

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



December 14, 2022

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HEALTH CARE

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, we are hearing about a rise in RSV cases in the province, and we are hearing rumours that there are children who have even died as a result of RSV. As you know, RSV is not a reportable disease in New Brunswick, but we have received some results from the Public Health Agency of Canada that tell us that the numbers have jumped by 602% over the past three weeks. A total of 316 New Brunswickers have tested positive for the virus, which is up from 45 in November. By comparison, there were only 72 cases at this time last year.

We know that RSV can result in serious infections, especially in vulnerable people such as infants, seniors, seniors with lung disease, and people with weakened immune systems. And as I said, we are hearing rumours that there have been child deaths related to RSV. So I wonder whether the minister can confirm those numbers of RSV cases that have been identified in New Brunswick and advise as to whether we have seen recent child deaths from RSV in New Brunswick.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is amazing that I once again find myself holding the opposition members accountable. They start a rumour, spread a rumour, tweet a rumour, or retweet a rumour, and then they stand in the House and say: Will you defend that and say whether that is right or wrong? Especially when it comes to people who are sick, it is really unfortunate that they seem to put out this political tactic.

Yesterday, the Chief Medical Officer was out providing media availability, and he talked to the press. That information has gone out. Today, right now, the CEOs of Vitalité and Horizon, along with the two trustees, are doing a press conference across the street at the Crowne Plaza and giving out information to the public as well.

So, Mr. Speaker, I wish the members opposite would deal in facts and not in rumours and innuendos, which they seem to be dwelling on lately.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, there is information circulating, and if it is not accurate, then it is up to the minister to correct it. That is why I am giving him the opportunity here today to correct that information if it is not true or to confirm it if it is, because it is a serious situation.

We know that the numbers are up. There have been 7 more COVID-19 deaths reported. There have been 20 flu-related deaths in New Brunswick this year, when there were 5 for all of last year. People are anxious and have waited for direction from Public Health. We got some firmer language yesterday, but there has been a void of information to give us guidance while people are struggling with what to do moving forward.

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What is equally concerning is that the vaccination rate percentage is very low—10% lower than last year. We know that when British Columbia had some deaths, it did a vaccination blitz. So I am wondering whether the minister is prepared to launch an effective Public Health awareness campaign and to do something like what we saw in British Columbia, with a vaccination clinic blitz to get more vaccines into...

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

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, once again, yesterday, we had the Chief Medical Officer giving information through the media to members of the public on how to protect themselves. One of the frontline opportunities is for people to get vaccinated. That is what we have been promoting, and that is what the Chief Medical Officer has been promoting. And now, the members opposite are not satisfied with the venue or with the timing or with when the Chief Medical Officer comes out. Now they are again trying to direct the Chief Medical Officer.

Now, I am once again finding myself having to hold the opposition accountable. The other day, a couple of weeks ago, the member opposite said that this government was putting political interference into the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, but now they want to direct the Chief Medical Officer. So, Mr. Speaker, which is it? Does the member opposite want political interference or want no political interference?

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I am asking the Minister of Health and his department to take this issue seriously. The minister seems to be downplaying the fact that serious viruses are currently spreading in the province. These viruses are affecting children, seniors, and vulnerable people. This minister seems to be downplaying his responsibility.

I am asking the minister and his government to rise and show real leadership. Give us real guidelines. We have to do what was done in British Columbia, where there have been six deaths. Here, we have had 20 deaths from influenza. Vaccination rates are very low. I am asking this government and this minister to rise. Why not hold a vaccination blitz to reach more reasonable levels and protect people?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As the member opposite should know, RSV is not a reportable disease, but it is something that is being considered by the Chief Medical Officer. The member opposite and the leader from above and on the floor are trying to direct the Chief Medical Officer. We know their history with the Chief Medical Officer has not been very stellar, but they are,

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once again, trying to direct the Chief Medical Officer on how to run the office and on what actions to take.

We are just trying to hold the opposition accountable. Look, we take this seriously. It is obvious that we take this seriously. Look at the ambitious health plan, which was reported on yesterday, and the success and the progress, which are moving forward. We know that there is more work to do. We know there is more work to do every day, and that is why this government is committed to making sure that the province has the best health care that New Brunswick has ever had as we move forward, even given all the crises and issues we are being plagued with here today. Mr. Speaker, I will continue to keep the opposition members accountable, because they will not keep themselves accountable.

NURSING HOMES

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. COVID-19 is still here, and we are also seeing a rise in infections related to RSV and flu. There is a need to ensure that every effort possible is made to protect the vulnerable populations in this province, including people residing in long-term care facilities. It seems that a significant number of patients at the Loch Lomond Villa in Saint John have tested positive for COVID-19. In light of the serious health threat in this facility and the risk of transmission in other facilities, what is the Minister of Social Development going to do to keep residents and staff safe? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate this question, because we all know that our nursing homes and long-term care facilities are certainly vulnerable. That is why we have vaccination clinics in our nursing homes. We try to ensure that everyone is as protected as possible. Nursing homes are very used to flu seasons, and they are very used to the COVID-19 protocols that we have had recently, in the past couple of years. They do everything they can to ensure that their residents are protected. It has been a very difficult couple of years for our long-term care facilities, with the lockdowns and the isolating that had to be implemented for the protection of everyone living in those residences. The staff of the long-term care facilities are certainly very attentive to their clients, and they understand the burden this puts on everyone. They certainly work with Public Health. And we are working with the Department of Health to ensure that our residents are looked after.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Families of residents are asking the government to put health protocols in place for people entering or visiting this facility, such as masks, screening, and better communication about outbreaks. That being said, they are also asking the government to restore funding to cover the extra costs associated with cleaning, sanitizing, and other preventative measures. Did the minister

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seek the advice of Public Health? Does she expect to put specific health and safety protocols in place and provide funding for stronger protection measures? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): So, look, Mr. Speaker, we have been closely monitoring any and all outbreaks that are happening in our long-term care facilities, particularly in nursing homes. We feel that they have the expertise on staff and the supports that they need in order to manage the situation. Do you know what? We can absolutely look at what the needs are in our nursing homes. We always consider requests if support is needed. We have done that with cleaning supplies all through COVID-19. But I believe that, at this time, the nursing homes are well supported with having the expertise that they need in order to manage through flu outbreaks, COVID-19 outbreaks, or whatever they are dealing with on a day-to-day basis. They have been very resilient. We appreciate all the employees and management in our long-term care facilities as they navigate a tricky winter and upcoming season.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am happy to hear that the minister is open to discussions, because, as you know, when a long-term care facility has to install extra glass, this leads to additional cost. As we know, it is not always easy for these facilities to find money. So, if there can at least be a conversation in order to meet their needs, that is good news.

Now, one of the measures that could improve health and safety is the improvement of ventilation systems. Many provinces have used federal funds from the COVID-19 Resiliency Fund to improve ventilation systems in schools, health care facilities, and long-term care facilities. Can the minister indicate how many improvements have been made to ventilation systems in long-term care facilities, and how many more are planned? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I will have to get that specific information for the member opposite, and I certainly give my commitment to do so. I do know that with every capital budget, we put forth work that needs to be done on ventilation systems within our nursing homes. Some of them are aged and certainly need to have those supports. Mr. Speaker, I can also say that our nursing home facilities not only are resilient but also are very used to protocols. In fact, I remember that in the early days of COVID-19, nursing homes were receiving Public Health changes sometimes on a daily basis and sometimes twice daily. We know that the staff and

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management of our long-term care facilities work closely with our department, and we will get that information for the member opposite as soon as possible.

FRENCH IMMERSION

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier has indicated that the Minister of Education will soon provide details on the new French immersion program. A number of high-ranking senior civil servants have left the department based on the Premier's refusal to listen to advice that is based on data. Can the minister advise as to which second language experts he has engaged to provide advice with respect to the design of the new program?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am excited to make an announcement tomorrow regarding our new approach to creating a bilingual population in our province. We have been doing consultations throughout the province. We did them in the winter, spring, and summer. John McLaughlin has returned as deputy minister. He has done extensive consultations with the public. We have a wonderful program that we are going to announce tomorrow. I am excited for it. I know that the opposition will endorse it wholeheartedly. It is going to move us toward a bilingual population in our province, where everyone will be able to be served in the language of their choice. That, Mr. Speaker, is the ultimate goal—to create a bilingual population in our province so that all our citizens have equal opportunity. I am pleased to be part of that. Thank you.

SECOND LANGUAGE TRAINING

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): I can say that we are glad to hear that the new French language training program will be announced tomorrow. The minister instituted a series of pilot programs on French second language training. Can the minister advise us as to the commencement date of these programs, whether an evaluation of their effectiveness has been carried out, when and how they were evaluated, and who conducted these evaluations—so that he can present a new program tomorrow?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We have a robust French team at the department that has been working on Language Learning Opportunity (LLO) that has been implemented and piloted in the province.

One of the places that I am most proud of is Maplehurst, and I was very disappointed by the stunt that the Executive Director of Canadian Parents for French did here last week up in the gallery, using a student as a prop and a parent who says: I know this is how I feel, but I think there are other people who feel the same way. And that the opposition would follow up on that... Mr. Speaker, at this school, we have the whole staff and all the students

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engaged in trying to learn French, how to speak French, and how to communicate and enjoy the language. I would think the opposition would celebrate that. I do not want to say that it baffles me; however, I will.

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, we are baffled.

[Translation]

Listen, the minister is attacking a New Brunswicker; that is surprising, if I may say so. In fact, the New Brunswick Teachers' Association and frontline teachers have warned the department against rushing the implementation of a new education program of this magnitude.

When resources are limited, this could be a disaster, and there is talk about a lack of resources for teachers. There are absences not only among students, but also teachers, including resource teachers. There is a lack of resources, so implementing such a program could be a disaster. Why does the minister not take the time to evaluate the pilot projects and have the experts evaluate the new program?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am going to answer the question from the member for Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston. The LLO pilot program is still under review and has been since its inception. This program continues to be evaluated by experts from our department, and, in the future, we will continue to evaluate this program, which has been very successful.

Tomorrow, I will announce what we are going to do. We are going to start at the kindergarten and Grade 1 levels for New Brunswick students, with a program that has a proven record of success. It will be very successful in making New Brunswickers bilingual. So, what we want our province to have is an extraordinary, world-renowned bilingual education system.

[Original]

NB POWER

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): It has been almost three months since the Minister of Energy announced his new energy efficiency program. It has become the flagship story of government members every time that we ask them about the rising cost of living for New Brunswickers, so I think it is appropriate to ask the minister to give us an update. How many heat pumps have been installed? Is NB Power on target to reach its goal for this year? Even more importantly, how many local heat pump contractors have gone through the process, have been approved, and are on the official NB Power contractor list? Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate having the opportunity to continue this conversation publicly in question period with the member opposite. It is a conversation that he and I have had offline as well.

The member opposite is quite concerned with making sure that this program rolls out properly, as am I and as are we in government. There are about 500 installations that have already been done. We have worked very closely with the opposition. We are working with the utility, and the utility is going to be available to the opposition to make sure that this is done in a transparent fashion.

There have been some issues along the way, and we have been working very hard to make sure that we overcome them. The contractor network is available to participate in this, and the reports that I get from the utility say that it is working through that network to make sure that we get qualified applications. Also, we are going to continue to make sure that if there are any wrinkles in the way... This program is too important to allow challenges to get in the way. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are a little concerned with the rollout. Obviously, there is a big snowstorm crossing the province and it is heating season, and people are really concerned. If we look at the government, we see that it canceled the \$100 in the home energy rebate program last year, and NB Power is asking for the biggest rate increase in over 40 years. So heating costs are going to become a major issue for a lot of homeowners in the province.

The minister mentioned that there are 500 heat pumps. What we are hearing on the ground is that instead of the processing of the applications taking the average 4 to 6 weeks, it is up to 12 to 14 weeks and there is a waiting list of almost two years. So that help cannot be directed to the homeowners this year. That is being pushed down the road. The best way to actually speed up the process is to include local contractors in the mix. Again, I ask the minister: How many local contractors are on the official NB Power list?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, absolutely, I appreciate the question. We agree. Whether in the House or during interviews, we have said that the government of New Brunswick certainly will not be an obstacle. We are going to work to make sure that we fund accordingly, that we react accordingly, and that we support the utility accordingly.

I do not have the exact number of private contractors that have been deemed qualified, but that work is being done. I know that I have participated directly, as a facilitator, with the utility and a group of contractors to ensure that there was clear communication. If there were any issues related to making sure that their applications were put forward and done accurately, we availed ourselves of all our resources to do that. As I said, I do not have the exact number of contractors that have been approved at this point, but we have said that

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any resources that we have are available to make sure that we reduce any of those challenges. We do it so that we get it done and so that every contractor available is able to put their hands toward making this program a success. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, it is coming on to Christmas, and there are many New Brunswick families who would dearly love to receive the gift of financial security this Christmas. Last June the government distributed the Emergency Fuel and Food Benefit to low-income individuals and families—one time only, with \$225 for individuals and \$450 for families. Today so many of those same people are struggling to pay for their groceries and for a tank of oil to heat their homes while likely staring down a rent increase in the new year. Some are likely wondering how they are going to give their kids a Christmas.

Mr. Speaker, the government has the power and the money to make a difference—to give the gift of financial security this winter. For the love of Pete, will the Minister of Social Development provide a monthly food and fuel benefit, beginning this Christmas and running until March, to low-income families?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member opposite for the question. We certainly understand that there are many families that struggle. We have inflation, and we have many issues that families in the province are trying to deal with. We recognize that the onetime benefit that the government has done has certainly provided some assistance.

You know, discussions have taken place about those things, and as the new year comes, we may have more information on them. What we can say is that this government has certainly been very attentive to those living on fixed incomes, not only by providing the onetime benefits that we have provided but also by increasing the minimum wage and by increasing the monies that social assistance recipients can earn before having their own benefits rolled back. We are doing everything that is at our fingertips to try to help.

INCOME ASSISTANCE

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, I do not know why this government and these ministers are insistent on keeping what they are planning to do so close to their chest. Let's give the families of New Brunswick some hope about what is coming.

I want to ask the minister about the rates of income assistance in New Brunswick. They are among the lowest in Atlantic Canada. If you are single, you are expected to live on \$625 per month. Can you imagine, Mr. Speaker—\$625 per month? If you are a single mom with a

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child, you have to figure out how to live on \$1 800 for the entire month. On Prince Edward Island, the monthly income for a single person is over \$1 000. This jumps to \$2 200 for a single mom. The New Brunswick Common Front for Social Justice and the NB Coalition of Persons with Disabilities are calling on the government to immediately raise income assistance rates. Will the Minister of Social Development raise income assistance rates to at least achieve parity with Prince Edward Island as a first step? The government has the money. The government has the power. Will she do it?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We continue to thank the members opposite for their questions. Do you know what? We have brought in a number of different programs to help out the poor, the working poor, and even people in the middle class. There is the Fuel and Food Benefit that we brought out earlier this year. We are looking at other programs, but we are also doing what we can in the meantime. The Fuel and Food Benefit was one thing, but raising the basic personal amount was another. Lowering the taxes was another.

As the minister mentioned, the minimum wage was another. Stronger Social Development payments were another. It continues with this government. It continues in the capital budget, with over \$1 billion to help. They talked about ventilation in schools. They talked about ventilation in different nursing homes and special care homes. Do you know what? Yes, we have programs. We are developing those, and we are working to complete those, especially in the school system at this time, to protect our children and the workers in the school system. So, yes, it continues not only for...

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

[*Translation*]

RENTS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, the main reason low-income tenants face financial insecurity is the impending rent increase. Monday, the Minister responsible for Housing missed the opportunity to table a bill to extend the rent cap to 2023. That bill could have received royal assent this Friday. The minister has considered the option of setting a threshold for rent increases next March, requiring landlords to apply to the Residential Tenancies Tribunal if they wish to surpass that threshold. Will the minister table a bill to establish an acceptable threshold for rent increases when we come back to the Legislative Assembly in March?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): So, Mr. Speaker, a lot of work is going into the housing issues. We have met with municipalities. We have gone through the challenges in each particular location. The



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minister is spending a lot of time understanding, okay, how big of an issue this is in each community. Where are the greatest needs? We have met with leaders. The idea is to put a system in place where we could actually review and where tenants could appeal any sort of rate increase that does not seem reasonable or appropriate. We have raised the bar there with the Rentalsman so that we have greater capability to access it quickly and to manage it quickly.

There, we have a process and a timeline that the minister has put in place in relation to when an increase could be put in place and when it could actually come into effect. So, as has been said many times, it is a balancing act between ensuring that adequate housing continues to be built and the private sector continues to invest in our province to build and meet the needs that we have seen and the challenges that have been faced while also ensuring that tenants have a way to appeal any sort of unreasonable behaviour by landlords who are not being responsible. We will continue that observation and surveillance. Thank you.

NB POWER

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. NB Power told me yesterday that dealing with more than one contractor is an administrative nightmare. I am kind of concerned about how it is going to be able to handle these major infrastructure projects that are coming down the pipe. Over 30 contractors have called me over the past couple of days saying that they have applied through the process and not one of them was able to get approved by NB Power. That tells me that either there is a lot of red tape or that what they are asking of contractors is not reasonable. I know that the minister has said that he does not have the exact number of contractors that are on the NB Power contractor list, but can he at least confirm that there is more than one?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, I appreciate the conversation about this here on the floor. The member opposite saying that he had a chance to speak to NB Power speaks to the fact that we, as a government, want to make sure that a transparent relationship is there for all parties here in the Legislature to be able to have that conversation. I am actually very encouraged to hear that the member opposite is interacting with the utility and working toward solutions with us.

Regardless of the difficulty, the message was very clearly given to the utility that there needs to be a broad base of contractors who get to work, if they apply and qualify. What we have done is work through them, but certainly, there are some challenges with rolling out a program that is of such significant size as this. I can confirm, though not with a specific number, that there is certainly more than one contractor approved and going through the process right now. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

SECOND LANGUAGE TRAINING

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unfortunately, there is little time left, but I have so much more that I could go on about. Today, I was baffled to hear the Minister of Health say that right now we have the best health care we have ever had in New Brunswick while people are still dying in ERs, ambulances are still backed up, and emergency rooms across the province are still closing on evenings and weekends.

On the other hand, we have the Minister of Education calling out parents and the president of the Canadian Parents for French for coming here and advocating for the best French second language training program we could have in our province. I think that the Minister of Education needs to apologize to them. Apologize to that family that is speaking out. These are parents from Maplehurst Middle School, where this program, which they were not aware of, has been shoved down their throats. And this program is not working—vocabulary is decreasing. Will the minister stand up and apologize to this family?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is nice to get another question regarding the LLO project that we are currently undertaking at Maplehurst. Last week, I was extremely disappointed by the stunt that Chris Collins and his organization pulled by bringing a student to this gallery and using the student as a prop, using the parent...

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): They are not talking about the facts of the program. Chris Collins has gone out and taken one small part of the program. I am proud of the principal, I am proud of the teachers, I am proud of the staff, and I am proud of the students who have all engaged and who are working hard to learn French as a language of communication. To pull a stunt like that is shameful. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period has expired.