39 per cent of seniors have incomes low enough to receive cash benefits from the Alberta Seniors Benefit program.

So when we look at this particular bullet and we see the figure of 39 percent of the seniors in the province presently requiring some assistance from the Alberta seniors' benefit program, this amounts to 126,000 seniors. In that number, we have single seniors with an annual income of \$18,745 or less and a couple with a combined annual income of \$28,530 or less, so we are looking at quite a significant number in the province who do fall into this category.

I can see this also becoming a bigger problem as we move forward

because certainly right now only 21 percent of Albertans who retire have an employer-sponsored pension plan. I think as we see the situation which is arising in Alberta right now where there tends to be fewer and fewer union members and fewer and fewer workers that have the opportunity to participate in a pension plan, we will see this number grow even more. I mean, we'll certainly see a greater burden being put on governments at all levels for assistance with seniors.

As well, when looking at the profile and demographic factors – I'm looking on page 339 of the business plan, Demographic Factors – we see that currently on a percentage basis the over-80 age group is the fastest growing segment of this particular society. Again, that in itself presents quite a problem in that certainly as people get older and into their 80s and 90s they do require assistance from someone. So I will be asking the minister some questions in this regard as well.

A big part of our discussion this afternoon has focused on shelter. It's estimated that approximately 75 percent of seniors in Alberta live in homes they own, 15 percent rent their homes, and 4 percent live in continuing care centres. Now, then, in looking at this, we certainly realize that the longer seniors can live in their own homes the more beneficial it is for them as well as for the facilities that we do provide. But we do have a situation in this province right now where we have somewhere in the neighbourhood of 400 acute care beds that are being occupied by people that really require long-term care. The reason they're in those acute care beds is because there is no other place to place them. So, clearly, we do have a shortage of long-term care beds in this province. For the minister. It would seem to me that as our population continues to age we will be requiring more and more long-term care beds. What is the ministry's strategy for providing those long-term care beds, and how many, with our aging population, are they planning to put forward in the next few years?

Now, as well, moving on to housing. Certainly, when we look at housing, there is a shortage of low-cost housing and home supports for seniors, and we have felt a tremendous amount of pressure and seniors especially have felt a tremendous amount of pressure, those that are renting at this particular time, because rental rates reflect the local economic health of the communities. Calgary and Edmonton have had booming economies over the last few years. We've had a great influx of workers, and we've also had, because there is a short supply, a greater demand for low-cost housing. Also, because of the demand certainly the rents continue to increase putting more and more low-cost housing out of the reach of seniors.

4:30

As well, for seniors living in their homes or those living in facilities where they're required to pay their own utility rates or taxes, then of course there is greater and greater financial stress on these people. This is a situation that isn't going to go away. As long as our energy rates remain high, as long as our economy remains strong, these are pressures that are going to be put on all levels of government to provide housing. So I certainly would want to see more of a commitment by this government to address those particular needs.

Referring to page 339 of the business plan:

An injection of capital funding is necessary to enable local community organizations to build and manage needed housing. For this business planning cycle, provincial funding will enable the ministry to access up to \$67 million in federal funds to develop affordable housing, especially in high-growth, high-need areas and northern, remote communities.

My question regarding this \$67 million would be: is this new money that the province is going to put in, or are we using some type of project that possibly could be there? I see the minister is nodding

yes, this will be new money. So certainly the influx of \$134 million will be quite an added boost to capital funding.

Now, then, as well, the minister and I had the opportunity to attend the opening ceremonies of Rosslyn Place, a gorgeous seniors' facility, one that I visit on occasion. I can tell the minister that all of the comments and hopes that we had about a place for seniors that was comfortable, that was safe, that would address many of their needs – this continues to happen in that facility. The residents are extremely happy to be there. Yet this year for reasons that I've already mentioned many of the residents are getting huge increases in their rent to stay in that facility, again partly because of utility rates, partly because of the requirements of the municipal government that they have in order to fund that facility.

In speaking with some of the people in the capital region housing authority, they were telling me that even though they get a lot of help in building these facilities, they actually are having to spend an additional ballpark \$1 million just to help fund those facilities. So if the minister could indicate if there are going to be additional moneys put forward to municipalities to help them in the operation of these facilities so that the rates do not escalate to the point where seniors would possibly have to leave those facilities.

The next area that I would like to look at is goals, key strategies, and performance measures. I'm looking at performance measure 2 on page 341, "Support the management of and enable the provision of family, special purpose and seniors housing." Under your key strategies I see, "Create effective governance structures for the community-based provision of seniors, family and special purpose housing in urban, rural and remote communities," and the second bullet, 2.1.2, "Create effective linkages with community-based housing organizations for the purpose of transferring ownership and management of provincial housing." Again, this is an area where municipalities require more than just the transferring of ownership. If they are in fact subsidizing that type of housing, then their resources are being stretched further and further. They are so stretched right now that they are having a great deal of difficulty, so they do require some type of assistance in this regard.

As well, I was looking at a little paper put out called Alberta Population Projections. These projections are based on the unadjusted 1991 census counts. Projections will be updated after Statistics Canada adjusts census population figures for undercoverage. Now, then, in looking at this, their projections for the year 2003 were 331,000 seniors in Canada, so roughly I guess about 13,000 fewer seniors than what had been projected. I know that these projections have been looked at quite significantly, and certainly we are looking at the projections of the baby boomers that will be coming through the system and will certainly require a tremendous number of facilities. Yet once they move through the system, the potential for vacancies in those facilities is also great, so I can certainly appreciate what the minister has said when he asked the question: how much is enough?

Certainly, we have to look at this very seriously because we don't want an abundance, but at the same time when we have 400 acute care beds that are being used right now for people that require long-term care, when we have the waiting lists for capital region housing at two years, then certainly we have a problem. It's a very serious problem and one that has to be addressed.

Now, another issue I would like to address while I have some time is that according to a 2000 Stats Canada poll 1 in 4 adult Canadians provide some form of care to someone living at home, someone with a long-term physical or mental illness or one who is frail and disabled. Again, many, many caregivers are providing unpaid support for a family member or friend, and certainly as the age of our seniors continues to increase, I can see that there will be a greater dependency on this type of care for our seniors.

As the minister mentioned earlier, we certainly do need some type of monitoring of these people, and right now that monitoring is being done by friends and family. But what happens to those people that don't have either? They are certainly the ones that slip through the cracks. We do see a continued shift in health care from hospitals to community-based care, and I think this is a much more efficient system than people having to be in hospitals if they can be in community-based care, and my question to the minister would be: how is the ministry in their business plans looking forward to this shift more away from hospitals to community-based care?

4:40

Another area that we experienced as a family – and I know many people in the province have – is having an elderly parent or friend that incurs a sudden illness and requires hospice or respite care. I know that this was a situation that we encountered last year. The waiting period was nine months, nine months for an emergency situation like this. So the only alternative we had was to put this person in a hospital. Long-term care facilities were not available, so a person that really wasn't sick had to be in a hospital bed for over six weeks. This is extremely expensive. Now, then, I know that there are private facilities out there that will provide respite care to seniors, but this amounts to between \$400 and \$500 a day. It is extremely expensive. They charge \$18 an hour. You multiply that by 24, and that is what it costs if you wish that type of care.

So, Mr. Minister, I would like to see us have an increase in the amount of respite care, and I would certainly like to see a greater number of long-term care beds so that we aren't tying up a very expensive acute care bed. Presently in the province we have about 400 seniors that are in acute care beds because there is no long-term care facility available. This amounts to us taking a hospital the size of the Misericordia out of action for health care. So it is a serious problem, it's an expensive problem, and it's certainly one that has to be addressed and addressed quickly.

Funding in long-term care facilities. There have just been some excellent articles in the paper on people who have loved ones in those facilities, and certainly the care that they get when people have time to get around to those people is very good. Very few times have you ever heard of any derogatory comments towards the staff. Yet we have people who are incontinent, who have to have assistance to get to the bathroom. They ring the bell for assistance, and they are met with either no response or somebody saying to them: "I'm sorry; I'm too busy. I can't assist you right now. Go in your diaper." We talk about protecting the dignity of seniors. There is nothing more degrading than knowing that you have to go to the bathroom and that you can't get to the toilet, so you either have to soil the clothes you are in or have a diaper put on you.

So those are issues that I think, Mr. Minister, we do have to address. Thank you very much for this opportunity to make those comments.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think I want to make it very, very clear that although I have extensive discussions with the minister of health, long-term care is a health thing. I'm not trying to shirk it, nor do I minimize it. The problem that I have with a lot of that is that some people in long-term care should not be there. They should be in a lower level called assisted living, if you will. If we could get the system working right whereby we had enough spots in assisted living, I think there would be enough spots in long-term care. Now, obviously, if we get more people, we're going to need more spots no matter what, but it's a matter of setting it up.

The other thing that I have – and this is very personal – is difficulty with a bed suddenly being occupied by a person who theoretically requires less attention, as in somebody who would be better in a long-term care setting as opposed to a hospital. Suddenly these beds cost astronomical amounts of money. I wonder: if those beds were empty, would the system save any money? That's just a side issue. When you say that it's costing more to put them there – those beds are paid for empty or occupied. Are they appropriately occupied? No.

I also have the thought that if there are situations in the bigger centres, maybe the inappropriate beds should be consolidated into a particular locale as opposed to being sprinkled throughout the hospitals and treated as a long-term care centre within the acute care centre. I haven't seen those things happening. Those are just personal observations that I'm giving to you. Unfortunately, they're going on the record.

I'm glad you raised your reference to the funding of affordable housing. Alberta and, I think, Quebec are the only ones that haven't tried to play the game of: we did this yesterday, so give us credit today. We're fully aware that we do need units onstream. What we have worked out is that there's a \$50,000 maximum per door, although we won't be going to a maximum very much, half-and-half between ourselves and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, but it is all new dollars that you go into.

Now, the situation is such that if we get the players involved, as they have been in some instances, that triggers a lot of good activity. For example, in Calgary there's a project, which escapes me – it's about 200 units, with some hard to house and whatnot – that we funded under this in the program in the previous year's dollars, and the city of Calgary came up very, very well to fund it. I believe there'll be very little if any mortgage.

The key to the affordable housing – and I'm surprised that this hasn't happened in the past – in my mind is to have encumbrance-free units so that the income from that can go into the maintenance or go into a reserve to build additional units. What we've had up to this point largely is a small amount and a large amount leveraged, and then you have the mortgage payments on an ongoing basis no matter who the operator is. For example, in our lodge program if some of the facilities didn't have mortgages, they would have a lot easier time managing their cash flows.

So what we're trying to do in working and leveraging, whether it be a municipality or private sector, whomever it is: money is out of this. We're trying to keep the mortgage, through value of equity, low. That translates into a lower rent, and it also translates into something that I feel very strongly about: that these units will in fact be able to become, if you will, self-sustaining as you go, and I think that's the whole key to it.

I believe that some of the other comments were answered in other places. The whole business of respite care is a good one. The thing is, you know, that it's a matter of finding what's appropriate, what balances. Remember that one size doesn't fit all. We are focusing on largely the middle and lower income seniors where we're doing the housing thing. In Edmonton and Calgary, as you well know, there have been a lot of good choices for people who want to expend the dollars on it where they've gone into this whole area of buying personal services and whatnot. It's worked very well, and that's their own choice, and my own hope would be that we would have a higher proportion of seniors in a position to do so.

I appreciate you going through my business plan quite like you did. You see the stats that are in there, and you've sent some of them back to me. They're as accurate a reflection of the reality as we have. Those are the kinds of things that we're trying to work around, again within a limited dollar, and as I indicated in some of my

answers previously, we do want to focus on what we're doing in such a way as to get the biggest return and to get continuity.

For example, on the SSHIP and AHPI, that we were able to do earlier for getting those additional supportive housing units on-stream, that was a very well-thought-out program. We've applied a lot of the principles in that program to our affordable housing. On the initial look at the affordable housing, it's very, very well received, but an interesting thing that has happened here is that we broke with the tradition of per capita. It's per project, which means that if you've got the need and if you've got the jam to go about it, you put your projects forward, and you'll be at the head of it. This is good on the one hand, but on the other hand – and I won't go into naming communities – this creates some problems for us in a way, too, where communities that should be coming forward for whatever reasons may not be, and we have to be conscious of that aspect also.

4:50

Again, you made references to downloading on the municipalities. I am very conscious of that, and it's a concern that I have. It's a concern in the lodge programs, where we're having a good, close look at it. As you know, the lodge authorities have requisitioning power to a degree, although the municipalities don't have to go with it. We have a situation where there's a municipality that's actually reducing their allocation, which is not very good.

The potential of the people not being able to pay their rent and live in there is really not a concern because one of the rules that we have in the game is that you have to retain I believe \$265 of expendable income. Having said that, however, I don't want to be shutting my eyes and saying: well, that's fine; everything is wonderful. That's why we're looking at factoring some more money into the seniors' benefits program to lodge residents, so those that are low there will be able to pick up the increases. Basically, those increases will be flowing to the lodge operators. You hear about the rents. It's about \$1,200, I think, that is the average on rent, but it's only about some 700-plus dollars to the resident, which is relatively low. That difference has been picked up by the lodge assistance grants and municipal requisitions. I may be low on it. It may be \$1,300, whatever the average is.

So we're trying to get the picture to be clearer. People in lodges are getting good bargains, especially when their lodges, the vast majority of them, are very well operated. They're getting a good return for their dollar, and what we want to ensure is that the requisitioning doesn't fall too heavily on the sponsoring municipalities. At the same time, we have this whole business of them coming forward continually and wanting approvals to build this and build that, and they will put up the money, but again when you're putting it up, it's for a long-term basis. So it's a little bit of balancing and trying to be careful in what we do.

The other one – and you alluded to this. I believe that 2016 is when the bump is expected. If you stop and think for a minute, that's only 13 years away. If we get into an extensive building program now – we have to get the right one – and you start it off and you work towards 2016 and then after that it starts to go like this, what do you do then? We've looked at this too. There may be a dual purpose and maybe a manner of the lodges, whatever, switching over to become some kind of different kind of housing thing. It's not a matter that they're going to be gone.

The other area that is of some concern, although it's not highlighted too much, is that we try to promote people staying in their homes, whether it be a lodge or a home, and in their home communities as much as possible. There's reference made to the Edmonton/Calgary corridor, and a lot of the people are being drawn from small rural places. So we have to be extremely careful there that we

don't have a bunch of empty lodges when the current users aren't in there.

So there are a lot of variables in it. On the surface it's whether it is the affordable or the homeless or the seniors. It seems quite simplistic to say: put more money in there. Well, I'll tell you that when we signed the housing agreement in June and we didn't get the moneys going until February, it didn't slow us down for one minute. If we had had the money allocated, we wouldn't have had anywhere to spend it because we wouldn't have had anything to spend it on. What transpired in that period of time: not only do we have some very, very good projects out the gate now, but I'm looking forward to when we have the next cut, that we'll have some more good ones. That isn't by accident; that's by good planning. Like I had indicated a couple of times before, when I was down in Winnipeg last week, I didn't see examples of that good planning across the province. I was quite surprised as a matter of fact. We're doing pretty well there.

I hope I've touched on your comments. If I haven't, we'll try and get back to you some other way on the issues you've raised. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's with great pleasure that I ask our Minister of Seniors a few questions today. First of all, I'd like to thank him very much for the aspects that transpired over the last couple of years, especially in West Yellowhead by getting us more long-term care facilities in Hinton and also looking at the aspect of supportive housing, because I think that, like he stated earlier, is the answer.

Looking through his budget, I was just wondering if he has any funds that he can help us with in West Yellowhead in looking at the aspect of doing feasibility studies on supportive housing in the possibility of the Edson and district area and then the possibilities of doing a needs assessment in the municipality of Jasper so that we can sort of look at that as the aging population is growing.

Looking throughout his budget, if he would go to page 339 under Housing and the second-last bullet on Housing. I'm just wondering: are there any funds available? When you look at his line budget, when you go to his main budget, it's fairly categorized on that one line item. So I'm just wondering: do you have any funds for emergency housing? Then again the other aspect with my colleague from Peace River and my other colleague from Athabasca-Wabasca and my other colleague from Lesser Slave Lake as well as myself: hon. minister, we're certainly looking for some help on the aspect of remote housing.

As you realize, in these areas we have quite a few reserves, and some of the housing needs to be upgraded. I know that a number of years ago we did have a job fair set up and were able to bring some of these up to standard. We're really needing a number of them more in the other areas that I explained as well as in my area. We have a housing authority that is working in the greater Grande Cache area that would be willing to work on a program where we could get a hand up rather than a handout to possibly look at some remote housing on some of these enterprises or co-ops. I'm just wondering if you can shed any light on that for me.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I do appreciate your comments, West Yellowhead. Do we have something specific for emergency housing as a line item? No, but most

housing, quite frankly, at the moment where we're short is an emergency. I'm not saying that facetiously. I really mean that. About the only place where we will go in emergency is where we have the supplement programs like, for example, rent supplements. We'll look at it if it is an emergent situation to try to get in there.

I appreciate your comments on the northern and remote housing. Just so you know, I believe that about \$17 million of this total package that we'll have for affordable housing has been designated for northern and remote housing. There's also word that we received of another bunch of money coming out of Ottawa, and they're going to inform us of where that's going. Some of that may well be directed towards aboriginal housing, but it won't be in the remote areas. It's for urban aboriginals.

You referenced your having the reserves. Although we have a little bit, we don't do housing on reserves, nor will we, because what we've noticed in northeast Alberta is that where there's a reserve, there's generally pretty good housing, and next door where you have the nonreserve native person, the housing is not the greatest.

As I understand it, if your Grande Cache co-ops come up and meet the criteria, they would be eligible for the remote housing. There again the criteria is different from the overall affordable program, but what we are going to insist on, no matter where it happens, is that there is an accountability back for that housing. You're going to have to pay something, whatever you can afford, if you will. It's not going to be in the same manner as it was created about 30 years ago, where it was just given then. There was a lot of conflict and confusion over it. It's not smooth sailing for us. In some areas we have disputes over land ownership. So what do we put in there? It's not, in your case, with respect to the Grande Cache thing, but I do believe that in one area in northeast Alberta Wood Buffalo Housing Corporation, who's responsible for the housing in the whole region and municipality, will be taking on and have taken on a project in one of the remote communities that are within their bailiwick. Whether they will be doing all of them up there or not I don't know, but we'll be working very closely with them on those. Again, I must emphasize that there must be an accountability in it, and there has to be a fair way of allocating, because we're desperately short of homes up there.

5:00

The funds for feasibility studies generally are a onetime shot, and I can't give you a definitive answer right now on whether the one that you asked for would or would not qualify. As you know, I believe the Evergreen Foundation received housing from us for a feasibility study on Grande Cache, I think it is. So those are one time only – and I'd best leave those up to department staff – if they can afford them, whether it should be done or whatnot. So I can't give you a definitive statement there.

You mentioned Hinton, and Hinton is a very good example of what can and should be done between partnering, and that was, I believe, the town of Hinton got involved with us in that when the former WestView health authority was in there, Alberta Seniors was in there. That's a supportive housing complex that I believe goes into long-term care also, and it's all under one roof. In the same area, in Evansburg, in the Whitecourt-St. Anne constituency, that place is now occupied. The official opening is coming. Under one roof we've got the continuum of lodge to assisted, supportive assisted, all the way through to long-term care. So we're making, you know, in some places good progress.

With respect to Jasper, given all of the anomalies around Jasper, we would have to have a very, very good look at what is there, what we can predict, and whether we would ask a foundation to in fact go in there and start in that particular business. You know the details of Jasper better than I do, but I know enough about it where I would have to be somewhat cautious to ensure that what we were building

there became or remained in fact affordable for occupants, given their particular circumstances. There is, as I understand it, a very close association between Hinton and Jasper. Seniors very often like to be close to good health facilities. Hinton has got the health facility. Hinton has got the airport. Maybe the folks in Jasper should be looking towards something. I don't know, but that's something that if you had a good look at the situation, it could be answered by people more learned than I with respect to what's happening in the area.

With that, I would like to thank all members for their comments, Mr. Chairman, and I'll take my place.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, before I recognize the Member for Edmonton-Centre, may we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests (reversion)

Mr. Snelgrove: Colleagues, it's a great pleasure to introduce to you today the chief of the Onion Lake band. Chief Wallace Fox has just joined us in the gallery. Chief Fox is here with some people from Los Angeles from the Global Energy Solutions company, that's hopefully going to be bringing some pretty exciting stuff to Alberta in the future. That's Moshi and his wife, Shiomi Kreenenburg.* They're also accompanied by two other members from the Onion Lake band, Mr. Glen Soloy and Mr. George Dill.* I would ask them to please rise and accept the warm welcome of our Assembly.

head: **Main Estimates 2003-04**

Seniors (continued)

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to get just a few last questions on the record, and knowing the time, I'll have to beg the minister's indulgence to answer these in writing. Just a couple of things. One is around the Canada/Alberta agreement on affordable housing, and if I could just get some clarification around figures, please. The minister wrote to the *Edmonton Journal* this morning, and in it he said that there was \$23.5 million in new provincial funding for the development of more affordable housing in Alberta. Later he says that this provincial contribution is being matched by the federal government, bringing the total funding to \$52.5 million for the 2002-03, '03-04 years. I'm wondering how he's arrived at the \$23.5 million. If he could give me an exact breakdown of how that figure . . . [interjection] Well, he wrote the letter. His name is on it. It was printed in the *Journal*.

Mr. Woloshyn: Fifteen this year, 8 last year. The total is 23 and a half.

Ms Blakeman: Sir, it's signed the Minister of Seniors with the responsibility for housing and the member's name. It appears in the *Edmonton Journal* today. It says \$23.5 million, and I'm wondering how he arrived at that figure, because when I look at the press release that came out from the government under the section for Seniors it says that the increase includes provincial funding of an additional \$6.5 million being added to last year's \$8.5 million budget increase for affordable housing, bringing provincial funding for the Canada/Alberta affordable housing program to \$15 million for the '03-04 year. In fact, that's not the '03-04 year. The '03-04 year, if I'm reading this right, is \$6.5 million. So somehow you're

*These spellings could not be verified at the time of publication.

taking last year's money and adding it to this year's money and putting it in as a total. To carry on there, it says that an additional \$20.5 million contribution by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing brings the total funding for affordable housing to \$35 million for the '03-04 fiscal year. So he seems to be taking money from somewhere else. [interjection] Okay. Extends something over. Eight point five million dollars from last year and \$15 million from this year gives us \$23.5 million. Well, then, what gives with the press release that came out with the budget? Maybe the minister could break that one down.

Just a couple of last questions and comments, then, from one of the seniors' advocates who's noting the funding formula for the lodge assistance grants to foundations. Now, the minister has talked about money going directly to seniors in the lodge program. I'm still questioning about the differential grant program that exists and pushing the minister to make that more equal, because I find that it's the urban lodges that suffer the most there. He's shaking his head. Nonetheless, I'll continue to press.

The one question from last year I asked is around the SSHIP program. There was a million dollars of money left from the SSHIP program which the minister said was targeted to one or more specific projects. I'm wondering what projects benefited from that money and what stage of development they are in specifically.

Also, leftover from last year and appearing again this year is the performance measurement with a "percentage of seniors provided with the opportunity to apply for the Alberta Seniors Benefit." There's no target. It says, "to be established" and a new measurement. That's the second year that's been applied. I'm wondering what the problem is with that.

I'll just note that there are a number of elder abuse support systems that have sprung up in the community: the elder abuse peer support program at the YWCA, the elder abuse intervention team, which the minister noted, that comes through the city of Edmonton, and the Oak-Net, that I did a recognition on last week.

Also from another seniors' advocate. Making note of the cost of utilities again, the accessibility of health care services in rural regions, and the availability of reasonably priced seniors' housing are noted among their most important items. Again, the lack of standards for the smaller seniors' homes with three to four seniors in them, a lack of standards for seniors' training, and complaints about care received in such institutions.

Finally, from one of the seniors' centres the point is made passionately by the manager that the government have an understanding that volunteers are not free. They provide a very high quality of service, but they're not free. It does cost money to run the volunteer management programs and to provide the incentives, to have the monitoring, to have the appreciation programs in place for them. To quote:

There is a need to reaffirm the value of community voluntary organizations and to properly support and encourage the volunteers and the paid staff who actualize such significant and beneficial community services.

He notes that the "organizations need increased financial support from government with significantly reduced bureaucratic efforts to obtain such funds in order to do their task." I'm wondering if that isn't a reference to something like Wild Rose, where the manager has to go to great lengths to make a grant application to get money to support their volunteer efforts.

5:10

I've just heard of something that seems a little odd, but I'll bring it before the minister, and that's an issue that seems to be coming from the denturists, that some seniors in trying to find extra money are getting an estimate for dentures done, submitting the receipts, getting the reimbursement, and then never ordering the dentures or,

worse still, never picking them up. If this has come to the minister's attention in the past, this has just come to mine. I don't believe that most seniors would resort to that, but knowing some of the seniors that I've spoken to, I can understand them feeling that they needed to do that, especially around the increased utility costs and the housing costs. So maybe if I can get something back from the minister about that.

Finally, in the seconds that I have left, you know, the minister is the Minister of Seniors, which, in my opinion, goes from 65 to death. I understand that he's not responsible for long-term care; nonetheless, for everybody else that looks at the minister, they see that he is. We need a stronger line of communication and influence happening there. I appreciate when the minister says: well, you know, in these extended care situations there are so many minutes or hours a day of care that are supposed to be given to people. Yes, there is, and it's something like an hour and 45 minutes . . . [Ms Blakeman's speaking time expired]

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, but pursuant to our Standing Order 58(5), which provides for the Committee of Supply to rise and report no later than 5:15 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoons, I must now put the question on the proposed estimates for the Department of Seniors for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2004.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and

Equipment/Inventory Purchases

\$334,566,000

The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that the committee rise and report and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Klapstein: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2004, for the following department.

Seniors: operating expense and equipment and inventory purchases, \$334,566,000.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that we adjourn until 8 p.m., at which time we reconvene in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:15 p.m.]

