

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



October 11, 2022

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MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the jacket is fitting a little tighter today. I want to take the opportunity to wish everyone a happy Thanksgiving weekend. I hope that everyone had a good weekend. At the same time, my heart goes out to those who were suffering out in the cold or who did not have a place around a family table.

Today, there is so much that we could go on about, but there is so little time. We know that NB Power ratepayers are going to be subsidizing pulp and paper mills. We hear, from Jean-Guy Finn and Richard Saillant, questioning of the local governance reform legislation. But today, I want to start on mental health. Mental health cannot play second fiddle, and I would be remiss if I did not bring it up. It is almost my first week—today is the first day of my second week—sitting as Leader of the Official Opposition.

Mental health is something that is very important to me and, I know, to this House. But it has been three years, and we have just learned that the government has made little progress on the Centre of Excellence for Youth in Moncton. From the minister, I want to know this: What has been done, and what progress can she report on?

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, I appreciate the well wishes from the member across. We, too, echo the concern for our citizens, and we also share the Thanksgiving wishes about family and friends and being ever mindful of the needs of others.

Just as a quick update, mental health and addictions are under the Department of Health, which is my portfolio. I know that the member across the way referenced “she”, but we have changed. I am the Minister of Health, and I am also responsible for the Restigouche youth centre.

There has been a lot done on this file, and part of this file has gone toward talking with stakeholders and the people involved with youth mental health. The decision was made that it would better serve the province and increase access—expand access to both sides of the province—if eight beds were maintained in Campbellton and eight were put in Moncton.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I am asking for updates on progress from DTI. The Minister of Health says that the Department of

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Health is a client of DTI. I would like to know what kind of progress has been made, but I will get to that in a second.

If they say that mental health continues to be a priority, why is the Centre of Excellence for Youth being downgraded? Call it what you want—it will no longer be a centre of excellence. This was not what was recommended and not what was approved by the government. It appears to be a purely financial decision.

I ask myself: When this government first came into power, how many projects did it suspend, push down the road, cut, or cancel to send a message of perceived fiscal prudence? Now, we are seeing that the economy is not the same as it was pre-2020. The projects that the government is resuscitating are going to cost more. This project is now cut in half, with eight beds in Moncton and eight beds up north in Campbellton. It is not what was recommended. Could the minister tell us what new information was received to justify splitting these beds into eight and eight?

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Again, I can correct the member across the way. This was not a money decision because the care of youth is more than just a bricks-and-mortar decision. Mr. Speaker, this comes after careful analysis of the continuum and the needs of the various youth and children in care who need these types of services. These types of services are very high-level. In Campbellton, there is an expertise that has been established with respect to a therapeutic and forensic type of care, which is in place.

Part of the discussion with the stakeholders was that there could be a step-up. There could be a facility that does not have such a strict locked-door policy, where the residents are in a more homelike environment that mitigates some of the tendencies toward violence and outbreaks so that the residents can get the care that they need. That is what went behind this decision.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, Minister.

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will go back to my first question, as I said I would. Three years have passed, and we have just learned that the government has made no progress on the youth mental health centre. The fact that the government has not yet been able to find land to build the centre on is incredible, Mr. Speaker. I am not convinced, from the answers that I am receiving today, that the centre remains a priority for this government. If youth mental health is a priority, as I said, then why has the proposed facility been downgraded?

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It is no longer a Centre of Excellence for Youth, as I said. That is not what was recommended or accepted by the government. It seems to me that this is a purely financial decision. Can the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure give us an update on the process for finding land for this facility? How many bids were submitted, and how many lots were reviewed? Can the minister give us an update on the process?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to go back to that because some of the statements that the interim Leader of the Opposition made are just incorrect. The work with children and youth in the province was ongoing all along. As a matter of fact, it was ramped up during the COVID-19 pandemic, when we had to pivot in order to make sure that people in need were receiving that type of care. For the member opposite to suggest anything less than that is total disrespect toward the people who were stepping up day in, day out to give that care to youth.

Mr. Speaker, we can also point to many, many initiatives that are showing that mental health for youth is a high priority for people here in New Brunswick. Again, I remember announcing \$500 000 for Atlantic Wellness, which deals with youth on the basis that they can get treatment and talk to a counselor. That may prevent someone in need of these services from going further down the road.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, it is obvious that the centre is not a priority for this government. It is also obvious that youth mental health is not a priority for the government. The opening of this centre has been deferred to 2026. Why is that so, if it is a priority for this government?

I remind you that the opening was to take place in 2020. It was postponed to 2024 in the government action plan. Mr. Speaker, now it will open in 2026. Children are the ones who suffer the most; they cannot access the valuable services that they so desperately need. Help is needed for children with complex needs. These are all pressing needs, Mr. Speaker.

The government must expedite the tendering process and construction schedule so that this project is completed once and for all, as soon as possible for New Brunswick children. I do not know if the minister will give us an update, but, if not, the Minister of Health may rise again. Tell us what information led to the decision to chop the planned centre of excellence for children in two.

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, yes, I will get up on that again, because the member opposite tends to have selective amnesia here. He seems to forget that COVID-19 took a big chunk of time away from getting things done in the province. I am not using that as an excuse, but I am just trying to set the table for the member opposite to realize that work still continued—work still went forward.

Consultation happened with youth. Consultation happened with the family community. It happened with partners, and it happened with stakeholders. Partners, such as Partners for Youth, indicated that a shared vision for a provincial centre would become a network—not just one location but a whole network—right across the province.

Mr. Speaker, that is again where we commend the people who step up day in, day out to provide mental health services here in the province for youth, no matter where they are on the spectrum, the complex cases or some of the less complex cases. That is why I point to some of the initiatives that we have already gone forward with.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

[Translation]

SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED BUSINESS

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the pandemic has dealt a heavy blow to our entrepreneurs and SMEs, so much so that a significant number of them have not been able to get through it. Meanwhile, the Conservative government is accumulating hundreds of millions of dollars in surplus on their backs.

The pandemic was not enough; property values are now up by more than \$8 billion. And NB Power is to increase its rates by nearly 9%. This is like throwing a brick through the windows of businesses right now. What will the government do to support our businesses before more of them close and before individuals and families lose the livelihood that they need every day?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I do not think that I got a question out of that. But if there was one, maybe the honourable member could ask it again. I did not get a question.

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, honestly, I hope that I will not lose any of my questions today.

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[Translation]

It is quite simple, Mr. Speaker. The Premier clearly has not been paying attention to opposition questions.

What will the government do to ensure that businesses, which have struggled, will be able to get through the situation, after the announcements of the nearly \$8-billion increase in property value and the nearly 9% increase in power rates?

We know that businesses have had challenges during the pandemic. We know that, today, businesses will find it even more difficult to get through this situation. People in this province need their livelihoods to support their families. Mr. Speaker, what will the government do to support our small and medium-sized businesses in New Brunswick?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I know that the member opposite got a little lost in all the information that he was trying to get out before actually deciding whether or not to ask anything. But I guess that there is something there about that.

Maybe he would like to have a little clarity on what small businesses are doing in this province. They are growing as they have never done before. They are expanding in every direction. You know, the biggest issue that they have is finding people, because we need more people to fit the growth.

Mr. Speaker, yes, we know that assessments are up. The value of everybody's property is worth more now than it was. You ask a fundamental question when the assessment process comes in, which is: Would you sell your house for that price? You would say: Oh, no, I would want more than that. Or you would say: Well, yeah, I guess it is right.

Mr. Speaker, we know that the province is growing, and we know that it brings challenges to us. Through the ability that we have generated internally and with the way that we are able to work with the dollars that we have, we are able to reduce taxes, keep reducing taxes, and make it cheaper for people to work, live, and move here, which is what they are doing. That is what people are looking for, and I am proud to be in a government that is a part of it.

[Translation]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, while our businesses are struggling to keep up with rising inflation—and I hope that the Premier is listening—the government is benefiting from property assessment hikes and power rate increases. Added to this is the glaring lack of staff needed to function completely effectively.

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Where is the government and what is it doing to ensure that our province has enough human resources to help our industries and our small and medium-sized businesses? Is the Premier waiting until we are in the middle of an economic crisis to tell us: We are out of money, and we are sorry? What New Brunswickers, small and medium-sized business owners, and all industries want to know is that the government has a plan to ensure that there are enough human resources for the future.

[Original]

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I applaud the member opposite for actually bringing up this question with respect to small businesses. I am proud to rise today to talk about some of the great stuff that we have done in the province. Our target was \$34 million on exports, and we actually reached \$94 million. Is that not awesome? We have signed over 70 deals in the province—2 000 jobs—awesome again. We have helped 36 companies get into 94 markets. That is pretty amazing and has never been done before. We have serviced over 7 000 businesses through our Business Navigators program, with a 97% satisfaction rate. These great things are going on in the province. Thank you for the question.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order.

[Translation]

NB POWER

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, as you know, NB Power announced last week that it would impose an 8.9% increase in power rates on all its commercial and residential customers. The Crown corporation indicated that this increase was necessary and that all its customers should contribute to helping it resolve its financial problems. However, we learned this morning that the six pulp and paper mills in New Brunswick will not be affected by this major increase.

At the end of the day, what I would like to know is this: Can the Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development explain to us the reasoning behind the exclusion of these six plants from next year's power rate increase?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite would be well aware of the process with the EUB

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and the application that NB Power is now filing. That is a process that has been going on for a long time, and there will be a lot of intervenors and a lot of understanding of what the application is for and why.

We can spend time in the House going back and forth on every detail of the application, or we can let the process unfold and let the EUB do exactly the job that it is supposed to do—analyze the application, ask whether it is real or not real, and accept or reject it. That is why we have an Energy and Utilities Board—to do its job and protect the citizens of the province. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is funny, Mr. Premier. NB Power said this morning in the paper that it has nothing to do with NB Power. It is all about the legislation that is in place for subsidies. Again, I ask you: What justifies the reason that you are excluding the six pulp and paper mills of the province from the increase that NB Power is actually imposing on every single person in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I will continue, and I will come back and say that we have a process that is unfolding. I know the rate increase that is being proposed is higher than we have seen in past years. There are a number of reasons for that. NB Power cites additional costs, which it has incurred over the years because of decisions made in this House, at about a billion and a half dollars. NB Power actually said that 2¢ of the 8¢ increase is directly related to the carbon tax and associated costs. That amounts to about \$22 billion or \$24 billion per year.

With the process that we have right now in the Legislature, would there have been a discussion before the EUB put the rate increase forward? Nothing has changed, Mr. Speaker, because of the rate increase suggestion or application. Nothing has changed, so let the process unfold. Going forward, if we need to change something because it is unfair, we will do that. But right now, we have a process. We have legislation. We are not changing any of that, and we are letting the process unfold. Let's make that happen and do what we planned to do from the beginning. Thank you.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is funny that the Premier talks about the process and letting the process take its course. When Irving Oil was going to face an increase, he was actually ready to write a letter. I think he did write a letter, and someone signed it or someone was forced to sign it.

Again, NB Power said today that this has nothing to do with NB Power and its having the decision of whether or not to impose that increase on the pulp and paper mills. This is legislation that is in place and that gives the mills subsidies. So I again ask the Premier: Can you explain the rationale behind these subsidies? Are they still necessary today?

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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, we know full well that we have not changed anything here. We did not introduce legislative change because of the EUB application or the NB Power application.

But I would like to go back and correct the member opposite in relation to the letter. If he wants to read the letter and to go back, rather than going back to just part of the history, say: Well, what happened during that time when Nova Scotia increased rates by 4¢ or 5¢ per litre when Irving Oil was asking for increases? Prince Edward Island may or may not have. Newfoundland increased its rates at that time, Mr. Speaker, but we did not. All we did was ask the EUB to analyze it and to do the process. And do you know what? The process never happened. Irving Oil pulled out and said, well, we are not going through that. But do you know what? We did not change the pricing a dime, Mr. Speaker—not a dime. So let the record show. Thank you.

[Translation]

SCHOOLS

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Mr. Speaker, a month ago, the government announced with great fanfare that it was increasing support for food programs in 110 schools in the southern part of the province, with the goal of providing vulnerable students with better access to healthy meals or free breakfasts. While the initiative is commendable, parents in the northern part of the province and I are questioning the government strategy, which excludes regions such as the Acadian Peninsula, Chaleur, or Restigouche, where the child poverty rate is highest.

So, my question to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is this: How do you explain that these free meals are reserved for children in certain regions of the province only?

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for her question. First of all, it is not at all correct to say that it is a matter of one region versus another. This program started two years ago. We are continually adding schools, which is why not all schools in the province are covered right now.

When a program like this is provided, the goal is always to ensure that it is of high quality and that it does target young people who have needs. We need to take this opportunity to convey the message to parents that we need them to support their children as much as possible. However, when parents cannot do so, we absolutely must help young people.

However, today, we do not have a program that says: Yes, there is one place in the province that receives assistance but not another. We are adding schools every year to ensure that

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we have a provincial program to help all the young people in the province who need our help. Thank you very much for the question.

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Thank you, Mr. Minister, through the chair. I want to remind you that the Conservative government, during its 2020 election campaign, promised to implement food programs in all schools in the province in 2021-22. Therefore, the question is this: What is the minister's plan and in what order will schools be chosen, because it seems to me that schools in the northern region of the province always come last, though that is where the child poverty rate is the highest?

In fact, I think that there are already some community initiatives. Among others, in our region, there is the Fondation des petits déjeuners de la Péninsule acadienne. The department could have added to these initiatives, because they are ready to receive... Children in northern New Brunswick are just as entitled to these meals as students elsewhere.

So, how do you explain the announcement that only some children in the province are entitled to these meals? What I wonder is this: After 50 years of the Equal Opportunity program, are we still a two-tier society?

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you again to the member for her question. First of all, it is sad to see this effort to create division based on regions in our province. It is sad to see the opposition creating division based on language in this province; it is sad.

As I have already said in my answer to the last question, there is a program to which schools are added every year. I know for sure that the member who asked the question and all members who are in this room today understand that there has been a pandemic for the last couple of years. This pandemic has caused delays in some programs, no doubt. My choice as minister and our choice as a government, when there is a choice to do something too quickly without the necessary preparations, is not to make that choice. Sustainable, well-resourced programs will be established to specifically target the needs of the people in our province. In this case, this involves our youth. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

NB POWER

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, Robert Jones reported on CBC this morning that \$3.4 million of the rate increase proposed by NB Power will be used to increase the subsidies that the *Electricity Act* forces the utility to provide to six pulp and paper mills. This was brought in by the Conservatives and endorsed by the Liberals. This will bring the overall subsidy to pulp mills to \$14.7 million next year. What a deal they got. We will all pay higher power rates so that companies run by billionaires generate even

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more wealth for them. In fact, the ratepayers of this province have paid \$100 million over the past 10 years to subsidize those pulp mills.

Mr. Speaker, will the Minister of Energy introduce a bill to eliminate those subsidies from the *Electricity Act* so that NB Power can recover its costs of supplying power to the pulp mills from the pulp mills rather than from the ratepayers?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that we have adequately covered this question, but in relation to understanding the process and the recommendation the EUB will come out with, I think it will look at the broad spectrum of the application and say what is relevant, what is not relevant, and what makes sense for the shareholders—the people of the province. And then, how will we go forward?

To debate what is being proposed in the current application and to do that here in this House and to suggest that we make premature changes to legislation without understanding the outcome of the hearings, in which lots of information will be provided and lots of intervenors will come forward... There will be all kinds of studies and investigations. I would guess that this will be one of them. It will be analyzed to say whether this is fair or not fair to industry and to the ratepayers, and there will be a recommendation.

Mr. Speaker, once again, we will react to the process and the recommendations that come from the process. That is how it works. There are lots of opportunities to intervene and to have a say in that process, so let it proceed.

[Translation]

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, the role of the New Brunswick Energy and Utilities Board is not to comment on government policy; that is not its role at all.

Successive governments have been generous to billionaires who own New Brunswick paper mills or have invested in them. These governments have guaranteed the wood supply for 25 years. They have reduced property assessments and limited property tax rates. They have sold wood at bargain-basement prices. They have subsidized power costs for the mills.

New Brunswickers are forever seeing huge increases in their property assessments, and NB Power is asking for the largest power rate increase that we have seen in years. How exactly can the Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development continue to justify this special treatment for the rich, when ordinary New Brunswickers have to put up with such increases?

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I think that the changes that were made in municipal reform in order to allow communities the room for the taxation of heavy industry and such were a move to allow communities to directly tax those heavy industries that they felt were not being taxed properly. There is a lot of information in terms of comparatives of different industries and what this should be like. I know that the minister is looking at other categories going forward and at how that makes sense, because there are numerous different blocks that different provinces may have.

I think if we were to decide how we assess this, how the EUBs look at this, and how our rate goes, we would put it all in context. Currently, our rates in New Brunswick are about 30% less, I think, than Nova Scotia's, as an example. We are about the third or fourth in the country. We know that NB Power carries a huge debt and that it has, and I have talked about some of the reasons why that is the case. So, Mr. Speaker, there is an element of how we measure this and how we ensure that we have rates that are comparable and competitive for both industry and our shareholders so that we get the right numbers.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, Premier.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am going to stick to mental health. We know that the Child and Youth Advocate has recently expressed concerns with respect to a lack of defined goals to address access to youth mental health services. We talked about the centre of excellence earlier. The advocate found serious deficiencies with regard to planning and long-term strategy in several key areas such as human resources, recruitment, community partnerships, First Nations services, and primary care in mental health. We know that he said that this government has a bunch of pilot projects, but he said that a pilot project without a plan is a placebo.

He is looking for an update within eight months, and he is going to be updating. He is looking for a comprehensive plan from this government to address those issues with respect to human resource recruitment and the like. He wants a defined timeline. We are asking whether this government is prepared to answer those recommendations and to provide a comprehensive plan to answer each of his recommendations. Is this government ready to do that?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for that question. We did receive the report from the Child and Youth Advocate, and we take that very, very seriously. We want to look at each and every one of those recommendations that were put forth. We do work very closely with the Office of the Child

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and Youth Advocate in making sure that the needs of the youth in the province are met. He did comment on a number of positive things that have now been happening.

I noticed that the member across the way said that we are bragging when we make a good announcement, but that is the information that people want to hear. That is the information that they want to hear—that we are moving forward. We are helping the youth here in the province. I was pleased to be part of the new child and youth Act not too long ago, when all the members in this Legislature voted unanimously to pass that to give youth more ability to access the services that they need. That goes on and on and on, and we will continue to work with all the stakeholders right across the continuum in order to make life better.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, another valid concern raised is with respect to mental health services in First Nations communities. As the minister said, they can talk about successes. We can look at what works, but we also need to look at shortcomings and what does not work. One of the areas is, in fact, the First Nations communities. The Child and Youth Advocate said that the differences in suicide rates and a host of other indicators are unconscionable.

The advocate said that two things need to be done. First, the reported progress in services in Elsipogtog needs to be accompanied by a plan to roll out services in the other 14 First Nations. He says that the problem is too acute to have only one story to tell. Second, he said that there needs to be a point person within government. The advocate said that he had heard from too many chiefs and leaders that everyone is passing the buck and that there is not one point person in this government. So I am asking: Is this government prepared to address the concerns with respect to First Nations communities and the mental health services provided?

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the very relevant question. I would say that I actually agree with the advocate with respect to the gaps in services. With First Nations, as you probably know, health, mental health, and addictions are actually a federal responsibility, so there is a gap in what the feds actually provide for First Nations. The province of New Brunswick is actually working with the RHAs and the First Nations to see whether we can actually cover that gap.

The other thing that I would say is really important about the First Nations file is that in the first quarter of this year, we had 52 meetings with the First Nations right across the province. During the course of those meetings, we talked about mental health, we talked about addictions, and we talked about housing. We talked about all those things that are relevant for First Nations. So I want to continue those discussions with First Nations, and I

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can tell you that there is a big advocate on this side of the House in terms of fixing those issues around addictions, particularly in the First Nations community.

I can also tell you that I spoke with one of the chiefs who said that this is probably the main priority when it comes to their actual communities. So there is lots of talk about economic development and opportunities on that front, but there is also lots of talk about mental health and addictions.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

The time for question period has expired.