

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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HEALTH CARE

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, we are in a full-blown health care crisis that is putting the public at risk. Late last week, again, we read a story about a Memramcook woman who was minutes away from death after waiting 14 minutes in an emergency room. We have been hearing similar stories for months now, including, unfortunately, stories about people dying while waiting for health care. Citizens are rallying outside of hospitals and city halls as a result of this crisis. People want solutions right now to alleviate pressures on our emergency rooms. People are scared to get sick. They are scared that they will need to access an emergency room or access our health care system. They want action. They want action today, not tomorrow, and the minister cannot keep kicking this can down the road.

Everywhere I went last week, people were asking: What is this government doing to address the health care crisis and alleviate pressures on our ERs? What is the minister doing, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Everywhere I went last week, I told them what we are doing. And I thank the frontline workers every day for what they are doing. They step up. They step up. The ones who go to work step up and help the people who show up.

Mr. Speaker, there are a lot of good things going on in the health care system. We know that more needs to be done, and we have been doing that. The members opposite want to stand in the way. Last week, we talked about Bill 3. Bill 3 would help reduce the wait times and the wait lines for cataract surgeries, hip surgeries, and knee surgeries. What did the opposition members do? They stood against it, Mr. Speaker. They stood against it.

We are open to new and innovative ideas. We have been putting those in place many times. NB Health Link has been working very well to hook people up with doctors, and eVisitNB has been assisting up to 546 people per day, Mr. Speaker. That is innovative. That is health care. That is getting the job done. And if the members opposite want to join in and help, then help—do not get in the way.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, everywhere I went last week, New Brunswickers were talking about three things. They were talking about the health care crisis, the huge surplus, and no action from this government. The situation is so bad that, as I said, people are taking to the streets to protest about this government.

As this patient pointed out, it is time for the Premier to step up and address this issue. If he does not, then maybe it is time for him to resign and for someone who cares to step in and do the job. People have lost confidence in this government, which brags about surpluses

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but has people begging for health care. This is a government that brags about population growth but has no plan to keep people here. People who cannot access health care are going to leave the province, Mr. Speaker. What concrete measures is the government going to put in place to address the pressures on our emergency rooms? What he has talked about today has not been working.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, the member opposite has been putting on a show here today. Look, I understand. I have been in the opposition before. He asked for some concrete things. I have some concrete things that I want to tell you about, Mr. Speaker, if I have the floor.

Last week, I visited the school up in Campbellton where EMTs are going to be trained to help with our ambulance service across this province. That is in addition to the EMT class that was started in the Moncton region to help, again, provide ambulance services to the people of New Brunswick. Mr. Speaker, I met with the RHAs, and again, they committed to helping with patient flow in the emergency rooms and helping people get the emergency services they need. Vitalité and Horizon have been doing recruitment sessions right across this globe in order to alleviate the situation. We brought in travel nurses. The RHAs brought in travel nurses, and you stood against it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier always likes to say that money will not solve problems. He is always saying it, while running huge surpluses and saying that the federal government owes us even more money. It is rhetoric to avoid acknowledging that there is a crisis and that, as Premier of New Brunswick, he has a responsibility in this regard.

Some things can be fixed with targeted and strategic investments, such as issues related to health care facilities, as well as the recruitment and retention of human resources. In our 2018 election platform, we talked about non-urgent care centres to move these procedures out of emergency rooms. Today, we are talking about multidisciplinary centres.

Unfortunately, this Conservative government, which is in office today, has other priorities; it is not about serving the people of the province. How does the minister plan to solve this problem and how long will it take for him to make changes?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that the back room had better talk to the front room, because the member opposite talked about doing procedures outside of the hospitals and clinics. That was Bill 3. We had the debate last week. And guess what! They stood against it.

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Mr. Speaker, we have a number of innovative programs underway. We are working with the RHAs on recruitment and retention. We need all people working together in order to make sure that the health care system stays together to deliver the services that are needed. We could talk about Tele-Care 811. We could talk about NB Health Link. We could talk about eVisitNB. We could talk about the recruitment initiatives across the world—Dubai, Senegal. We could talk about the nurse navigators helping internationally trained RNs to come here to our province, navigate the system, and get to work as soon as possible. I already talked about the EMT program that is going to put more ambulances on the road to serve the people of New Brunswick. Mr. Speaker, we need a cohesive attack, which is going on but which is something they do not want to see happen.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, minister.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Last week, during a scrum, the Labour Minister refused to use the word “scab” to define private contractors possibly being hired by the government to replace public service employees during a strike. Two media outlets, Radio-Canada and CBC, then proceeded to ask him what term he would use to define people being asked to cross the picket line. Well, that question quickly put an end to the scrum, as the minister ran back to his office as if his pants were on fire.

Mr. Speaker, let’s call a spade a spade. Whether you use the terms “scabs”, “strikebreakers”, or “replacement workers”, at the end of the day, the government is giving itself the power to completely push aside fair practice and hire, as it wishes, workers from outside the government to come in and do the work of our public servants. The minister could not answer then. Let’s see whether, in front of our union leaders, he can answer today and tell us why he wants to hire scabs.

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am going to say the same thing that I said last week. We need to dial down the rhetoric here. We are not bringing in replacement workers to break a strike. We are not bringing in replacement workers to fill roles that are nondesignated.

All that we are simply saying is that the level of designated services and the level of designated workers required to provide those services must be protected. These are designated workers that both sides have agreed to, or in the event that they cannot come to an agreement, the quasi-judicial Labour and Employment Board will establish those designated levels of workers. All that we are saying is that in the event of a strike, there will be no attempt to do anything to take away New Brunswickers’ right to strike in any way, shape, or form, nor are we bringing in replacement workers for nondesignated roles.

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister can get up and say that these future employees are not scabs, but at the end of the day, if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck.

The Labour Minister not only wants to use scab workers but also wants to legalize using them. How does he justify this? He does it by saying that unions have not been meeting their obligated level of essential workers during strike periods. He never came out publicly to give us an example of levels that were not being met, he never talked to unions about it, and he never triggered the labour board process that was already in place. So why is the minister creating this false narrative and saying that changes to the Act are necessary and that scab workers must be brought in?

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am also going to reiterate what I said last week. I would never support any kind of legislation that legalizes scabs in this province. That is not what this is.

This is about a level of service and the workers required to deliver that service that both sides have agreed to. We are just trying to bring in some clarity around the legislation so that this is maintained in the event of a work stoppage—a legal strike. There is no attempt to interfere with a legal strike in any way, shape, or form here. That is not what this is. The member opposite can grandstand and throw around all kinds of rhetoric, but that is not what we are attempting to do here.

I have a meeting scheduled for next week with members of the labour movement. I see some of those members in the gallery today. In fact, my offer is that if time allows for them, I would like to meet with them later today. I would like to have a conversation...

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

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister is so caught up in his story that he does not realize that the real issue for the government is meeting the designated levels during normal times. In Saint John, for example, the Social Development branch has 17 vacant child protection positions in that region alone. It was in dire shape before last year's strike was even a consideration. That is where the government and the Labour Minister need to put their focus and attention.

[*Translation*]

This government is out of touch with the real needs of New Brunswickers and has no long-term vision. So, the next logical step is for me to ask this question to the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour: Why is he outright refusing to work with unions before making significant changes to the current Act?

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Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): The member opposite is mixing two issues together. Regarding the issue that he just raised, this is the first time that he has ever raised it on the floor of this House. He brings it up when it is convenient for him.

Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House, we take free collective bargaining very seriously. This is about clarification. This is about clarification around the rules of engagement, as we said before. I would be more than happy... My department sat down and gave a technical briefing to members of the labour movement before we introduced this legislation. My door is open to them if they want to meet. I have agreed to meet with them later next week. If we want to do that sooner, I am prepared to do that as well.

RENTS

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, contrary to the Tory governments in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, this Tory government is not going ahead with keeping a rent cap for 2023, leaving many New Brunswickers to scramble to find the extra money that they will need to cover their rent increases in 2023.

This government has been saying, notably, that a rent cap will stifle construction in the current New Brunswick housing market. Can it produce any tangible evidence or studies that can properly explain this reasoning? It was relying on an economist who clearly said: Well, that is not exactly what I said. Richard Saillant actually said that a rent cap is totally appropriate in this current context. I do not know what is going on here, but I have yet to see tangible evidence that shows that a rent cap is not justifiable right now. I am asking the minister this: What is that evidence? Can she produce it? Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year, there were 135 starts of residential properties of two units and above. That equaled 2 600 new units that were started last year. Mr. Speaker, this year, there have only been 45 starts of properties of two units and above, which equates to only 1 000 new units. I do not know what evidence the opposition needs beyond that, but we have had half the housing starts this year, when we had the rent cap in place, that we had last year.

As I have said in the past, we are taking a balanced approach to thinking about affordable housing and the entire housing spectrum. We put controls in place to help tenants. In fact, I introduced some just a couple of weeks ago, which we will be debating here on the floor of the House. We take the needs of both tenants and landlords very seriously, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, minister.

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Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Wow, Mr. Speaker. I mean, if she is looking for more evidence, let's talk about the fact that there is less construction. What about the inflation that is going on, that rampant inflation? What about the increase in construction costs? What about the labour shortage that we have right now? Those are the real issues that stifle construction. It has nothing to do with the rent cap. The economist said it. Even if it was a factor, it would be small in normal times. In these current times, it is completely negligible.

I can say that the minister does not have a leg to stand on. There is no justification for not having the rent cap right now. Right now, it is clear: There is a shortage, and we need to protect the ones who need protecting. We are talking about the working class, the working poor, and the vulnerable population. Right now, they are experiencing serious difficulty. Some are landing in the streets, and the minister needs to do something, including a rent cap. Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Mr. Speaker, there have been a number of things put in place to help tenants, and we will continue to look at opportunities to assist tenants going forward. When I have discussed this issue, I have been very clear that we are taking a balanced approach to dealing with our housing crisis. I have also been clear that if we find that the controls that we put in place to assist the tenants are not working, we will reconsider the rent cap.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Mr. Speaker, there is overwhelming evidence from economists that rent caps do not work in the long term. There have been numerous examples all over North America. In fact, I read an article very recently about what economists say about rent caps, and do you know what, Mr. Speaker? They say that they are a bad idea. I actually have an article that I would be happy to share with the member opposite that describes it very, very well, in simple terms. I will share that, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Well, in simple terms, she said it very clearly, "in the long term". What happens with this current labour situation and this current inflation situation? We are in unprecedented times after a once-in-a-century pandemic. Absolutely, what the minister says is in normal times, so, yes, I could buy that. I am sure that the article that she wants to send me says something like that.

Okay, well these are not such times, Mr. Speaker. Now, we are in very serious, troubled times where a rent cap... Economists agree that in these current times, a rent cap works very well and it would help. It would move the needle now, at least for 2023, to make sure

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that the people who need that help will get it. The minister talks about Bill 25 and the Residential Tenancies Tribunal. Yes, it moved the needle a little bit but not enough. It puts the onus on the owners. I found out that if you have a 16-unit, only one can apply. None applies...

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

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Mr. Speaker, this government has acknowledged that we are in a time of crisis in the housing sector. As a result, this government put a minister in place to be responsible for housing, and this is the first time that has been done in many, many years. You can see how complicated this is from the trouble that the member opposite is having in even describing the problem, and a rent cap is only one piece of the solution. We are working diligently to put controls in place for tenants.

We have the Residential Tenancies Tribunal, which is an independent body that mediates between landlords and tenants. We need tenants who are experiencing difficulties to go to the Residential Tenancies Tribunal so that we have the data that we need to make decisions quickly. We showed last year that we would make decisions quickly. We will do it again. Please go to the Residential Tenancies Tribunal if you are experiencing problems as a tenant.

SUPPLY TEACHERS

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, according to the New Brunswick Teachers' Association, the hidden reality is that many schools are in crisis. There are a significant number of unfilled teacher absences, caused by illness and stress. There is also a major shortage of supply teachers. We even heard that a Grade 12 graduate was offered a supply contract until the end of June. What is the policy with respect to the required credentials of supply teachers?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston for her question. It is also a pleasure to welcome the people who are here to represent the leadership of the New Brunswick Teachers' Federation. They are in the gallery today. There are Executive Director Leopkey, Copresidents Keating and Brideau, and Mr. Lagacy.

[*Original*]

There are different levels of being a supply teacher in our schools. We have certified supply teachers, we have local permits, and we do, from time to time, have students who have

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graduated. They are not currently in Grade 12. I am not aware of that happening, so if the member opposite is aware of it, I would like to have that specific information.

I met with the leadership of the NBTA the week before last. We did talk about the supply teacher situation, and it is serious. We do have a shortage of supply teachers. We are in one of the most difficult times of the school year, right before Christmas, and we are going to work together to resolve this.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also wish to welcome the people from the New Brunswick Teachers' Federation. We still have not received or seen the catch-up plan, even though an increasing number of teachers and students are sick, which means even more lost school time for students.

Just last week, 100 students from Marshview Middle School in Sackville missed school because they were sick, which is a third of the school population in a single day, and we could see more school absences. We were also informed that three or four classes have been moved to a gymnasium because there is not enough staff to watch the students.

What is the minister's plan to ensure the safety of teachers and students, to reduce the risk of contagion and the spread of the virus and other diseases, to make sure that there are qualified teachers for classrooms, and to ensure that students do not fall even further behind?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, it would take me the rest of the afternoon to answer all of the member's questions. There are certainly illnesses in our schools, like the flu. If over 10% of students have the flu, Public Health must be informed so that this organization can decide what to do with that school.

As I said earlier, we are facing a significant challenge regarding supply teachers in schools. There is no miracle solution. We are going to work to keep our students in school. We will work with the New Brunswick Teachers' Federation to try to find a solution to this problem. It is a serious problem.

I remember that, when I started teaching, we had the same issue. So, it is not new.

[*Original*]

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

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HEALTH CARE

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, it was five months ago, on July 12, that a constituent of mine died in the crowded ER waiting room of the Chalmers hospital. On November 22, another patient died in the ER waiting room of the Moncton Hospital while it was in a state of critical overcapacity. In the first case, the Premier fired the CEO of Horizon, dismantled the board, and shuffled the Health Minister out of her portfolio. In the second case—nothing. In July, the Premier committed to publicly releasing the findings and recommendations of the death review at the Chalmers. He has not done so.

For years, our ER doctors have repeatedly and publicly warned that critical overcapacity in our ERs will result in deaths. Mr. Speaker, why has the Premier done nothing to keep people from dying in the waiting rooms of our ERs?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate that the member opposite has taken such a sensitive issue and made it a political issue. We know that, day in and day out, the people in our health care system step up to try to give as much help as they can. Sometimes the outcomes are unfortunate, and we sympathize with the families and friends of those people who do not have a good experience in an ER or in hospital. But, Mr. Speaker, we are taking that seriously. We are working with the RHAs, Ambulance New Brunswick, and Medicare. We are trying to make moves with them and assist them with the congestion in the emergency rooms.

There are a number of initiatives that I talked about earlier, such as trying to focus on primary care in the community to allow people to access that primary care so that they do not end up in the emergency room. We are also working with our other members here, whether it is for education or recruitment or to help seniors get care in the community. Mr. Speaker, a number of initiatives are taking place.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): We know that there are many New Brunswickers who lack a doctor or a nurse practitioner, but many who have a primary health care provider often have difficulty getting appointments in a timely manner. In fact, so often the phone message on the other end at the doctor's office tells them to go to the ER if their concern is urgent. It tells them to go to the ERs, which are chronically at overcapacity and understaffed. Mr. Speaker, the tragic truth in this province right now is that it is easier to access health care for your cat than for your children.

Our regional health authorities operate 14 community health clinics that are staffed by multidisciplinary health care teams and 3 large clinics in our biggest city that are staffed by nurse practitioners, yet few of those clinics even take walk-in appointments. Will the Health Minister commit to requiring all those clinics to treat walk-in patients, to take walk-in patients, and to resource those clinics accordingly to alleviate the pressure on our ERs?



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Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): This government has a Provincial Health Plan. That Provincial Health Plan has a number of different platforms, whether it is working with seniors to make sure that they get the care where it is best for them and their needs or whether it is working with the Primary Care Network system in trying to make sure that people have access to primary care when and where they need it. We know that we continue to have a population that is aging, that is getting sicker, and that has more acute illnesses. Again, that is why we are working with the RHAs, with the College of Physicians and Surgeons of New Brunswick, and with our various associations to try to make sure that our human resource assets are recruited and are working within the RHAs. We have created navigators to work through the system.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday, I was at the community health centre in Lamèque, which is undergoing renovations with a significant investment. I talked to the frontline workers, and I talked to the nurse practitioners and the doctors. Again, what is happening in New Brunswick is that we are trying to...

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

MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): The week before last, our former member for Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore—we can now just say “Denis Landry”—made an impassioned plea for the establishment of more mental health courts across the province. We have one in Saint John, for which he, as Justice Minister in 2017, was responsible. He has asked that this government expand those to other communities that could use them.

I was pleased that the Minister of Justice recognized that as well, and he seems committed to moving forward with this. It seems as if the ball is now in the court of the Minister of Health to adequately provide the resources to make this a reality. So I am wondering this: What are this government and Minister of Health ready to do in order to ensure that mental health courts are provided and justice is provided to all of those in need, not only in one area of the province?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, if the member opposite looks at the budget, he can see that this is an ongoing part of it. There is a significant amount of work that has to be done, but there is a significant amount of work that has been done. And the Department of Health is not alone in this strategy. We work with the Department of Justice. We work with the Department of Social Development. We work with Addiction and Mental Health Services. We work with the legal system. There are a lot of moving parts that need to fit together properly. We need to make sure that people get justice in a quick and meaningful way, and that is why we are working—to make sure.



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We can see, on an ongoing basis, some of the investments made for mental health and addictions here in New Brunswick. And during this mandate, the investment has been significant. In the last number of years, we have continued to invest where it is needed, in frontline workers. We know that there is more work to do, and we continue to do that work, whether it is recruiting, whether...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, minister.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, if it is in the budget, time is running out. Time is running out for people who need to access those services. We know that the Saint John Mental Health Court has a success rate of 85%. People do not come back to court and do not reoffend.

Instead, we have a government focused more on public safety. We are going to put more money into jails and hospitalizations, but we could avoid jails and hospitalizations for these people by investing on the front end and reducing costs on the back end, Mr. Speaker. If we had a success rate as high as Saint John's in terms of people not reoffending, perhaps we might not need a new jail, and then we would not need to hear, in the capital budget today, what is going to be invested there.

Last week, we had the Moncton business community pleading for a mental health court. The Minister of Health and the Minister of Justice were not in Moncton when the Minister of Social Development and Minister of Public Safety were there. When can we expect mental health courts in other areas of the province?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the work is being done. The work continues, and the government knows that this is an important aspect, whether it is mental health, clinics in various locations, or additions to hospitals. The capital budget is coming up here momentarily, and the members opposite are going to see another significant investment in the health care system here in New Brunswick—and not just for the health care system but also for social development, justice, and education. The list goes on and on and on.

This government is getting the work done. This government is making the investments to alleviate within the system the strain and stress, which we are so well aware of. That is why we work day in and day out along with the frontline health care workers, who are stepping up day in and day out to make sure that the people of New Brunswick are getting the service they need in the time they need it. We know that we can do better; so we continue to work very hard, and we make that commitment again today.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period is over.