

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**March 25, 2025**

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[Translation]

### PENSIONS

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Good afternoon, Madam Speaker. Let's start with the basics today.

[Original]

Let's start with the basics today, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

Does the Premier believe in the shared-risk pension plan model? Does she think that such pensions are fair for workers, taxpayers, and retirees?

[Original]

Does the Premier believe in shared risk pension models? Does she believe they are fair for workers, for taxpayers, and for retirees? Thank you.

[Translation]

**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you for the question. Yes, our government believes that shared-risk pension plans are good options for the New Brunswick public and civil servants. It's one of the options that works and is successfully used in our system today.

[Original]

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Let's go a little further with that. We'll do a little bit of a backgrounder, and maybe we'll test the radical transparency of the government today.

Ten years ago, public-sector pensions were in crisis. Taxpayers, a lot of whom didn't have access to a pension, were propping up these pensions to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars, so we entered into shared risk pension plans. We know that this system has worked well for the past 10 years for taxpayers, workers, and retirees. However, some public-sector unions had concerns about moving to shared risk and took the province to court. When that happened, at every single turn, the courts ruled in the province's favour. What legal advice, if any, did the Premier receive to make her believe that we wouldn't also win this current legal challenge? Thank you.

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**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the question, because the issue that our government had... It's interesting to me that you raised the instance of 10 years ago, when people who worked for the government of New Brunswick under somebody who is no longer in this room saw, at the age of retirement, their pensions cut and taken away from them. They weren't grandfathered in or supported. At 65 years old, they were told: We're sorry; you've paid into this your whole life, and now we're going to change it.

Really, the process matters when it comes to how you make decisions and whom you consider. That's the issue that we saw here last year. We saw a government that couldn't handle it at the negotiation table, couldn't mediate to a solution in partnership with unions, and chose to use a big hammer of legislation instead of free and fair collective bargaining with the unions to achieve a pension solution that would work for everyone.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Okay, so I take it from that non-answer that she either didn't get any advice or didn't listen to it, or maybe she didn't agree with it. The people of this province are asking what she got for advice and whether that changed, but she didn't answer. When asked by the media, the Deputy Premier and Finance Minister couldn't tell New Brunswickers how much it would cost to take these workers out of a safe and stable pension plan. The now-Holt government promised this in its election platform. Did it have a costing for this promise? Was that transparently—radically transparently—communicated to New Brunswickers? What's the number? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I think that the member opposite is a little... The facts need to be clarified, because the people he is speaking of are not in a safe and stable pension plan. They were trying to negotiate one, and the previous government failed at the negotiation table and chose to use a big hammer of legislation to force them into something they didn't agree to. So our government is working closely with the unions to find a solution to deliver fair, equitable, sustainable pensions for the workers of New Brunswick.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): So, again, I said that we would test the radical transparency, but there was no answer. I asked directly: Did they have a costing for the promise? Was it transparently communicated? What's the number? There was absolutely no answer. Is this even costed in this year's budget? Yes or no?

[Translation]

**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The opposition members can read our

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platform. It's clear that they have read it several times. All the costs are in our campaign platform. Our promise is to enter into the...

[Original]

I will switch to English. Our promise is that we are going to enter into agreements in partnership with unions and at the negotiating table with them. We are going to find a path to create the kinds of pensions that are fair, affordable, and sustainable for New Brunswickers. That's the work that we are doing in collaboration and in open and transparent negotiation with the unions of this province, affording them the respect that they deserve and that they haven't had in six years.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. The Premier started this off by saying that she supported shared risk pensions, and now she's saying that the shared risk pension that this particular group was put in is not safe and secure. So where's the reality here, Madam Speaker? It's not lining up.

The Premier said that we have to make sure that we're being fair, equitable, and all that. Now, I want to ask her this: What are we going to see next? Is this just a one-off? Will the Premier confirm to other bargaining units that the ability to leave shared risk plans does not exist for them? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the question, because what you're going to see next is a government that enters into conversations and negotiations with the unions of this province. We will go to that table with an open mind to find a path forward that is acceptable to those members and respects that we need to find an agreement that everyone can support, that provides for equity with other workers in New Brunswick, and that meets the needs in retirement of those critical members of New Brunswick's workforce. What they're going to see is open, respectful bargaining at the table in order to come up with pensions that are sustainable, affordable, and fair for New Brunswickers.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): So we started off, Madam Speaker, with this: Yes, we believe in shared risk. Now, it's this: Well, we're going to negotiate and figure this thing out in the best interest of retirees. The Premier said that, for 10 years, she agreed. For 10 years, these pensions have delivered what they said they were going to do. Shared risk pensions delivered what they were supposed to deliver. These pensions have delivered cost of living increases for their pensioners, have secured their pensioners, and have shielded taxpayers from having to prop up pensions that were no longer viable. Now it seems as though the Premier is opening us up to the risk of having to pay for pensions that are not sustainable. This is what it seems she's opening us up to.

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We still don't know what the true cost is going to be to New Brunswick taxpayers. We don't know because the Liberals won't answer. What advice did they receive? We don't know because they won't answer. Was this ever truly costed in their platform? We don't know. Can the Premier tell New Brunswickers at least one thing: Was the decision to repeal this Act in the best interest of New Brunswickers or did she bow to pressure from CUPE?

**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It's clear that the member opposite is struggling with the ability to understand that you can be supportive of shared risk pensions. Those are a good thing for the workers in New Brunswick who are experiencing them. However, forcing them on a group that doesn't accept them because you're tired of negotiating is not the way forward. You can celebrate shared risk pensions but actually enter into respectful negotiations in partnership with the workers of New Brunswick. This shows them that their voices matter. That's what you're going to get from this government every time.

We are closing the legal risk. We have gotten out of the lawsuit that CUPE previously brought against the former government because of that government's unfair actions, legislating when it should have been at the table. Our government will be at the table every time, working hard to come to collaborative solutions that respect each and every worker in this province and deliver them a pension that is affordable, sustainable, and fair to everyone. Maybe that's unfamiliar to the member opposite, but our government is going to collaborate with and respect our workers every time.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Do you know what? We were at the bargaining table, but you can't bargain or negotiate with somebody who is not there. When we made these changes, we saved hundreds of millions of dollars for taxpayers. This government is putting every single New Brunswicker at risk, including people who don't have access to pensions. This government will not say how much this is going to cost. It seems to me that this government put out a bill without even knowing what the cost is going to be to New Brunswickers. That's what you're going to get from this government.

Let's talk about protecting New Brunswickers, Madam Speaker. The changes that we made in the original Bill 17 gave pension rights to 2 500 part-time and casual employees. Let's see if the Liberals know the answer to this: Will the repeal of this bill strip away the pension rights of those 2 500 workers?

**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the detail in this question, so I'm happy to get a clear answer and bring it back under advisement.



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**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): There it is, Madam Speaker. The Liberals put out a bill for political reasons. They didn't think about how much it would cost. They don't know the details. They can't tell New Brunswickers who don't have access to a pension what this is going to cost them. There was \$365 million of taxpayers' money brought over to shore up these pensions. Can the Premier tell us whether that \$365 million is going to come back to us? How is this going to work? There were three different pension options that this group had to choose from. Where does that money go?

Does it come back to New Brunswickers, or is it lost? Are we going to have to add to it for whatever pension scheme the government members come up with?

The last time CUPE wanted to come forward with its own ideas, it was \$1 billion for an Ontario pension fund. We chose an option that made it equitable with every other pension group—every other pension group, including CUPE, with 9 000 employees. Will the government members do the same for this group, or will they put New Brunswickers at risk?

**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I can appreciate that it might be challenging for the member opposite to understand that when you are open and coming forward to the table looking for a collaborative solution, the end is not predetermined. The costs are not predetermined because we are in the process of working together with unions to determine what model of pension and what level of benefits are going to be sustainable, affordable, and fair. We are not going to presuppose the outcome. We are not going to do what the previous government did, which was walk away from the table and force a solution on a group that did not want that. We are going to work with them to build the kind of pension plan that respects workers in New Brunswick. We are going to do that and share with New Brunswickers every step of the way what this is going to cost as it is being designed and developed for the workers of New Brunswick.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Currently, 9 000 CUPE employees are under a shared risk model, Madam Speaker. That works for them. It works for them. They have gotten—

(Interjection.)

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): What is my point? Member for Dalhousie-Campbellton, my point is this. My point is that we have a system in place that has protected the pensions of 80 000 people in this province. It has delivered cost of living. It has shielded the taxpayer. It has worked for retirees. This is what we want to see for people in our province. What this Premier is exposing us to is more risk. The government members do not know the ramifications. They do not know the cost. They do

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not know the details. I will ask a question: Can the Premier be radically transparent and admit that this is a political promise that carries extreme financial risk to taxpayers? Thank you.

**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I think it is rich to hear the member opposite talk about shielding New Brunswickers from risk when it was their previous leader who eliminated the option to continue with the pension that the workers of New Brunswick had. At the last minute, he changes their pensions with absolutely no respect, and that is what the members opposite have done again and again.

We have removed the risk that was inherent in the lawsuit that exists. I think what this comes down to, fundamentally, is this: What is the right thing to do? Our team believes that the right thing to do is to respect workers in New Brunswick, to enter into bargaining in good faith, to recognize both sides of the table, and to stay at the table until a solution can be found that all parties agree to. That is the hard work that our team is prepared to do. We are going to show that respect to workers in New Brunswick, and we are going to do the right thing, not the political thing to grandstand about pensions.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Oh, man, Madam Speaker. Political grandstanding? Can you imagine? Can you imagine? This pension fund was underfunded to the point of \$365 million. Taxpayers had to shore that up. Now, we had them set on a path to sustainability where they could count on a pension when they retired. Now, because of political pressure or political influence, this Premier wants to undo that and say that she is going to defend the rights of these pensioners when she is putting them and all the taxpayers at risk.

I am going to ask again: Will this Premier be clear with New Brunswickers? She likes to say that everything is on the table, but I want her to clearly say that she is going to open up the shared risk pension plan to every single New Brunswick employee in this province so that taxpayers can really understand what they are looking at when they see this government. Thank you.

**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I appreciate that the member opposite was really attached to their government's decision to force shared risk pensions on CUPE and other workers in New Brunswick because it could not make progress at the bargaining table. Shared risk pensions are a good thing, and they are working well for many New Brunswickers, but forcing something onto a group that has bargaining rights is not the right thing to do. It is not the right thing to do.

Our government is at the table, working with CUPE and other unions in the province to identify the kind of strong and stable pension model that is going to work for the taxpayers



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of New Brunswick, for the workers of New Brunswick, and for all of us in the long term. I appreciate that might be hard to understand for a group that likes to walk away from the table and ask people to sue them. That's what happened. We have taken away the risk of that lawsuit and have shown respect to the workers of this province. We are going to land on a sustainable pension that decreases risk for all New Brunswickers.

### MENTAL HEALTH

**Mr. Weir** (Riverview, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. This budget cuts funding from mental health access to emergency care. In September, the New Brunswick Child and Youth Advocate reported a surge in the number of young people reporting poor mental health. The last *State of the Child Report* outlined a spike in the number of children presenting with serious and escalated mental health issues. On January 29, we learned that the Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health has given New Brunswick another failing grade regarding residents' access to mental health and substance abuse services.

I am not sure whether to address my question to the Premier, the Minister of Health, the Minister of Finance, or the Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services. To whomever would like to answer, how did this decision get made? Why hasn't this decision to cut funding been reversed? Thank you.

**Hon. Ms. Miles** (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, through you to the member opposite. I'm grateful for the question. On the cutting of the funding, I think you are going to a particular line that is specific to the *Child and Youth Well-Being Act*, if I am understanding you correctly. Or perhaps you are speaking specifically about Chimo. I'm not quite sure where you are going with the question.

Right now, we are investing \$8.7 million in a child-centred approach. That's really the core of the *Child and Youth Well-Being Act*. It puts children at the centre of the entire Act. It is very youth-focused and child-focused. We are investing an additional \$10 million in an integrated approach to services. If that wasn't the question you are asking, to the member opposite, then I ask for some clarity. If it was about Chimo, I'm happy to answer that.

**Mr. Weir** (Riverview, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Through you, thanks for the response. This Premier and government would not be the first Liberal Premier and government to be accused of saying one thing and doing another. When she was Opposition Leader, the Premier said that our PC government's mental health approach didn't respond to the magnitude of the need in society. Then, once she became Premier, her government responded to the magnitude of the need in society by cutting funding. That is textbook. They say one thing and do another. I would remind the Premier that, while our government was balancing the budget every year and paying down the debt, the Chimo mental health

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helpline remained funded and operational. I will ask this again. Will the Premier and her government reverse this decision? Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. McKee, K.C.** (Moncton Centre, Minister of Justice; Attorney General; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services; L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. This is rich coming from the other side. There have been four statements grandstanding on this issue. I would ask the member from Riverview to ask his colleague from Albert County, the former minister of mental health. He should ask his former boss, the former Minister of Health. He used to like to say that the members in opposition have selective amnesia. The members opposite were in government when the assessment was done. They got a failing grade on mental health services. They were in government when funding was cut to the Chimo Helpline. They stopped funding \$20 000 in 2023. They launched an RFP process to launch the new addictions and mental health helpline that we now see in the province. I would ask the member for Riverview to do his homework before grandstanding on the floor of this Legislature.

**Mr. Weir** (Riverview, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. That's a lot of grandstanding from someone accusing me of grandstanding. Well done, Mr. Grandstander.

Despite a youth mental health crisis, as described by the Youth Advocate, despite warnings from the Auditor General that access to mental health care was lacking, despite the Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health giving the province an F on access to care, despite their own words while in opposition, and despite the current Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services saying in January: "People in crisis deserve access to care and easy navigation." — despite all of this, they cut funding.

I must ask the Premier this: During prebudget consultations, did any group or individual make a submission to government suggesting cutting funding for mental health care? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Mr. McKee, K.C.** (Moncton Centre, Minister of Justice; Attorney General; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services; L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Again, I remind the member that his government made the cut. His government received the failing grade.

They put in place a provincial addiction and mental health helpline that is open 24 hours and is bilingual, with trained clinicians. They put in place an integrated clinical model, and there are absolutely no gaps in services, Madam Speaker.

Yes, our government is committed to transformational change when it comes to mental health and addictions, giving timely access to everyone when they need it, at the right place, at the right time, and by the right care provider. We've put \$20 million more into the mental health budget this year. We are addressing the need for a mental health court and a mental health advocate, and the mental health advisory committee will be relaunched. We

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are putting mental health professionals in the collaborative care clinics. We're working with First Nations to cocreate mental health services for them. Madam Speaker, we are addressing mental health.

### ENVIRONMENT

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, the drinking water aquifer beneath Murray's Irving gas station and restaurant and Tim Hortons on the Beardsley Road in Woodstock was severely polluted by a leak of 100 000 litres of diesel fuel last December. However, the Minister of Environment has said nothing about this publicly. In fact, it was investigative reporting by CBC that made New Brunswickers aware of this environmental calamity. According to documents received under the right to information Act, it was discovered only after someone reported that the tap water in Tim Hortons stank of petroleum. How long was that tap water contaminated? We don't know. Despite repeated requests by CBC for an interview to find out how this massive leak went undetected and what impact it would have on local water, no one from the Environment Department has been made available. Why hasn't the Minister of Environment briefed New Brunswickers about this?

[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. LePage** (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I thank the member for his question.

[Original]

I remind everyone that this is a very serious issue that we are living. We are following this incident very, very closely. There are two parallel things going on: There's an investigation under the *Petroleum Product Storage and Handling Regulation*, and remedial work is being done under the *Contaminated Sites Regulation*. These are great rules and regulations that we have in place. Actually, no current monitoring indicates impact on nearby households, so the citizens affected are well protected. We've ensured that everyone around the contaminated site is aware.

[Translation]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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[Original]

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, the minister must have been briefed by his experts that contaminants in groundwater move. They move. They move away from the site of contamination, downstream, as it were, and that raises a whole other concern.

But what I want to mention is that the *Clean Environment Act* requires that a person who has control of or responsibility for a contaminated site must notify the minister if they have reason to believe or know that a contaminant has been released into the environment. The requirements of the *Petroleum Product Storage and Handling Regulation* under the Act are very clear and comprehensive. Offences under the *Clean Environment Act* carry an administrative penalty from \$1 000 to \$1 million for every day the offence continues or prosecution in court. Three and a half months have passed since this massive contamination of the aquifer was discovered. Can the Minister of Environment tell the House what offences occurred under the Act, who was responsible, and what action he is taking?

[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. LePage** (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I don't think the member opposite understood the answer I gave him, so I will repeat it in the other language.

What we are doing comes down to two things. An investigation is under way. Once we have all the results, they will all be disclosed publicly. We absolutely do not want to disclose the results halfway through. We will wait until the end of the study.

However, what we are aiming for today is to ensure safety. Work is being done every day. There are discussions with everyone involved. We have taken the necessary measures. Irving Oil has taken the necessary measures, according to our policies and regulations, and, honourable member, these regulations are stringent and binding. There will be follow-ups to do. We are waiting for the results of the investigation. Thank you.

[Original]

## HEALTH CARE

**Mr. Hogan** (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The official opposition has been providing valuable suggestions to the Holt government, and we will continue to provide valuable, common-sense suggestions to the Holt government. I am surprised they

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ran out of ideas so quickly. Well, you know, not really, but there's no point in dwelling on that. That's just the way it is. My suggestion today is for the Premier.

The Premier promised New Brunswickers she would improve access to frontline health care. The Premier promised to expand the scope of practice for health care professionals and to optimize their roles. The Premier had a functioning pharmacy program in place that was improving access to frontline health care services and expanding the scope of practice for health care professionals, and she cancelled it. My question for the Premier is this: Should New Brunswickers believe their ears or their eyes? Their ears provide them with what the Premier says, while their eyes show them what the Premier actually does—two very different things.

**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for the opportunity to talk about our government's number one priority, and that is improving access to health care for New Brunswickers. We know it is top of mind for many people who don't have a family doctor today, who don't have access to care in their community, and who have to wait long hours in places they don't want to be in order to get care for their loved ones. That's why we took action immediately upon forming government, engaging with stakeholders and engaging with the medical society, pharmacists, and nurse practitioners in order to figure out how we can expand access to care in New Brunswick through them. That's why we're in conversations with the pharmacists right now about expanding their scope of practice so that they can deliver care for more than the 12 minor ailments that they're delivering care for right now and do so in pharmacies all over the province that every New Brunswicker would have access to. It's why we were thrilled to congratulate the 10 new family doctors who came through the practice-ready assessment program and are ready to provide care to New Brunswickers now. It's why our Minister of Health has been working tirelessly—

**Mr. Hogan** (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. You know, that practice-ready assessment program started under our government, so we accept the congratulations for that.

I'm a little surprised by the Premier's answer because she talked about being in negotiations with pharmacists. This expanded program has been cancelled. A good leader knows that they're not right one hundred percent of the time, but when you get a one hundred percent satisfaction rate on the expanded pharmacy care program, one might think that you'd want to continue that as New Brunswickers are extremely satisfied with the service that they've been receiving, especially for the type of care that they need, including for hypertension, COPD, etc.

My question to the Premier is this: Why did you kill that expansion?



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**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thanks for the question from the member opposite. We are working with the pharmacists. While that pilot that was operating in those six pharmacies had great patient satisfaction results, we want to put something in place that can extend to all pharmacies in the province. We want to give pharmacists access to a greater scope of practice. Pharmacists are a critical part of the solution for access to care. They are critical members of the team in terms of how we collaborate to provide integrated health care to New Brunswickers in their communities, where they are—not only in the six communities operating a pilot. We want to have a true expanded scope of practice all across the province, for every pharmacist in every pharmacy. That's why we're in these discussions with pharmacists. We want to get them connected to an integrated strategy and to have their services expanded so that, along with the 12 ailments that they're delivering New Brunswickers care for today, we can grow that list and improve that form of health care while we rapidly get these collaborative clinics developed.

[*Translation*]

**Madam Speaker** (Hon. Ms. Landry): Question period is over.