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RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

TUESDAY, 5 DECEMBER 2017

Responses to Questions Taken As Notice

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Funding for abortions on PEI

My question is to the Premier: Premier, how many abortions were funded on PEI this past year?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, there was a number mentioned in the public media. I believe it's on the order of 120, 116, 120, something of that order. That information was communicated to the public.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Funding for in vitro fertilization treatments on PEI

My second question is also to the Premier: Premier, how many in vitro fertilization treatments were funded on PEI this past year?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, as far as in vitro fertilization treatments, none of them are done on Prince Edward Island. We have a new women's wellness centre here now, operating in Prince County and we have some divisions out across the province. They would work with helping families or individuals that are having trouble conceiving a child and they would make recommendations, refer them to off-Island for in vitro fertilization should that be the approved choice of service.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Having a child can be one of the most rewarding moments in a person's life, but unfortunately, many are unable to experience this joy due to fertility challenges, which often causes stress, reduces self esteem and strains relationships.

Supports for Islanders seeking in vitro fertilization

Again, question to the Premier: Premier, what supports are now available for Islanders seeking in vitro fertilization services to help address fertility issues?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, basically if a particular individual or family is deciding that they are requesting services regarding the conception of a child, they would, once again, go to our women's wellness centre. They can go a self-referral, or they can be referred by their family doctor. They would counsel and provide them different ideas and ways of trying to help with that issue.

Then, once again, if there is a case, the referral would be made and it would be up to the family to get to those locations and pay for that particular treatment.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

For couples and individuals dealing with fertility challenges there are significant roadblocks to accessing necessary care that this government has simply not dealt with.

Government refusal to provide IVF services

Again, question to the Premier: Premier, why has this government refused, for 10 years, to provide access for Islanders to IVF services?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, that particular service, like many other services on Prince Edward Island, that there are requests and we work through these initiatives to try to provide those particular services. At this point in time, we have not provided the supports and funding for that particular in vitro fertilization service, but we do provide a lot of issues around counseling and to try to help families conceive in other forms of ways of doing that through our health care system.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Mr. Speaker, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women reported little or no progress on this issue in their last report card for this government.

Women or couples who desire or require assistance to get pregnant now have no local fertility specialist or access to supports for in vitro fertilization treatment and it remains a top priority for the council.

Financial supports for access to in vitro fertilization

Again, question to the Premier: When can Islanders expect to see financial supports for women and couples trying to access in vitro fertilization?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: One of the things that our government has done is the developing of the concepts of a women's wellness centre on Prince Edward Island. We made that announcement about a year and a half ago and we are now getting up and operational.

We are now working on many different issues – women's issues – around conception, all those particular issues that are particular to women – postpartum depression, things of that nature. We've now launched those services out into the communities. Charlottetown, I think we just recently made an announcement – O'Leary and Alberton. We'll continue to work on many initiatives that will advance the causes of women's wellness.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I was actually at that announcement at the PCH just a little over a year ago and sadly, leaving there; I didn't hear anything remotely close to an announcement around IVF. A single round of IVF treatment can cost \$10,000 or more. Multiple treatments are often needed, so costs can quickly add up. The cost can put the dream of parenthood out of reach for many. It's reported that one in six couples have problems conceiving a child naturally.

Again, question to the Premier: Do you think it is fair that Islanders who lack the financial means are unable to seek IVF treatments?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, certainly I can empathize with many families that are having that difficulty. Once again, with our development of our women's health program and sexual health services that are provided to Islanders and women, we are doing our very best to provide services and will continue to provide more services as they evolve.

I might add that the construction of the site has not even been completed in conjunction with the ambulatory care section at the Prince County Hospital and, once again, these services will be evolving as time moves on.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Just roughly over a year ago the announcement was made in Summerside at the PCH with regards to the women's wellness centre. No announcement there; no announcement here today, again, a year later, with regards to assisting women or couples who are seeking IVF.

A number of provinces offer some measure of coverage or financial support for fertility treatments. For example, New Brunswick offers a one-time grant of \$5,000 to partially offset treatment costs.

Again, a question to the Premier: Will you please take action to provide financial support towards fertility treatment to offset some of the huge costs Islanders face?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, once again, as we provide many services to women, and women's wellness programs, and sexual health services in this province, we will continue to look at more and more services as time and skill sets exist. We have added a number of services around postpartum depression, sexual health education, pregnancy testing and options around that, menopause care, and conception counseling. These are the types of things that we'll be doing in the women's wellness centre and I'm sure these services are only going to continue and expand, but it's really only been a year and a half since we've made that announcement and we'll continue to work with providing more and more services to Islanders for many other causes too, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

It's easy for the minister to stand and rhyme off just a few of the items that they're finally providing at the women's wellness centre, but I could equally stand here and rhyme off the many, many services that this government is still ignoring. But today, I'm speaking specifically about in vitro fertilization.

For Islanders struggling with fertility issues, a compassionate approach is needed – one that gives these families and individuals hope.

Provision of a grant or tax credit to Islanders seeking IVF treatment

Again, question to the Premier: Will you commit to providing these Islanders a small measure of hope, either through a grant or tax credit that helps shoulder some of these costs?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, and I know as minister of health, there are many challenges that I face on a day-to-day basis and trying to provide many, many services. The opposition has brought up many questions around it, whether it's long-term care, whether it's more drugs in the formulary, whether it's now in vitro fertilization.

Once again, as minister I'm working hard on trying to make sure that we can provide as many services as we possibly can and we'll continue to do so – and this would be one of those other services that we'll add to the list, but I certainly can be empathetic to any particular family that is having this significant challenge in their creating a family, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I have questions on autism today. I'm curious to as which member I should direct them to.

Speaker: You can ask the question, hon. Member, and whichever person wants to answer it can answer.

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct)

Speaker: Hon. Member, I can't order any particular person to answer a question, you just ask the question.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I much appreciate that and by the looks of people looking around over there, is kind of the reason why I was asking it. Autism falls in amongst a number of departments and I know a lot of advocates out there are feeling that it's falling through the cracks.

In 2010, a comprehensive study made 37 key recommendations to improve services for Islanders living with autism.

Improving services to Islanders with autism re: key recommendations

A question: How many of those 37 key recommendations remain outstanding?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: When it comes to the issue of autism, the hon. member is correct; it does fall under different portfolios and departments. If it's a preschool autism issue, that falls under the Department of Health and Wellness. One of the things I can say is that we have 2.5 positions that are there with doing psychologists, pediatrics psychology. There's a one-half position that's vacant at the moment. In fact, we have seen our wait times for pre-autism assessments decline from back in August of 2014 at about 22 months to currently; it's about an eight month wait time for pre-autism assessments.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That had absolutely nothing to do with my question.

My question was: How many of the 37 key recommendations remain outstanding, and I would appreciate if the minister would bring that back.

One of the key recommendations was for the creation of a navigator position to help families literally navigate the many silos in schools, health care system, and government. That position was created in 2011, only to be later cut after proving success with families.

Restoring of navigator position for autism

Question to the minister: Has there been any discussion within your department to restoring the navigator position for families with autism?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, once again, in our department we're doing our pre-autism issues before our preschool. We, once again, work with those particular families. We have our student wellbeing teams in place and we also have our physicians that would make referrals and our child psychologist to assess individuals and things of that nature and we'll continue to work with those particular families to try to provide the most appropriate level of care, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I asked the minister if there was any discussion about bringing back the navigator position. I simply didn't get an answer again.

Accessing of autism grant for school-age children

I'll move to another question: Another outcome of that report was that the autism grants of \$6,600 a year be made available for school-age children under the age of 18. Less than half of those people are accessing that funding grant right now. Can the minister explain why?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. J. Brown: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Through our department there is autism funding for school-age children and there is a grant of up to \$6,600 available annually to help those families – to enable their children to access resources that might help them to progress as they go through their education. We are actively looking at ways of facilitating that process for them, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Education on financial autism supports

I understand that there's a lot of red tape, of course, with setting up the company and it's not the easiest thing to do. So, I would appreciate the minister looking into that and also, the province has a public education campaign right now called Be Aware and Get Your Share. The idea behind it is to help vulnerable Islanders access federal-provincial benefits they may be eligible for.

A question to the minister: Will the department look at a similar campaign to make sure that the families of students with autism are aware of the financial supports that are available to them?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. J. Brown: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I think that is a great idea, hon. member, and I wouldn't be too quick to overlook the work that's being done currently by the Stars for Life group and the disability support program, both of whom I know through having navigated this system myself with constituents, are very good and very quick to help families that are dealing with accessing funds to enable this kind of care. I think there is a fair bit there, but we can always do better and we'll take a look at that idea, hon. member.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Stars for Life seeking core funding increase

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Stars for Life autism foundation has put a request in for an increase to their core funding.

Will the minister honour that request?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. J. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I can say that I honestly haven't seen that request. I'm not sure whether it would come to me or not, but I will look into that as well, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Again, we see the problem. That request goes to a number of departments and everything; it seems to be, with autism keeps getting pushed around from department to department. Even with this strategy, it

seemed like the government of the day, which this is still the same government that is there, cherry-picked ideas. Now, there have been some good progress made, don't get me wrong, with early childhood education in our school system, but they cherry-picked certain ideas and the rest of the strategy fell.

To the minister: The Stars for Life foundation, their services are exceptional. You know their programs are incredibly valuable. Will you please honour their request for an increase in their core funding?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. J. Brown: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As I indicated, I'll take that back. I think, while we're on it, I should be very quick, though, too, to indicate that there has been significant increases in funding for autism supports and for special needs students that are coming through the system. We're hiring two new early years' autism specialists this year. In fact, it's right in progress right now. Early years' grants have gone up by approximately \$350,000 this year.

So, there is a lot being done in this regard and I think we should be proud of the work we have done, and we should recognize there's always more to do.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This government knows that the Stars for Life Foundation for Autism – if they had more funding to hire and pay the professionals appropriately, they could do so much more.

Will this government honour a request to increase the core funding?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. J. Brown: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As I had indicated previously and I'll indicate here again, I think we are looking at all of our programs that involve supports for autistic students and we do recognize and value the contributions that Stars for Life makes, and we certainly recognize and value the other supports that we have and the issues that parents and families that deal with autism, and teachers and frontline workers I should say, too, every day.

We're constantly looking at the resources that we have to put towards that and we have very significantly increased those resources over the last few years.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Education on financial autism supports (further)

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm not sure if this government gets it. Here I am asking questions about the Stars for Life, an organization that helps adults with autism. We have the minister of education standing up to answer these questions that's based on school-aged children. That's the disconnect that we have here.

I keep hearing from people who feel that we need a renewed focus on adults with education. Why are we doing just enough to let people with autism survive? Why aren't we running every provincial funding decision through the lens of making people with autism thrive? That's the question.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, when it comes to issues with dealing with children with complex needs, our government has

made significant investments and we've focused on issues, whether it's a student wellbeing team which are now unfolding and rolling those out across the province, we've seen our pre-autism wait times reduced. We've made occupational –

Mr. LaVie: Not answering the questions.

Mr. Henderson: – therapy part of the student wellbeing teams to try to, once again, deal with students and children that require these complex needs. We certainly understand the challenges and toll that this can take on many Island families. We'll do our level best to try to address these issues.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Service-based approach to autism

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Let me finish with this today. I started asking my questions today about how autism can fall through the cracks of all departments. We see that in the answers right here today, coming from many departments.

The autism action group itself said this in their report: The department-based or serviced-based silos are entrenched and cannot be penetrated by the goodwill and intent of AAG participants alone because each department or service applies very different approaches to ASD supports and services. At their levels with their corresponding organizations, the AAG participants did not have the authority or mandate to resolve these issues.

While Stars for Life needs an increase in its core funding to be able to do the great work that they do, the larger issue that must be addressed is this and I ask the minister today: What have we done as a province to address the entrenched service-based silo approach to autism?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, actually we've done many things in trying to deal with some of these different programs. One of the things that we've developed here is the bridging program where if an individual might have particular challenges where different agencies get around the table and they come up with solutions to work that through.

We also realize that there are differences between our different departments in dealing with school-aged children versus pre-school and beyond, and as a department of health we've had discussions and we're continuing to work in collaboration. One of those things of collaborative therapy has been around occupational therapy where we have worked in making sure that our recruiting and retention department is working with trying to recruit and fill these vacancies. We're also having discussions around the issues of psychology. We are working together collaboratively to try to meet the needs of Islanders, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

Qualifying criteria for grandparents and care givers program

Dr. Bevan-Baker: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker.

In a November the 10th Facebook post, the Minister of Family and Human Services wrote the following: Words cannot describe how full my heart is. I couldn't hold back my tears as I let these dedicated grandparents, some who are caring for up to four of their grandchildren, hear from me firsthand about a new grandparents and care provider program. This program will help families who provide out-of-home care for children for safety reasons, giving them \$700 per month per child, as well as child care and children's dental and drug coverage.

A question to the Minister of Family and Human Services: Are there any qualifying

criteria for grandparents to access this program?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Family and Human Services.

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Actually, hearing that again, again made my heart feel so full because it was very befitting that I went back there to announce the program. It is an interim program. We wanted to get something out the door immediately that would help the grandparents, and care givers; the aunts, the uncles, the neighbours who are caring for children, vulnerable, traumatized children who have been removed from their home, had to leave the safety of their home for safety reasons.

Our interim program is the one that rolled out –

Mr. LaVie: Answer the question.

Ms. Mundy: – actually just last week, December 1st, and it is open right now and it is being acted upon for those family members, or those grandparents, or those caregivers that are caring for the children with open child protection cases across Prince Edward Island.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party, your first supplementary.

Dr. Bevan-Baker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Clearly, getting something out the door was the priority here because it was not made clear whatsoever that there would be some very stringent eligibility requirements attached to this program.

The vast majority of grandparents care for their grandchildren in an informal arrangement and approximately 75% of them will not be eligible to receive assistance. I believe that all care giving grandparents regardless of their income, custody arrangements, or the status of the

child, should be able to access simple, universal and sufficient financial support equivalent to that provided to children in the care of the province.

A question to the minister: How can you design a program that intentionally excludes the vast majority of people needing assistance?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Some Hon. Members: Oh.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Family and Human Services.

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That is so far from the truth, I can't even address it. We have identified 54 grandparents that are caring for children that have had to leave their home in an informal situation. They have been doing that out of the kindness of their heart; they stepped up to the plate. Those are the ones that we identified right off the bat. Those are ones we knew about because we had an open child protection case on them.

Those are the ones that we are helping in the interim program. In the meantime, we announced, that very day, that we would be expanding the program and that would expand on April 1st. We will identify more families that are coming forward and we will address those –

Speaker: Thank you, minister.

Ms. Mundy: – on a one-on-one basis.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Mundy: Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party, your second supplementary.

Lacking supports for majority of grandparents and caregivers

Dr. Bevan-Baker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I read, carefully, the government announcement. There is nothing there about interim program, there's nothing about April 1st. This was to be available December 1st.

There is a diverse range of reasons why grandparents are caring for a child. The one thing that they all have in common is that they are determined to keep these children safe and well-cared for within their own families.

This government loves to talk about acting in the best interest of the child, but when it comes to actually helping vulnerable children you create a complex program of conditional help that excludes more than it assists.

Question for the minister, again: How can you claim to be acting in the best interest of the child when this policy fails to support the majority of grandparents, who are working so hard to keep their families together?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Trivers: All talk, no action.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Family and Human Services.

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Again, I don't think the hon. member heard what I said last time that I stood. We have 54 families that are now receiving, as of December 1st, supports. Fifty-four families that we knew about because they had an open child protection case on file, 54 families that our social workers, our caring social workers, are helping and they are receiving supports.

The others that the hon. member mentioned, we are dealing with them as they come in. Each and every one of them have been told that we will look at their case. When the full program is up and going in April, we'll be able to move forward with those.

Right now, the 54 that needed the help most are getting are getting the help they needed.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from West Royalty-Springvale.

GPS tracking for snowplows

Mr. Dumville: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question is to the Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

On PEI we rely on snowplows to keep our roads clear and safe during the winter months. In the past few years other Canadian provinces such as Ontario and Nova Scotia have implemented public online GPS tracking of snowplows in order to allow real-time tracking of roads that have been plowed.

This gives citizens a timeframe for which snowplows will be clearing and opening up roads around their homes and in their communities for safe travel.

Minister: Has your department ever considered looking into implementing this type of public online GPS snowplow tracking system for our provincial plows?

Mr. Trivers: Good question.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Actually, our department does have GPS, as it's referred to, on our provincial plows and other departmental vehicles. Those are used by the highway supervisors to determine and to report and dispatch to the dispatch officers who manage crews, and dispatch equipment and deal with inquiries. It's currently available for our department only.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from West Royalty-Springvale, your first supplementary question.

Mr. Dumville: Minister: Currently, are there any systems in place to be able to determine where plows have been or where they are going in order to allow Islanders to plan their winter travel?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

If Island residents either call 511 or go online to our department with 511, you can see what the road conditions are. You can monitor through the cameras that are placed across the province to see what roads are already plowed and what road conditions are. That is continuously updated on an hourly basis by our department to ensure the people know and have a sense of road conditions before they get out on the road.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from West Royalty-Springvale, your second supplementary.

Mr. Dumville: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister: Will your department commit to researching the idea to see if something like this could work on PEI?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That's certainly something we have had discussions on; as to the costs and the logistics of how that would work based on the fact that 40% of our highways are plowed by contracting out to private contractors, our provincial plows that do have the GPS on it are on the main highways. Those are all factors that when the snow contracts come up in two years time that we would have to look at what the added costs would be and the logistics of doing that.

I know other provinces that do do it actually, by majority. The roads are plowed by provincial equipment.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Lewis Point.

Number of foster family homes on PEI

Ms. Casey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question today is also to the Minister of Family and Human Services. Minister, I have noticed since you have been elected

and sworn in as the Minister of Family and Human Services that you carry out your duties with a great deal of compassion. I have noticed this right away. One of your first duties was the supports for grandparents, and we all know the success of that program. This compassion also extends to foster families and the need for increased foster families.

Can you explain how many foster homes there are on the Island and what is being done to increase the numbers of foster families?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Family and Human Services.

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Every day, foster families across Prince Edward Island, from tip-to-tip open their hearts and their homes to vulnerable children who have had to leave their homes to be safe.

Approximately, we have 80 foster families on Prince Edward Island. We also have five group homes and they are caring for approximately 120 children that have had to come into care of the director of child protection.

We work hand-in-hand with the Federation of Foster Families on Prince Edward Island, as well as other community partners to retain and recruit foster families. We look forward to collaborating more in the future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Lewis Point, your first supplementary.

Review of foster families association

Ms. Casey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, we have had many conversations about foster families and I understand there are many positive things happening in your department with regards to the foster families with the supports that have been increased lately.

You'll soon be undertaking a collaborative review of the foster families association on the Island.

Could you explain what this review will entail?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Family and Human Services.

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Again, I can't say enough about how much we do appreciate the crucial role these foster families step up to the plate each and every day to care for the Island's vulnerable children.

I am very happy to say that we are going to be undertaking a collaborative, comprehensive, thorough review of the entire foster care program. We will be doing that in collaboration with the PEI foster families federation, as well as other community partners because doing it together is the only we're going to thrive.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Students receiving benefits from Career Connect program

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Back in April, government announced its Career Connect program to allow eligible fulltime students to collect EI while pursuing their studies.

Question to the Premier: To date, how many students have received benefits from this program?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: I don't have a precise number for that. The Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning, I'm sure would be happy to answer the question.

There was, and I'd encourage all hon.

members to look at it and I'll be looking myself. When Statistics Canada produced its most recent report on EI beneficiaries or EI recipients across Canada, there was a significant increase relative to last year in the number of people in that student age group who are recipients of EI to the end of September and I'd be happy to give the House the precise numbers, but (Indistinct) would be significant in terms of the benefits received and the impact on the economy.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Earlier this fall, the UPEI Student Union came to committee and they talked about their priorities and it was a great discussion to have on the issue and this issue came up – about unequal access to this program because of the dual zones.

Following the student union's presentation, our committee wrote to our four MPs trying to confirm their position on this issue. The committee heard back from three of the four MPs and the response is not encouraging, Mr. Premier. Only one stood by their 2015 election commitment, one hedged, and the other completely reversed.

Consensus among MPs on program

Question to the Premier: Are you troubled by the fact that there appears to be no consensus among our Island MPs on this issue?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the changes that have brought about the situation that the hon. member is raising indeed took place under the previous government and were led by minister Gail Shea as she was at the time and I think there were concerns at the time about what that impact would be, notably from one area and from one community to another. It's our understanding – and we've heard some discussion about that when the prime minister was here that this is something that the federal government has under

consideration and presumably they'll be dealing with it in due course.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Well Gail Shea isn't there anymore, in fact, Bobby Morrissey is – and Bob's pretty clear about where he stands on the issue and it happens to be the complete opposite of Charlottetown MP, Sean Casey.

He says in a letter to back the committee that I received today:

Economic region boundaries exist to provide support for those who are at a disadvantage due to where they live. Perceived inequality for workers who commute into regions with lower requirements is exactly that – perceived. In the case that these commuting workers become unemployed, they have a significant and quantifiable advantage over their rural counterparts.

Question to the Premier: Do you agree with Bobby Morrissey's take on this?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, our government has a record of working closely with our four MPs from Prince Edward Island and the four MPs have a record of working together, collaboratively. It's the nature of when you're in government or when you're dealing with public policy, that things arise that people have to speak to each other and find whatever the best common position is and I'm confident that our four MPs are conducting that collaboration and encourage them to do so.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

What Bobby Morrissey is saying is that the rural residents of Prince Edward Island are the ones that have a significant disadvantage when it comes to work.

Question now to the minister responsible for rural and economic development: Do you agree with Bobby Morrissey's take on this issue?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Rural and Regional Development.

Mr. Murphy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As the Premier spoke earlier, we have to work together in these issues. This is the federal government jurisdiction and I don't feel that it's my responsibility to weigh in on that.

Mr. Fox: Oh come on.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

So the reason why it is your issue is because it was brought forward to a committee here of this Legislature, UPEI students expressed their concerns over this issue, and our committee wrote to the MPs asking them to clarify their position. Bobby Morrissey continued. He said more than that.

He said: This is a necessary part of a system that is adapted to help the unemployed weather economic hardship. If it were eliminated, rural Islanders would lose an estimated \$8 million in benefits each year.

Question to the rural and economic development minister: Do you agree with Bobby Morrissey's take on this?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Rural and Regional Development.

Mr. Murphy: I haven't seen those numbers myself, so I'll have to take his word on that. If that's the case, of course I wouldn't want to see rural Prince Edward Island lose \$8.1 million.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Well, I'm glad to hear that. I'm glad to hear that the minister responsible for rural and economic development is siding with Bobby Morrissey on this issue, which I think he should. This issue impact all post-secondary students; however, on Prince Edward Island.

The question back to the Premier: Premier, do you agree with Bobby Morrissey's take on the issue, or Sean Casey's take on the issue?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, as I said in my earlier comment this is a federal initiative. Indeed, it started under the previous government. There have been various positions put forward as to how to move that to whatever might be a further stage. We have lots of work to do in this House; advancing rural and regional development are, indeed, doing so –

Mr. Trivers: Take a stand.

Premier MacLauchlan: – we're very impressed to see –

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct) not your pocketbook.

Premier MacLauchlan: – what that means in the hands of students –

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct) not your pocketbook.

Premier MacLauchlan: – in our post-secondary institutions and you can see it in the Statistics Canada report, the most recent one on EI recipients. I think that's the focus

that we should all have as we're trying to move our province forward.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Access to Career Connects program for all students

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This is an issue about students. The reason this is an issue here today; it was your government that brought forward this program that students were supposed to be able to access. Except, a lot of them can't access it, and I don't know how you didn't see that prior to bringing this program in.

Good to hear the minister responsible for the rural Islanders here believes in rural Prince Edward Island.

Premier, I haven't heard anything what you believe in. You haven't said anything at all about statistics, and previous governments. We want to hear what you have to say.

Question to the Premier: Will you be changing your program so that all Island students will have to work the same number of hours so they can access it?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the underlying criteria are those of the Employment Insurance program, which is a federal program. But I'm happy that our government and, indeed, our hon. members and the Member from Tignish-Palmer Road had a hand in this, too, which was to make the case for students at university, as well as at college to be able to access these benefits.

That initiative has, indeed, translated into material benefits for a great number of students for here on Prince Edward Island and we're proud of that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters, your final question.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This government brought in a program this spring that wasn't equal. It wasn't equal access for all Islanders. I don't know how they didn't see that it wasn't going to be equal, but it didn't.

Now, when we look for clarification on the EI issue, we're hearing a different story from Island MPs on the issue. We can't get any clear message from the Premier. We're hearing a straight message from the minister responsible for rural development.

Question to the Premier: Why did you introduce a program that wasn't equal for all Island students on Prince Edward Island?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, it seems that the direction of this line of questioning is to contend that we shouldn't have brought this program forward and we brought it forward because it does benefit a large number of students here in our province who are attending university today. I think if we go back and look at those numbers for the month of September for students in that age cohort, who are accessing EI benefits in our province it's a very significant number in the range of several million.

I'd be happy for the House to know about this and if the Member from Georgetown-St. Peters thinks that we shouldn't have done it, then I disagree with him.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct) shame it isn't all equal.

[End of Question Period]