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Poverty Reduction Measures

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A recent report from StatsCan shows that Saskatchewan tops the list of Canadian provinces with the highest rate of women residing in shelters because of spousal abuse, and Saskatchewan is the only province in Canada to have more children than women living in shelters.

To the minister: what is this government doing to address this heartbreaking reality?

The Speaker: — I recognize the Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well, Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. Interpersonal violence and abuse is a significant concern for our government, and not only harms individuals and families but entire communities. We appreciate the community organizations that partner with interpersonal violence and abuse programs, units to make life safer for Saskatchewan citizens and families.

Mr. Speaker, in this province we operate 42 services delivered by 32 community-based organizations across Saskatchewan. This includes increases to community agencies for wages, enhancements, new funding for a new transition house and new transition services, Mr. Speaker. This includes development of the province's first new transition house since 1989.

Mr. Speaker, this government takes this issue very, very seriously. Mr. Speaker, we're going to continue to work with our community partners to address it.

The Speaker: — I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, we know there are various factors that contribute to the number of women and children in shelters in our province, but poverty plays a huge role, and the human cost of poverty is tremendous. But poverty also costs the government and society a lot of money. It contributes to an estimated \$420

million in higher health care costs, \$720 million in increased social assistance costs, up to \$120 million in increased criminal justice costs, and billions of dollars in lost economic opportunity.

Saskatchewan is only one of two provinces in all of Canada that doesn't have a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. To the minister: will the government agree today that Saskatchewan needs a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy?

The Speaker: — I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I know that lately we've been hearing information about the poverty strategies that are in place in other areas. And I think the members opposite should be aware that according to Stats Canada, since 2007 our government has reduced the number of low-income people more than any other province in Canada, including all of those that have a poverty strategy.

Mr. Speaker, what we're talking about is action to deliver results. Mr. Speaker, we know that working together is an important part of what we're doing, and that's why when we talk about looking at programs like SAID [Saskatchewan assured income for disability] taking 11,000 people off the roll. We talk about things like the Hub and the COR [centre of responsibility], where people have a chance to sit together and talk about the issues that are affecting families. We have hot-spotting in place, Mr. Speaker. We're working to ensure that we find out why people are needing services.

Mr. Speaker, there's always more work to do. Through the child and family agenda, we have seven ministers that sit together and talk about the work we can do to improve the lives of children. We agree there's always more work to be done and we'll learn from other jurisdictions, but we're not just basing that on another report. What we're talking about is action. That is the role of our province.

The Speaker: — I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: — Mr. Speaker, we're not just talking about another report. Mr. Speaker, other provinces have had good success by implementing anti-poverty strategies, and there is no question that Saskatchewan needs a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. And there have been many calls for this over the years, including from Poverty Free Saskatchewan and now Poverty Costs.

The NDP would be very pleased to work with the government to help make this a reality. And as the legislature, we have struck an all-party special committee on a variety of topics: about tobacco control in 2000, about the abuse and exploitation of children through the sex trade in 2001, and most recently about traffic safety. To the minister: will this government agree to announce initial funding in next week's budget, then work together with the NDP in an all-party special committee to develop a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy?

The Speaker: — I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: — Mr. Speaker, I told the member opposite a few minutes ago that the number of low-income people in Saskatchewan has decreased more in Saskatchewan than places that have a poverty strategy. The number of children in low-income families has decreased more than any other province. And I really don't know if we need to take any lessons from the NDP because the number of low-income people declined in the NDP's last seven years by 16 per cent, has declined by 30 per cent in the last six years under our government.

Children in low-income families has declined by nearly 36 per cent in the last number of years. Mr. Speaker, you know we have spoken to the members from Upstream. We talked about working together and we'd be willing to do that, Mr. Speaker. We have to talk about the fact that we have results.

We have the lowest unemployment in Canada for the last 14 months. We have the record number of people that are employed. The average weekly earnings have increased by 27 per cent. We've raised minimum wage by 26 per cent. And yes, there's more work to do. In fact some of my colleagues had an opportunity to meet with Upstream yesterday and we talked about how we can work together with some of the very great policies we have in place right now.