

Seniors and Housing – Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Written submissions for May 12, 2020 appearance on
2018-19 Annual Report and outstanding Auditor General recommendations

1. **“Certainly, I mean one measure that we hear about and is certainly well established is that, you know, the higher your income is correlated with higher health outcomes. You’re healthier, generally if your income is higher. I guess I just want to dig down a little bit more on this one, and just wonder what kind of things the department is measuring, perhaps along with colleagues and other ministries, regarding costs deferred in this regard. Is that an ongoing exploration that the ministry is doing? If you’re investing up front then you’re not paying oftentimes a significant amount more at the end. I’ll leave that with you”. (MLA Sigurdson)**

- Health status has a two-way relationship with socio-economic factors, such as income level. Statistics Canada (2018)¹ indicates poor health conditions can result in lower income. Lower incomes can affect physical and mental health; however, this is a correlational, not causal, relationship.
- Because of this relationship, the ministry monitors the income of seniors through the Seniors Income Relative to Population Performance indicator. Compared to their Canadian peers, Alberta’s seniors have lower income parity with the general population. However, over the last five reporting periods Alberta seniors’ median income has increased while the median income of the general population in Alberta has remained stable or decreased.
- As Alberta’s median income is higher than Canada’s, Alberta seniors continue to have higher income than seniors in other provinces.
- A large proportion of seniors’ income is from federal income sources (Canada Pension Plan, Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement), and if applicable, private pensions and employment income. Seniors and Housing’s Alberta Seniors Benefit supplements federal income sources by providing an additional benefit to seniors with low income. The Supplementary Accommodation Benefit ensures seniors residing in long-term care or designated supportive living have \$322 in monthly disposable income after paying care facility accommodation charges.
- Seniors and Housing is exploring options to enhance data sharing in coordination with Health and Community and Social Services as a means of focusing resources on those most in need, with the goal of reducing the frequency of hospital admissions and preventing/delaying the onset of need for more acute/higher levels of care.

¹ Statistics Canada (2018). *In sickness and in health: The association between health and household income*. Catalogue no. 89-648-X.

2. **“Well, thank you, Deputy Minister Taylor. I guess it was something that I remember, having been in the chair of minister some time ago, that that was something that we talked about, certainly: what are the costs deferred and the costs of poverty? I know there was some exploration of that. I don’t want to belabour it at this moment, but if there’s anything that you can provide in writing about what kind of movement was made on that during that time frame – I believe a researcher was hired – I’d really appreciate it. Maybe you could just provide that in writing to us”. (MLA Sigurdson)**

- In summer 2018, Seniors and Housing hired a third-party contractor (Advanis) through the Request for Research process with Communications and Public Engagement to complete telephone surveys with Albertans who use Seniors Financial Assistance programs. The contractor completed the data collection in fall 2018 and provided analysis of the results.
- Results for the main outcome performance measure for the Seniors Home Adaptation and Repair Program (SHARP) was reported in the department’s 2018-19 Annual Report.
 - 91 per cent of respondents agree the SHARP loan supported them to remain in their home longer (same result as in 2017-18).
- Results for the main outcome performance measures for Alberta Seniors Benefit (ASB), Special Needs Assistance for Seniors Program (SNA), and Seniors Property Tax Deferral Program (SPTDP) were:
 - 77 per cent of respondents agree ASB has assisted them in meeting their basic needs (up 3 per cent from 2017-18 results).
 - 91 per cent of respondents agree SNA has assisted them to meet their individualized needs (no comparison from 2017-18).
 - 89 per cent of respondents agree SPTDP supported them to remain in their home longer (no comparison from 2017-18).

3. **“I’m going to go back to the lodge program, which we had just sort of begun, and we want to look at the outstanding recommendation of the Auditor General. I was asking specifically what month in 2019? The report indicates that it was implemented in 2019, so was it January, February, March? Which month was it? And what specific changes were implemented to address those issues that the Auditor General was concerned about?**

You know, jumping ahead to today and COVID-19 world, I know that so many seniors’ lodges do not just do that independent living piece. They also do higher level because that might be the only facility in town, and we want people to stay in their communities, of course. That has caused difficulties, I know, for sure. Anyway, coming back to the time frame that we’re talking about, just what exactly is being done to assess that, and is there more flexibility for communities to have seniors needing higher level care in those independent living facilities? And then just some of the information about the effectiveness of the program.

I understand, too, that the Auditor General will do a follow-up audit, possibly in October is what I understand. This might be something too technical for this committee, so I wonder if maybe some of those questions that I just presented could be answered in written form. Is that possible?”
(MLA Sigurdson)

- In response to the Auditor General recommendations, Seniors and Housing developed an Evaluation Framework in April 2019 for the Seniors’ Lodge program, which outlined program objectives and key measurement metrics. The Housing Division developed processes for collecting and analyzing necessary data to determine whether the Seniors’ Lodge program is meeting its objectives as set out in the Evaluation Framework.
 - The Evaluation Framework included three specific metrics to identify and evaluate the demand for seniors’ lodge accommodation across communities in Alberta.
 - Number of applications received for Seniors’ Lodge program
 - Number of vacancies in Seniors’ Lodge program
 - Ratio of low-income seniors to the number of rooms in provincially-supported lodges
 - A detailed business process is also in place to identify increasing care needs in the planning of seniors’ lodges, including through the ministry’s capital planning process.
 - The results of the Auditor General’s review are expected in his next report.
- 4. “How many people are going without housing that may qualify for it, that are eligible? I’m asking about wait-lists and things like that. I know that we have a lot of need in our province for affordable housing, and I know that the ministry, along with its partners, does tremendous work, but I just would sort of like an accounting of what kind of information is gathered about the need and not just how many units are provided”. (MLA Sigurdson)**
- ***Response provided at Standing Committee on Public Accounts Committee***
 - “Thank you. As you mentioned, MLA Sigurdson, regarding the wait-list, the number of households that have applied and who have been found to be eligible for affordable housing has increased over the last number of years. We’re continuing to see that need and that demand. Approximately 18,000 households were on wait-lists for those housing units and programs as of March 31, 2019. That change was an estimated 150 decrease from the beginning of the fiscal year, but again we are continuing to see ongoing need and demand. In the 2018-19 budget there was an \$11.2 million increase to the housing management bodies’ operating budget to support and maintain those existing units”.
(Deputy Minister Taylor)

5. **“I guess another question that I have, too, is just the rent supplement program. Specifically, let’s dig down a little bit on that one. It does say that it’s providing 11,500 units, about 18 per cent of the total units the province delivers. Can we talk specifically about that program? I know you talked in general about 18,000 people on wait-lists. Can you separate that out and see how many people are on just this wait-list for the rent supplement program?”**
(MLA Sigurdson)

- In 2018-19, approximately 10,000 households were assisted by the rent supplement program in Alberta, which amounted to 22 per cent of households in housing programs regulated under the *Alberta Housing Act*.
- A separate waitlist is not maintained for the rent supplement program. Those on the waitlist are eligible for all housing programs.

6. **“I just want to quickly follow up on some questions from Member Sigurdson. I imagine this level of detail isn’t readily available, so I’m happy to get this in writing. You mentioned that there are 18,000 families on wait-list. I’m just wondering if you could provide us with the number of these families that require accessible housing, so wheelchair-accessible housing or universal design. If you don’t have that number, I’m happy to get that at a later date”.**
(MLA Renaud)

- Housing providers are not required to collect information on families who require accessible housing.

7. **“I want to talk about the number of units and types of housing that are supported by the housing divisions, and two in particular: special needs housing, which is defined as for people with physical disabilities or people leaving family violence situations, and also community housing, which focuses on low-income and special needs housing. All together I think there are about 13,000 units, so less than 20 per cent of this portfolio. I’m wondering if you could tell me how many of these units are wheelchair accessible, are barrier free, or comply with universal design. If you have that, I’m happy to hear it now, or I’m happy to get it in writing”.** (MLA Renaud)

- The ministry does not track how many units are wheelchair accessible, barrier-free or comply with universal design; however, all new projects are required to comply with the *Alberta Building Code* requirements of at least 10 per cent accessible units. In addition, units in seniors’ lodges that may have continuing care services comply with the *Design Guidelines for Continuing Care Facilities in Alberta*, which includes barrier-free provisions.

8. **“In the annual report it notes a total of \$205 million was expended on 15 projects, so that’s 2018-2019. Fifteen units were regenerated, and 773 units were built. I’m wondering if you could give us a breakdown of the investment in energy efficiency in that work. What was the value of that, and also what was the value of the regenerated units in terms of the retrofits made to meet barrier-free design?”.** (MLA Renaud)

- The Affordable Housing Energy Savings Program (AHESP) was established to make Alberta’s provincially and municipally-owned affordable housing stock more environmentally and financially sustainable through energy efficient upgrades.
- The department spent approximately \$4.5 million on AHESP projects in 2018-19, including \$1 million for energy audits, which identified maintenance projects focused on energy efficiency.
- The ministry does not track specific investment dollars related to energy efficiency elements for each capital project, nor does it track the number of barrier-free units.

9. **“Thank you, Deputy Minister. I appreciate that. I want to switch over now just to some questions about affordable housing [inaudible] about the need for more affordable housing by our community’s Lodgepole Center. What kind of preliminary work or initiating work has the ministry done to allow us to grow the number of available affordable units in rural Alberta?”** (MLA Reid)

- In 2018-19, 446 affordable units were built in seven rural communities in Alberta.
- In 2018, capital planning with Health was undertaken to confirm the need and complete analysis to integrate continuing care into seniors’ lodges in rural communities. The pilot community was Oyen, and then Drumheller, Spirit River, Manning, and Camrose were also identified.
- In 2018, the ministry undertook the Apartment Vacancy and Rental Cost Survey (AVS) which collected data on multi-family dwellings in 66 Alberta rural communities. The AVS report provided the housing industry, private sector, and various Government of Alberta (GOA) ministries with essential housing information on private market vacancy and rental rates for multi-family dwellings in Alberta’s rural communities.
 - The results were used by stakeholders and GOA ministries, regional planning commissions, and the private sector to help inform government policy, support planning for future housing needs, market research, investment decisions and targeting locations.

10. “Thank you, Chair. I think I’m broadcasting. I have questions for both housing management bodies, including as well the deputy minister, regarding our dedicated nonprofit agency that was a pilot project for one-window application processing. Is that something that both housing management bodies wish to pursue, and if so, would it have the support of the ministry? How long would it take to actually implement so that we get this process in place to streamline the application process?”. (MLA Dach)

- The One-Window Initiative was initiated by the City of Calgary. It was supported as an action under the *Provincial Affordable Housing Strategy* to explore how a one-stop shop could help Albertans applying for affordable housing. This included a \$500,000 grant to the City of Calgary.
- The department supports streamlining application processes for households; however, funding was not available to support the implementation request in 2018-19.

11. “Secondly, I have a question about the mixed-rent model. I know I had some experience with that through the City of Edmonton Non-profit Housing Corporation. One end piece to that would be selling units eventually, possibly even to renters so that they can enter the housing market so that you will renew your housing stock in that way. Is there a plan to eventually sell units to individuals so that you can then renew and reinvest in other buildings, and if so, which housing management bodies have started to do that? Of course, that would involve strata titling your units when you actually buy them. That’s a quick question I had there”. (MLA Dach)

- At March 31, 2019, there were no plans to sell Alberta Social Housing Corporation-owned facilities to individuals so that government could renew and reinvest in other buildings.

12. “The final question is about SHARP. Regarding SHARP, the seniors home adaptation and repair program: is it fully subscribed? This, of course, allows seniors to stay in their own homes longer. What number of seniors who stayed out of long-term care or government-subsidized housing –how many seniors has that allowed to stay out of government-subsidized housing? Based on that, what savings to the government have resulted from those seniors not having to go to government housing and staying in their own homes? Therefore, the cost of the program compared to the savings: was it good value for money? Is SHARP, in other words, meeting its desired outcomes?”. (MLA Dach)

- SHARP offers a low-interest home equity loan to help senior homeowners finance home repairs, adaptations and renovations.
- In summer 2018, the department hired a third-party contractor (Advanis) through the Request for Research process with Communications and Public Engagement to complete telephone surveys with SHARP loan recipients.
 - 91 per cent of respondents agree the SHARP loan supported them to remain in their home longer and 83 per cent indicated they would not have completed their home repair without the loan.

- The most common loans funded under SHARP are for essential home repairs and adaptations such as roof repairs, windows, furnaces, and bathrooms.
- From July 1, 2016 to June 30, 2017, SHARP provided loans to 782 seniors.
 - A review of residence status shows 93 per cent of these loan recipients continue to reside in their homes more than three years after accessing SHARP.
- SHARP charges simple interest on loans to offset the cost of administering the program. Over time, the interest received from loan repayments is expected to cover administration costs.

13. “A second question. You know, the affordable housing strategy: you have a stakeholder advisory structure that met. I’m just wondering: what are the next steps coming out of that?”. (MLA Sigurdson)

- Implementation of the *Provincial Affordable Housing Strategy* was a key priority for the ministry in 2018-19, and was supported by a stakeholder advisory structure that included a steering committee and several working groups.
- Membership included representatives from a broad range of housing associations, the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, the Rural Municipalities of Alberta, as well as the ministries of Health, Community and Social Services, and Municipal Affairs.
- Seniors and Housing worked with stakeholders to implement amendments to the *Social Housing Accommodation Regulation* that came into effect on January 1, 2018. This included changes such as awarding prioritization points to Income Support recipients and participants of Housing First programs.
- A bilateral agreement with the Government of Canada was signed on March 6, 2019. The bilateral agreement will provide up to \$339 million in federal funding to GOA between 2019-20 and 2027-28.
- Seniors and Housing worked with Capital Region Housing Corporation to complete a 70-unit mixed-income building, Parkdale ONE. A project evaluation framework was developed to help inform the development of future mixed-income affordable housing projects.
- Fire and safety upgrades were completed in all seniors’ lodges to ensure modern fire and safety systems are in place.
- The work of the advisory structure ended in February 2019.

14. “And just the Indigenous Housing Capital Program: I’d just like to know a little bit more of the outcomes described”. (MLA Sigurdson)

- In 2018-19, 33 applications were reviewed in two rounds of applications (September and December 2018), and 11 projects were selected for funding.
 - Métis Capital Housing Corporation received approval for \$6.95 million to build a minimum of 23 three-bedroom units to house Indigenous families in Edmonton.
 - Elizabeth Metis Settlement received approval for \$2.91 million to build 10 new three-bedroom units to house families living on settlement.
 - The following organizations received planning funding, totaling \$702,147:
 - i. Métis Capital Housing Corporation (\$50,000)
 - ii. Elizabeth Metis Settlement (\$50,000)
 - iii. Blackfoot Confederacy Tribal Council (\$99,500)
 - iv. Buffalo Lake Metis Settlement (\$76,097)
 - v. Peavine Metis Settlement (\$62,850)
 - vi. Yellowhead Tribal Development Foundation (\$64,900)
 - vii. Paul First Nation (\$75,000)
 - viii. Métis Urban Housing Corporation (\$148,800)
 - ix. Lac Ste. Anne Métis Community Association (\$75,000)
- Projects were prioritized based on:
 - Indigenous control over design, ownership and operation;
 - Affordability of units;
 - Intended tenants (family units are top priority);
 - Ability to sustain operational costs;
 - Proximity to community amenities; and
 - Capital contribution to the project.

15. “I do. Thank you. I just wanted to know if you could explain how this ministry is going to align itself with the federal legislation called Accessible Canada Act. Obviously, there’s a partnership between the province and the feds in terms of accessibility standards going forward, so if you could just explain sort of the work being done”. (MLA Renaud)

- As part of the federal bilateral agreement, Alberta has committed new construction projects will be subject to the accessibility standards set out in the *Safety Codes Act*, and Alberta is committed to ensuring 10 per cent of units will be built using barrier-free design.
- The *Accessible Canada Act* came into force July 11, 2019.
- Seniors and Housing will align with the *Alberta Building Code* and other legislation, if amended, to align with the *Accessible Canada Act*.

16. “Thank you Madam Chair. I’ll move on quickly. On page 24 of the annual report under ministry financial highlights there is reference to \$5.4 million of debt servicing for the Alberta Social Housing Corporation. What is that debt related to, and how is your ministry managing the debt?”. (MLA Gotfried)

- This debt was incurred to build seniors’ self-contained and family community housing projects during the 1970s and 1980s.
- The debt with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation is the only debt within the Alberta Social Housing Corporation. The long-term debt is part of historical, long-term debentures with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.
- These are repaid on a set schedule until the principal is completely repaid. The amount has been fairly consistent for many years.
- As with any type of debt repayment schedule, the principal debt reduction occurs annually as per the original, agreed-upon terms.
- This funding for the principal and interest payments is built into the Alberta Social Housing Corporation’s annual budget and expenditures.
- As per the payment schedule, the interest on the declining principal debt is reduced in each successive year until the debt is fully retired.

17. “Secondly, I’d like to ask about the federal national housing strategy. What plans are in place with respect to that and reflecting back on those announcements over a year ago in terms of leveraging that for opportunities for adding additional affordable housing to the Alberta housing stock”. (MLA Gotfried)

- A bilateral agreement under the *National Housing Strategy* was signed on March 6, 2019. The bilateral agreement will provide up to \$339 million in federal funding to GOA between 2019-20 and 2027-28.
- Under the bilateral agreement, provincial spending on most capital projects in 2018-19 was eligible for cost-matching federal funding. This ensures provincial spending will be fully leveraged in building and repairing provincial housing stock and to ensure Alberta will meet its cost-matching obligations over the duration of the bilateral agreement.

18. “Thank you. I have a question related to highlights from the revenues and expenses that are found on page 25 of the annual report. The last point under expenses states that “ASHC’s \$28.2 million increase in expenses from the budget was due to one-time funding that was re-profiled from capital investments to fund additional capital grants for non-government owned projects.” My question is: can the ministry explain what it means exactly as far as re-profiling goes, and could the ministry also explain to me what “non-government owned projects” means?”. (MLA Reid)

- Re-profiling means re-allocating the funds that were originally approved as capital investment (in this case) to be capital grant, an operating expense. A capital investment requires government ownership in the housing project.
- Non-government owned projects refers to non-market rental housing units that are owned by housing providers, civil society organizations and/or municipalities.
- The funds were re-profiled to grant funding to facilitate access to private capital and federal innovation funding programs.
- The units will be owned by the community housing organization, with affordability dictated under the terms of a 20-year grant agreement.

19. “I think we have Member Toor in rotation as well. I will take that round. With respect to elder abuse, which is, of course, an unfortunate situation that many seniors find themselves in, on page 12 of the annual report it states that preventing elder abuse is an ongoing priority for the ministry. Can the ministry speak to what initiatives are under way to help prevent and address elder abuse, can the ministry tell us how much was spent on the issue of elder abuse in 2018-19, and can the ministry explain in detail how many cases of elder abuse are reported each year, how many are investigated, and the qualitative and statistical results of those investigations?”. (MLA Gotfried)

- In 2018-19, the Aging Well in Community grant program provided \$1.6 million in funding for 28 projects to prevent and address elder abuse, support aging in community, address ageism and social isolation.
 - Approximately \$400,000 supported six grants focused specifically on preventing and addressing elder abuse.
- The Taking Action Against Elder Abuse Coordinated Community Response grant program ended in December 2018. \$3.6 million was provided to 31 participating communities to support them in successfully developing or enhancing a localized elder abuse response model between 2015 and 2018.
 - More than 1,400 frontline service providers were trained to recognize the signs of elder abuse, make referrals to services and to respond by providing support, between 2012 and 2019.
- The department participates on the Inter-departmental Committee on Family Violence to ensure issues related to elder abuse are included in all broader GOA plans related to family violence.
- The department has committed \$300,000 to support the establishment and development of the Alberta Elder Abuse Awareness Council whose mission is to raise awareness and support community responses to elder abuse.

- The most recent prevalence study on elder abuse suggests up to nine per cent of older Albertans experience one or more forms of elder abuse, which translates into approximately 54,450 older adults in Alberta.
- National police statistics are used as the primary method of data collection and reporting for elder abuse in Alberta. However, not all cases of elder abuse involve police and therefore, these statistics are likely underestimated.
- If a criminal investigation is not warranted, support is typically provided through a variety of service providers including social workers, health care providers, housing providers, and victim services.