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Support for Seniors

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, we know that many seniors in our province are struggling with the cost of living and we hear heartbreaking stories about this all the time. And yesterday we learned that the number of seniors having to use the food bank here in Regina has increased by 24 per cent just over last year. To the Minister of Social Services: how can she explain why the number of seniors accessing the food bank here in our capital city has jumped by 24 per cent in just the last year?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And I also heard the report this morning about the seniors and the individual that was looking for housing, and that there was an increase in food bank usage. I think the question that the member opposite should be asking themselves is why, when they were in government for 16 years, they didn't look at things like the seniors' income plan. Never once in 16 years did they look at it. We've increased it 189 per cent since we became government, and for 16 years it was frozen under them.

Mr. Speaker, we've also looked at the housing issues for seniors and the social housing in Regina. The wait-list has decreased from 192 in June of 2012 to 92 in April of this year.

Mr. Speaker, we know there's always more work to do when it comes to helping those who are very vulnerable. But I know that we've also looked at things like the seniors' income plan, the personal care home benefit, the caregiver tax credit, and issues that we know impacts every one of them on a daily basis.

Mr. Speaker, there's never . . . Not one of us on this side of this House doesn't realize there's more to do, and we will continue to do that.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: And, Mr. Speaker, under this government's watch, 3,000 seniors have been thrown off the seniors' income plan, and she knows that. It's cold comfort to seniors who have to go to a food bank — 24 per cent increase in the number of seniors in the last year, in the last year.

But we also know that there's an alarming increase in the number of homeless seniors seeking emergency shelter in Regina. And the director of the Salvation Army Waterston centre says, "This alarming increase is linked to rising rental and utility rates."

My question to the minister: is the government paying attention to this? Is it concerned? And when will it actually do something to help seniors who are living in poverty?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Mr. Speaker, the answer is each and every day and each and every budget we think about people that need our support. Mr. Speaker, there are 1,150 social housing units for seniors in Regina. Mr. Speaker, the wait-lists for those housing units have decreased from 192 in 2012 to 92 in April of this year.

And also, Mr. Speaker, we've talked about the seniors' income plan going up. We've talked about the personal care home benefit and caregivers' tax credit. And I think the member opposite should know that the seniors' income plan is based on income. That's why people are not on . . . They're going off it because their income has increased. Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing? Isn't that what we're pleased to do in this province, is having seniors with more income? That's why we have the third-lowest percentage of low-income people in Canada.

We care about every one of those seniors that need support. And, Mr. Speaker, because of the changes we made in income tax, right now a single senior with \$25,000 in income tax, in income this year, pays \$59. You know what they paid in 2007? Nine hundred and thirty-three. Mr. Speaker, we are looking at things like the personal . . .

The Speaker: Next question. I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: You know, Mr. Speaker, the members opposite can cheer while the minister recites stats, but what are the people on the front lines who are helping seniors every day saying? What are those people saying? They're seeing a 24 per cent increase.

And this is what the Regina Food Bank CEO [chief executive officer] has to say, and I quote. And he's a front-line worker. He's not regurgitating the stats. He's saying, "What we're starting to see now is people that would never have thought they would have to entertain the idea of reaching out for some support through the food bank."

And they laugh over there. The director of the emergency shelter says this:

The seniors that we've seen come to the shelter have been folks that have lived comfortable lives and because of their financial instability that they face, they've not been able to maintain that standard of living.

It's incredibly disturbing to hear about seniors' poverty. To the minister: will she just admit that Saskatchewan needs a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What I will tell the member opposite is what we need is continued action. The members opposite want to talk about another paper, another strategy, and we want to talk about action.

Mr. Speaker, a senior couple with a combined income of \$50,000 now pays \$494 in provincial income tax. That's a savings of \$1,699 compared to 2007.

All of a sudden there's a new-found caring about seniors from the members opposite. They had an opportunity for 16 years to look at our seniors' issues, and they didn't do anything. We've talked about the seniors' income plan. We've talked about ensuring that people that need our support are getting it, through access to housing, through personal care home benefits, the caregiver tax credit, to the Alzheimer Society, for the seniors' house call pilot program. The ministries together are recognizing the needs of our seniors, and I assure you, Mr. Speaker, that's something that we'll continue to do.