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Social Housing

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The shortage of affordable housing in communities across the province is a major problem, and the government's new social housing policies are making it worse.

Because of the new age requirements for tenants, the Earl Grey Housing Authority recently had a one-bedroom unit sit vacant for close to six months despite having numerous calls from people desperately looking for a place to rent. And because of the new community market rent policy, the Earl Grey Housing Authority must charge \$800 per month. They say that is, and I quote, "far too high for a small village."

To the minister: why is this government, as a landlord, making it so hard for people to rent social housing units at affordable rates?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Mr. Speaker, I'm really pleased that the member opposite is talking about affordable housing because it's something that our government takes very seriously.

We have the most social housing units of any place in Western Canada and the policies hadn't changed since the 1950s. So when we relooked at them, we realized that there were tenants in these social housing units that had . . . Fifteen of them were making over \$100,000 a year. And we had up to 800 spaces that we created because there were . . . had a rent cap of about \$800 a month.

Mr. Speaker, we know that in rural Saskatchewan there is need for affordable housing as well. We relooked at our policies and looked at what would be, something that would be suitable when we compare the fact that we have lights, power and lights and services are available within our units.

Mr. Speaker, our goal is to make sure that we have, that the houses are available to those most in need. Mr. Speaker, that is our goal, and we will continue to provide housing for people that are in need in our province.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Well thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well this is what the Earl Grey Housing Authority said last week when they wrote the minister. They say, and I quote, “For small communities like Earl Grey, housing is still beyond the reach for most non-seniors with low and moderate income, those that need it most.”

The housing authority wanted to discuss these changes with the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation at a meeting in January, but they were told it wasn't acceptable. They write, and I quote again, “We were told beforehand the policy we found most detrimental, community market rent, was not up for discussion.” To the minister: why is this government not even willing to listen to very real concerns from those front-line workers about the impact its policies are having on Saskatchewan people?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And I think the member opposite does know that there was meetings in January and that we actually did make a number of changes. In fact there was another level of housing that was acquired. Now we have A, B, C, D, and E for communities that have less than 300 people.

Mr. Speaker, we know that the work that we are doing and the chatting that we are having with area authorities meant that we looked at the rental units, and there was a decrease in all of the tiers so that it is more acceptable in the areas. We now have a maximum unit rent in each area, a discussion that we continue to have with our housing authorities.

The members opposite should know that there is 276 housing authorities in this province, and our goal is to make sure that people can receive a rent that is viable for them. Mr. Speaker, the number of people that are paying the maximum rent in this province is less than 9 per cent of the 18,000 units. Mr. Speaker, we will continue to speak with our housing authorities.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. These are very real concerns being brought forward by the Earl Grey Housing Authority, and the minister ought to be listening to them and taking them seriously. The housing authority is concerned about the many people that they've had to turn away because of this government's new policies, and they outline the specific cases in their letter to the minister.

But they've also expressed concerns about the sustainability of the housing units because the government has slashed their improvement budget by 63 per cent. The government has decided it won't even be replacing closet doors anymore, but they suggest instead

that they can use curtain rods and fabric.

To the minister: is she listening to these concerns from the housing authority or is she going to be stubbornly dismissing them as usual?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Mr. Speaker, first of all the members opposite should be aware that in our province, the people that are paying less than the maximum rent is less than 9 per cent of the people paying maximum rent.

And when it comes to maintenance, I'd really like to ensure that the members opposite can prove the numbers that they're talking about in the House because far too often they come forward and bring numbers that are based on nothing more than maybe something that they have dreamt about the night before.

But, Mr. Speaker, it is very, very important to our government to make sure that we are maintaining these units. In fact one of the things that we are doing is evaluating every one of the housing authorities that we have to ensure what actually is . . . the state that they're in. I'm very proud of the fact that by the end of May of this year, we're going to have evaluated every one of those units to know what type of maintenance is required so we know our ongoing needs.

Mr. Speaker, we have signed another agreement with the federal government where we can look at the social housing, another \$9.1 million from the federal government that we'll be matching to not only build affordable housing but to maintain the housing that we do have. Mr. Speaker, in rural Saskatchewan this is an important issue as it is in the urban centres.