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Housing Crisis

Mr. Forbes: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, a lack of affordable housing and quality housing is at a boiling point in Saskatchewan today. We know of young people couch surfing up in La Loche because they can't find a place to stay. We know students are holding demonstrations to draw attention to the lack of affordable housing. We know that seniors are worried about whether or not they can afford their rent. And this morning, we heard media reports of families having to stay in the emergency room at St. Paul's Hospital in Saskatoon last week.

To the Minister of Social Services: does she believe, does she truly believe there's an affordable housing crisis here in Saskatchewan today?

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — I recognize the Minister Responsible for Social Services.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you very much for that question. And the quick answer quite frankly is, yes I do believe there is an affordable housing crisis in the province today, as well as an available housing crisis. And that is why I have asked two very credible gentlemen to take a look at this issue. The government previous had done some programs. We've been monitoring those programs, and I might add, Mr. Speaker, they put them in place on the eve of the election. And we've been . . .

The Speaker: — Order. I would ask members to allow the Minister of Social Services to respond to the question.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again I'd like to say that they took a look at it on the eve of an election. That was after the students were saying that there was a crisis when they went to get housing in the fall, and that was after we heard from different vulnerable citizens within the province. They finally took a look at it and put programs in place on the eve of the election. In less than six months, our government's going to look at strengthening those programs as well as addressing the industry and what they can do to help this crisis.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Forbes: — Well, Mr. Speaker, of course HomeFirst was announced in 2004, and we were right on the ball. And of course we were listening to people last summer. But I want to say this. Yesterday the minister announced a new task force to study the issue and one of the members appointed to this task force is a former MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly], Ted Merriman. Well last summer Mr. Merriman called the housing market an emergency situation. At the time he said to government, quote, “You just can’t wait. You’re not the one living on the streets.”

Well the housing situation has indeed worsened since those comments were made but the government now seems all too willing to just sit and wait for a report. But like Mr. Merriman said, they’re not the ones sitting on the streets, living on the streets.

To the Minister of Social Services: why is she waiting to act on what is clearly a pressing need for Saskatchewan families, seniors, and students? How can she look at her former colleague in the eye and tell him this is action, when clearly all it is, is waiting?

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — I recognize the Minister Responsible for Social Services.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Mr. Speaker, it’s quite surprising to me that that member would even stand on his feet today and come up with such a silly question. People have been waiting for 16 years for a government that never, ever conceived that this province could grow. They never planned for growth. They never did anything about the housing situation till the eve of an election. Then they finally put some programs into place. And they can’t take a compliment. I have said, Mr. Speaker, those programs were good. We need to strengthen them. We also need to see what the industry and what municipal governments need to partner with us to not only address affordability but availability, Mr. Speaker. And that’s what these two gentlemen are going to do.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Forbes: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well in February of last year our premier put an additional \$100 million into affordable housing and community revitalization, the single largest expansion for the HomeFirst program. In this past summer, our government heard the voices of those who said more needed to be done. Countless groups were consulted and provided input into the solutions they felt would improve the housing crisis.

Why is the minister insisting on reinventing the wheel? Is the photo op really worth the continued suffering of Saskatchewan people?

My question is to the Minister of Social Services: will the minister stop playing politics with people's lives and get to work on the affordable housing starting today, especially with today's budget?

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — Order. Order. Before I recognize the minister, I just want to remind members to address their comments through the Chair. Minister of Social Services.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I know there's fewer members on the opposite side of the House, and maybe they need to get a few more researchers because the fact is yes, they did say, they announced money for housing. They said it was there. They never spent it. They never spent it. It was a hollow announcement. So we currently have 856 units that are in construction right now and will be ready, which represents 71.5 million of those dollars. There also is an expression of interest that is going out fairly shortly which is a total of 18.4 million for First Nations housing off reserve and Métis housing.

We have 84 submissions of additional groups that want to partner with Sask Housing Corporation in different projects. That is all happening as we speak. It did not happen when that member was government.