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of Prince Edward Island**

**Responses to Questions and  
Oral Question Period**

**(Preliminary Proceedings)**

**Second Session of the 67th General Assembly**

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**No. 17**

**The Honourable Sidney MacEwen, Speaker**

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[10:33 am]

[B. Trivers in the chair]

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

**Tourism inspections**

**Hon. Z. Bell:** I better read this, so I don't mess up my words, Mr. Speaker.

Yesterday, the Leader of the Opposition asked a few questions. One question he asked was how many inspections of tourism operations and properties were completed in the last calendar year. As of January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024, in fiscal year 2024-25, 2,040 inspections were completed and recommended to be licensed.

The hon. member also asked how many inspections last year resulted in a fail or required corrective action before a pass was issued. Using the same date, as of January 8<sup>th</sup>, 758 operations were required to be reinspected. The majority, 542, were due to having no water test or a fire extinguisher only, and a total of 15 operations failed inspection, which is about 0.74 percent.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, minister.

Questions by Members

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

**Hon. H. Perry:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I've heard troubling reports from community partners who stepped up to support government priorities, only to be left holding the bill. In one case, a local fire department was told by this government that they'd be a pilot site for electric bus charging infrastructure. Now, that meant paving, power upgrades, and installation of charging units.

[10:35 a.m.]

But after following every direction from the Province, they're now being told the Province

will only cover the generator, leaving the community with a \$70,000 loan.

**Electric bus charging site**

Question to the Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action: Why did your department give local partners the green light to move forward with construction, only to backtrack on the key infrastructure commitments after the fact?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

**Hon. G. Arsenault:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I will go back to my staff and find more information, as I don't have all the details with me here today. We will make sure we will work with the community of Tignish to see what's suitable in that area, and I'll come back to the hon. member with further information.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

**Hon. H. Perry:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

This was pitched as a flagship pilot project for electric buses, and it involved multiple meetings with senior government officials, with engineers, and with contractors.

Minister, when did your department decide to scale back this project, and why weren't local partners informed before they took out a loan and turned down other funding opportunities?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

**Hon. G. Arsenault:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As I've stated before, I wasn't aware of all these commitments made. I will go back to staff and see what we can do to bring the information forward to the hon. member.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

**Hon. H. Perry:** Thank you very much.

Well, it was your department that made these commitments.

I'm going to direct the next portion of my questions to the Premier, who will hopefully answer what I'm asking here today.

Does the Premier believe that it's acceptable for a community partner to be left on the hook for paving and electrical work that the Province initially committed to, especially after they've followed every directive given?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Premier.

**Hon. R. Lantz:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I don't know any of the details of the issue being raised here. I would certainly hope that it's something that can be worked out. We obviously embarked on some type of project with the community, and if it hasn't proceeded as everyone had anticipated, let's get back to the table and solve this face to face, as it should be. I'm sure there's something that can be worked out to advance it, and I don't think it's necessary to work this out here in Question Period here today.

Thank you.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

**Hon. H. Perry:** Well, I will say yes, this is an opportunity for me to voice the concerns of my district.

So, Premier, I'm going to ask you. You said you'd like to see it go back to the table. Islanders want to be partners in building greener infrastructure – we hear that – but they need to trust that when a government makes commitments, they follow through.

Premier, will your government honour the full scope of what was originally promised for the electric bus charging site, or are you leaving volunteers and local organizations to clean up your mess?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Premier.

**Hon. R. Lantz:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I don't know what the full scope of the project was; it's all a surprise to me here today. Of course, I would be happy to even participate in discussions with the minister himself if required, to work something out with the community.

As I said, we obviously embarked on some sort of project. I don't know the details. I appreciate the member bringing it up, and that's what he should do, is raise issues for his constituents here, but I honestly just don't know the details. Let's get together and work it out and see what can be accomplished from here.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

**Hon. H. Perry:** Thank you very much, and I appreciate that.

The Jobs for Youth and post-secondary programs are vital for students looking to gain work experience and for businesses that rely on summer staffing support. But across the province, we're hearing from students and employers who are still waiting for answers, and summer is fast approaching.

### **Student job programs**

To the Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population: When will employees be notified whether they've been approved for Jobs for Youth or the post-secondary funding?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

**Hon. J. Redmond:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question.

It is certainly an important topic. The Jobs for Youth and programs that we have in place are essential to help support students and others in the workforce during our key months.

I do know the department is currently working on all of the applications. There were certainly many, which is great. They are working currently on the literacy projects right away first, and then they'll get everything else out. So, I would suspect they'll see something by the end of this month.

Thank you.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

**Hon. H. Perry:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I hope it's soon, because even with the post-secondary, of course, it's 14 weeks. That needs to start pretty soon. Some of these students want to participate in the Career Connect program, so they need those hours.

Students are also asking when and where they can start applying for these positions, of course, so when will the list of approved Jobs for Youth and the post-secondary positions be posted publicly, and on what platforms can students expect to find them?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

**Hon. J. Redmond:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[10:40 a.m.]

One element is, certainly, getting our budget passed; will help with confirming some of those details.

As for jobs, we are committed to ensuring that youth have work, and our students, for sure. I appreciate the weeks and understand them fully of what they need. Jobs will be posted on our website upon approval.

Thank you.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

**Hon. H. Perry:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, can you just elaborate on your website, which website that is and what are the platforms the students may be able to find these positions?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

**Hon. J. Redmond:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'll certainly confirm that with SkillsPEI and how we can list and make it easy for students to access, and I will certainly bring back the exact location and tabs of where they click for the hon. member. But we will make sure through social

media as well, an advertisement where students know how to get access to these positions.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

**Hon. H. Perry:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

So, transparency matters, especially when we're talking about publicly funded employment programs. I know, as an MLA and one of the extremities here from Charlottetown, I am the go-to person for everything government when anybody within my community has questions.

Will the minister table a list of the employers who will be approved for the Jobs for Youth program and for the post-secondary programs for this year, including their locations and the number of youth positions approved in each community?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

**Hon. J. Redmond:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'll certainly talk to the department and see what we can do.

Thank you.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

**G. McNeilly:** Mr. Speaker, Islanders are proud of our public long-term care system, and they have every reason to be. The care provided at Beach Grove Home and Prince Edward Home is second to none. The staff treat residents like family, and the community of Charlottetown-West Royalty takes great pride in supporting their work. But that care is being delivered under impossible, unsustainable conditions.

To the Minister of Health.

Beach Grove Home is supposed to provide bilingual services to its residents, but bilingual-designated positions have gone unfilled for months. The result: shifts are understaffed, and the remaining workers are burning out under the weight of forced overtime.

**Long-term care (further)**

Question: Do you think it's acceptable that positions go unfilled while staff work short and residents risk losing access to the level of care they deserve?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Hon. M. McLane:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the member for the question. Our districts actually border on each other, so I do drive by those two long-term care homes on my way home every day.

In terms of bilingual staffing, we've seen challenges, for sure, with bilingual staffing in many sectors on Prince Edward Island. My sister is a retired French teacher, and she's had to unretire actually because of lack of French teachers within the system. So, she's at École La-Belle-Cloche these days, filling those holes there.

Again, bilingual staff is a challenge, and some of our international pathways may bring us more French-speaking people to our health care system.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

**G. McNeilly:** To the minister.

Minister, you've known about this issue for some time. It's been brought to you and various other members of your caucus. We've been told that up to 42 residential care worker shifts go unfilled every two weeks. That's approximately 84 shifts a month left uncovered due to vacant bilingual lines.

Question: What immediate steps will you take to relieve the pressures on staff to ensure stable care for residents?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Hon. M. McLane:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's good to rise today to talk about this issue. We recently announced over 500 positions that we're making permanent within our system. They include nurses and other allied health staff that support our long-term care homes. Those

people that have possibly casual or temporary positions can now move into those positions.

This is the first phase, so obviously, respecting our collective agreements, those positions are offered first internally to those people, but I think we'll see a lot more movement as we move along this process, and that will enable people to take more permanent jobs and stabilize our workforce.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

**G. McNeilly:** We have the workforce right here, so that does nothing for them when we talk about hiring 500 – we've heard these numbers before, minister. They want answers, and that's why they're here today.

This isn't just about shift coverage, it's about continuing care. One nurse said this about the situation: "The vacant bilingual lines impact everything. This should be one of the easiest problems to fix and solving it would make regular lines more attractive. Our residents and families are counting on consistency and experienced care."

[10:45 a.m.]

Minister, what is being done to recruit permanent staff, outside of the things that you just mentioned, to stabilize our long-term care staffing in our public system?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Hon. M. McLane:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I have talked about workforce development a lot this session and all the things that we've done: international nurse pathway, which has yielded 74 nurses already to date; the Marion Reid grant program – which I really like – with over 100 applications within that program, which allows for planning; the expansion of our nursing program at UPEI, which sees the highest number of cohorts that we have in nursing ever at UPEI.

We know where there are workforce challenges. I would welcome any other suggestions to help improve the situation of any of those workers there. As we've talked about before, to the

member, let's take a visit out there and go talk to the staff.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

**G. McNeilly:** Thank you.

I'll definitely take you up on that visit because it's a special place. They're working so hard, and I want you to understand that there are solutions.

Here is another thing that one of the nurses shared with me recently about this topic:

"I'm supposed to have six weeks off a year. I never get it. They tell us we have days off, and then they take it back. It's impossible to rest. I gave up running and biking until I retire. These vacant bilingual lines are doing nothing for us."

Question to the minister: Will you consider reclassifying some of these bilingual imperative positions to bilingual non-imperative to open up the hiring pool and give these workers some relief?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Hon. M. McLane:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I probably wouldn't be able to give a great answer to the reclassification question. Obviously, we work with all of our unions across the spectrum to classify positions and, again, with the PSC. I guess it's something that we need to look at in conjunction with our unions and the Public Service Commission about classifying.

I know the Nurses' Union is going through a process now where they're having town halls and looking at reclassifying nursing positions. It hasn't been done 1996.

Again, I'm pretty proud of some of the challenges that we've undertaken in our department with regards to reclassification and nurses, and other initiatives that we're trying to address these workforce challenges.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

**G. McNeilly:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, your government says it's committed to strengthening the public system, but Health PEI is competing with private providers and the staff shortage is worsening. If you want answers, here is an answer, or an idea to use.

Will you direct Health PEI to temporarily risk-manage a portion of these vacant bilingual positions by staffing them as English-only, one-year term roles until permanent bilingual hires can be secured? Simple.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Hon. M. McLane:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My gosh, we've been here for three or four weeks, and I've had a suggestion. Thank you. I appreciate it. Again, it's good to propose solutions in this House instead of pointing out problems all the time. I do appreciate that suggestion.

We have made a lot of investments in our long-term care homes. The EMR is going online this year. We've done dementia training, actually, I believe in the fall for our nurses, and then other staff are going to be scheduled. We developed the training with the Alzheimer Society. We had the IPAC positions for infection control; we've seen with the measles outbreak the importance of infection control procedures. It's very important.

Even back to the mobile X-ray initiative that we announced yesterday, it's going to reduce 1,000 visits from our long-term care patients to hospitals. That's significant, and we're very of that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

**G. McNeilly:** Well, I hope Health PEI was listening to that question because I didn't get much of an answer about risk-managing a portion of these positions.

To the minister.

It's not just staffing. There are long-standing safety issues in one part of Beach Grove Home where residents do not have proper access to safe, functioning showers. One nurse said: "The space isn't designed for a shower. Water leaks onto the floor. A staff member has already slipped and has been injured. There are no temperature controls and that's a violation of policy."

I'll be tabling photos, and I'll be tabling four suggestions about that from the community to let the minister and Health PEI have a look at.

Minister, will you commit today to addressing these safety issues and ensure that residents can bathe with dignity and that staff can work without fear of injury?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Hon. M. McLane:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[10:50 a.m.]

Yes, there is funding in the budget. It's currently on the floor; they're debating. I agree, there should be no patient or employee safety issues at that facility. The hon. member has advocated for a new door that was done this year. It was about a \$700,000 project. Thank you for the member. He is a great proponent for Beach Grove.

I would encourage the staff to either reach out to us or Health PEI to fix those changes. I think we can address those in a timely fashion. It did take a while to get that door tender out and get that done, but we got it done.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

**G. McNeilly:** I know all the residents were excited about the door, but you didn't do the door that the staff wanted to be fixed.

[Laughter]

**G. McNeilly:** I hate to tell you that. Anyway....

We'll see it on our tour. This was the door that the staff was actually – they care about the residents so incredibly much that they were going to fundraise on their own, and I'm really proud of that.

Moving on to the next question.

Islanders believe in a public health care system. They expect their tax dollars to support a system that puts patients and frontline workers first, not one that quietly funnels millions into the pocket of private, for-profit staff agencies, but that's exactly what's happening under this government. According to the PEI Nurses' Union, spending on agency nurses has exploded from just \$27,000 in 2020 to a forecasted \$20.8 million this year.

### Travel nurses

Minister, how can this government justify a \$20 million payout to for-profit nursing agencies while permanent positions go unfilled, staff are burning out, and patient care is suffering?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Hon. M. McLane:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

If I relate the use of travel nurses just to our long-term care facilities, I believe it's about five manors that we actually use travel nurses. They tend to be at the outer tips of Prince Edward Island, more in rural areas, but that's important to maintain the quality of care that those patients deserve. We don't want to be short. Again, it's our last option.

From a nursing perspective, we offer all those shifts to our existing staff first. We have the shift premiums in place until the fall. We go to our workforce first to fill those shifts, and obviously the travel nurses are a last resort.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

**G. McNeilly:** But your last resort is doubling, and the nurses in the system are decreasing because of the stresses I had mentioned before.

This government says it's working to stabilize health care staffing, but the numbers, which I said, tell a different story. Just one year ago, there were 37 agency nurses working daily in our system. Today, that number has more than doubled to over 80.

To the minister: How can you look Islanders in the eye and claim your workforce plan is



working when your solution is to rely more and more on short-term agency staff and pay a premium rate for temporary coverage?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Hon. M. McLane:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I would like to remind that this government over here actually expanded the nursing program, which should have been done probably about eight years ago. We have about 380 students currently at UPEI in our plan. We've created that funnel. We're working to move them through the system. Our international nurses program has produced 74 nurses already.

If he has any other suggestions about helping our nursing workforce from a body perspective – and one of the things we're doing, too, is that permanent position exercise that we're taking. I've said it before: I don't like 0.4s and 0.6s. We want our workforce to be permanent, and even with these tough economic times, there may be an opportunity for people to solidify their employment going forward.

So, hopefully the full-time employment project that we currently have underway – which is about 160, I think, full-time nursing positions of the 500 – will help increase our staffing complement across our system.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

**K. Bernard:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our counsellor and support staff ratios need to be increased across the board, but our smaller schools and rural schools face unique challenges. Many of these schools are not allotted a full-time counsellor, meaning that when a student is in crisis or needs support, there may not be a counsellor in the building.

Earlier this week, the minister shamed the last Liberal government that tried to close small rural schools, but it's just as shameful of this government not to provide the needed supports to those schools and students.

#### **Student supports and PBIS**

Question to the minister: When will you finally give all Island students consistent access to a school counsellor?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

**Hon. R. Croucher:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member.

Look, these questions have been asked repeatedly already, and we're working as diligently and as hard as we can to get our staffing levels where they need to be.

[10:55 a.m.]

I'd just like to thank our staff in various departments across government for the hard work that they're doing – in the past, today, and moving forward.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**K. Bernard:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I have been asking these questions since 2019, and we still haven't seen any movement.

I hear from teachers regularly about the increase in student behaviour challenges across Island schools. At this year's Home and School AGM, the Somerset Home and School proposed and passed a motion calling on government to add student behaviour intervention resource positions for future staffing allocations wherever there is a need in Island schools.

Question to the minister: Will you commit to adding these positions to staffing allocations for schools who identify as needing them?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

**Hon. R. Croucher:** Our student well-being teams – we're building that. Our PBIS teams – we're building those.

And yes, member, I am committed to working towards bringing our staffing levels up in each and every school across this province. Ministers before me have been working on this. I will continue that hard work moving forward.

Thank you.

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

**K. Bernard:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Forgive me for being cynical about this because I've been hearing the same thing for six years. We need people in our buildings. Student well-being teams are not that.

The New Brunswick Department of Education has implemented positive behaviour intervention supports – PBIS – in 64 schools, with positive outcomes. This government has acknowledged the increased demand by piloting PBIS in the 2024-2025 school year, but some schools are telling me that they just don't have access to the supports they need to reap the benefits of this program for their students.

Question to the minister: I don't want to hear a list of investments already made. Will you commit to increasing the staff supports in all Island schools – including small and rural schools, despite ratios – specifically related to the PBIS program to ensure this program is a success for all Island students?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

**Hon. R. Croucher:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the advocacy on this.

Our PBIS is a pilot. It's a framework that has shown to be very, very successful in the 18 or 19 schools that we have it in. We are going to continue to build upon that. I'm looking forward to the results of that pilot as they come to me so that we can begin to move into other schools as we can get the staffing numbers up to do so.

This is a problem; it's not unique to Prince Edward Island. This is nationwide. I assure you, we're making our system as competitive as it can be to attract new talent here. We're working diligently on that, and we're going to continue to do so.

Thank you.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

**M. MacFarlane:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question is for the Minister of Education, responsible for IRAC.

The Island Regulatory and Appeals Commission is an independent, quasi-judicial tribunal that is responsible for some of the most important decisions that affect Islanders. IRAC regulates gas prices, electricity rates, rental increases, land transactions, and more.

### IRAC

My question to the minister responsible for IRAC is: What are you doing to ensure that IRAC is operating truly independently from government to ensure fair and transparent decision-making for Islanders?

**G. McNeilly:** Who's responsible for IRAC?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

**Hon. R. Croucher:** I'll take it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yes, Department of Education and Early Years is responsible for IRAC; the member is correct. It is a body that operates independently from government, so any questions, really, on IRAC specific to what you're asking for, I would need to take back to you, member.

Thank you.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora, your first supplementary.

**M. MacFarlane:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I don't have anything really specific to IRAC, but it is a pretty important theme. It's nothing specific, so I think the minister should be able to handle it.

It's incredibly important for our independent Crown corporations to be truly independent. They work best when they're not tied to four-year election cycles. Independence allows Crown corporations to be transparent with Islanders because these corporations work for Islanders, not for politicians.

Unfortunately, I'm hearing more and more from Islanders who are losing confidence that IRAC is actually and truly working in their best interest.

My question to the same minister: Do you believe that having a former chief of staff to the Premier appointed as director and CEO of IRAC for a 10-year term is the best decision to remove perception of political interference?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Premier.

[11:00 a.m.]

**Hon. R. Lantz:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I do want to point out that although the member is directing the question about IRAC to the Minister of Education and Early Years – which, in theory, holds responsibility for the act; does not necessarily get involved in the administration of the act – much of the work that happens at IRAC that flows through government happens through the Department of Housing, Land and Communities. Again, those questions aren't being directed, necessarily, to the correct minister today.

But just to circle back to the other part of the question: Ms. Williams, who has been appointed as the chair of IRAC, is highly qualified for the job – a King's Counsel lawyer, more than qualified – and I know that she'll do an absolutely professional job in that position, just as many other well-qualified people have in the past, many of them lawyers. It is a position that requires a legal mind, and Ms. Williams, in fact, having the experience that she does, is uniquely qualified in my opinion to do a very, very good job at IRAC.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora, your second supplementary.

**M. MacFarlane:** Thank you.

I appreciate the Premier responding to the question. It's an important issue, and I'm sure someone in government is looking out for the issue that I'm raising. I know Ms. Williams well, and I don't disagree that she's capable of doing the job finely, but my question revolves around the potential and perception of political interference in our independent corporations like IRAC and Health PEI.

Interference actually does two things: it benefits and protects the politicians in power, and it disadvantages and removes protections for Islanders. We've heard about the harm that political interference has had on our health care

system; for example, from past board chairs, past CEOs, and unions on the front line.

Question to the Premier, since the Premier is prepared to answer the questions: Government places a lot of power and responsibility in IRAC, an organization that impacts Islanders every day. Will you commit, Mr. Premier, to reviewing IRAC's structure and regulations to remove political interference – even the potential for political interference – to ensure Islanders are protected to the highest standards?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Premier.

**Hon. R. Lantz:** Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure what the member is asking me to commit to. He seems to be suggesting that there is potential or a hypothetical conflict of some sort that hasn't occurred. If the member has accusations to make, then bring them forward, but the role of IRAC is always under scrutiny. I'm willing to review its functions at any time, and we do that through regular review of acts that govern our Crown corporations and independent bodies, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

**S. Dillon:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There's a national shortage of teachers in Canada. It is especially difficult to fill French teaching positions, as we heard from the Minister of Health earlier. Retirement, stress, and workload are contributing factors. It's worth noting this stat: Many new teachers leave the profession within the first five years due to challenging work conditions.

### Education staffing

Question to the Minister of Education and Early Years: What steps are being taken to retain and attract teachers to our province?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

**Hon. R. Croucher:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question.

You are correct regarding the nationwide shortage. French positions can be exceptionally challenging to recruit into. But retirements, stress, the workload, all the things you just spoke about – I'm making no excuses, but

they're across all sectors and all professions. It's not unique to education, for sure.

I mean, we recognize everything that you're speaking of, member, and we're working closely with our school authorities to support recruitment and retention and offer various initiatives: the provincial French-speaking immigration strategy is one; language training opportunities for teachers and staff is another, and continuing to invest in UPEI's French bachelor of education program, that's a big one; international recruitment efforts, both domestic and abroad; and missions to French-speaking countries. They're all things that we're doing, member, and will continue to do.

Thank you.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere, your first supplementary.

**S. Dillon:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[11:05 a.m.]

It was noted during a committee meeting that there were a number of educational assistants and youth service workers in relief positions in our schools that don't meet the qualifications to obtain permanent positions. While I appreciate the investments being made in the front line, we need qualified staff supported with enriched PD that provides practical solutions and support to our students in our classrooms.

Question to the same minister: What are we doing to retain/attract educational assistant youth service workers in our educational system?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

**Hon. R. Croucher:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and, again, thank you to the member; good questions.

It's important to note that we have created 51 new EA positions in '24-25 alone. There's an accelerated human services program offered in partnership with Holland College, another opportunity for uncertified staff to upskill and get certifications, EAs.

Our teams are working on workforce plans. Started discussions with our unions about reaching out, and reaching out to both our post-

secondary partners, and we're doing that in the coming weeks.

Not fast enough for my liking, member, but we're moving in the right direction.

Thank you.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere, your second supplementary.

**S. Dillon:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We've been very lucky in PEI to have been able to fill the positions in our school this year, but this has depleted our substitutes. Both teachers and support staff struggle to find substitutes, and at times, positions go unfilled or filled from within.

Question to the same minister: What efforts are being made to find qualified substitutes for our educational system?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

**Hon. R. Croucher:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're very fortunate to have this member over here that's such a staunch advocate.

This is an extremely competitive job market, as you would know, member. Some of the initiatives that this government has taken have made us a very, very attractive and competitive place to work here on PEI. We're engaging in initiatives to attract and train local talents. We're looking, again, both domestically and abroad, for talent through immigration.

I just want to take a second to thank the dedicated staff within our departments for all of the hard work they're doing and continue to do. I encourage them to keep their foot on the gas and keep working hard.

I'd also like to thank teachers and staff at all of our educational institutions. I know the Minister of Health's sister works in one of mine, as he alluded to earlier. They're making a difference every single day.

Thank you.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

**C. Deagle:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Islanders who rely on the KCMH emergency room are worried. With the QEH being the next closest hospital, some Kings County residents would have to drive over an hour in an emergency. It is vital that we have hospital emergency services available to Islanders when they need them in their most vulnerable times.

**Kings County Memorial Hospital (further)**

Question to the Minister of Health and Wellness: What is the current timeline and strategy for fully reopening the Kings County Memorial Hospital emergency room seven days a week?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Hon. M. McLane:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

A good question. We're having some success with the new hire in eastern PEI from physician affiliation. That is taking place, which hopefully should reduce some demands on the KCMH, but since probably early 2004, we've put in locum incentives at that location in order to encourage locum coverage. We've added, actually, a third physician to that staffing model there because of the volumes so that an eight-hour shift doesn't become a 12-hour shift for our physicians down there. We've had some success in flex hiring with RT and some of the lab staff down there.

Again, I think we've been in constant with both Mayor Dunphy and Mayor Johnston to make sure that we communicate with the community as well.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir, your first supplementary.

**C. Deagle:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That's all great, but if we've been trying the same thing since 2004 and it's still not open, we might need a different approach.

The former chief operating officer of Health PEI said the unforeseen closures have an impact on other Island hospitals, so they are trying to be better prepared.

"What we're trying to do is get a plan in place for a predictable and regular schedule that the

public is aware of and that our partners are aware of. If the department has to be closed on weekends this summer" – and that's back in 2023 – "regular hours will resume in October" of 2023.

Mr. Speaker, it is now 2025.

Question to the Minister of Health and Wellness: How many full-time and part-time positions remain unfilled at the KCMH emergency department, and what are your plans to address this?

[11:10 a.m.]

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness

**Hon. M. McLane:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Great question.

Again, back to the staffing issues that we have, from a physician recruitment perspective, we are doing some physician recruitment in the U.S., especially six states including New York, New Jersey, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Maine, which is fairly close. It has generated discussions with about half a dozen physicians in that area that are considering moving to Prince Edward Island.

Our team has been in Vancouver; White Point; Toronto; Miami, Florida; and Toronto just over the last 35 days at physician recruitment opportunities, and I mentioned yesterday that our lead physician recruiter won a national award last week for his work. So, physician recruitment continues to be a top priority.

There is an incentive for that hospital, to work there, for those physicians that choose it. We are trying as best we can to fill those shifts down there. The flex hiring positions, it's not just physicians. I do have the numbers on the 472 that are posted. There are 211 UPSE positions, over 155 PEINU, 82 IUOE, and 23 CUPE positions. That flex hiring and that permanent position hiring, hopefully, will stabilize that workforce.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir, your second supplementary.

**C. Deagle:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We certainly won't be handing out any awards over here for getting the KCMH ER open.

Residents of eastern Prince Edward Island have repeatedly expressed deep concern over the continued limited access to emergency care at Kings County Memorial Hospital. Given the critical role KCMH plays in the region's health care system, it is essential that we address the ongoing limitations in service at the KCMH.

Back in 2023, an emergency operations committee was established to address critical care at the PCH and QEH when the intensive care unit closed back in early 2023. The KCMH ER has been closed on the weekends for nearly two years now, but no such committee to address this has been struck.

Minister, will you commit to striking an emergency operations committee to give it the same attention as the PCH and QEH so that we can finally reopen our ER on weekends?

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Hon. M. McLane:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think we've set a record today. I've had two suggestions on solutions to help health care. I appreciate both the Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty and now the Member from Montague-Kilmuir actually proposing suggestions for some of the remedies within our health care system.

I do know our recruitment team seems to be firing on all cylinders this year. We've actually delivered 57 expressions of interest to residency physicians that are currently completing their residency. We have a very strong PSA; it's generating a lot of interest. They're working really well. They're getting that PSA in front of physicians so they can consider Prince Edward Island for their first job or their next job.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition, final question.

**Hon. H. Perry:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I'm going to follow up with the same line of questioning as the Member from Montague-

Kilmuir. You said he had a good question, so this should be a good question also.

### **Western Hospital**

I'm going to ask about the Western Hospital in Alberton. When can the residents of West Prince see – you didn't give him a specific date, but maybe you can give me a definite date on when they will see their ER open 24/7.

**Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Hon. M. McLane:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The two members, they've got a great barber, whoever they go to, so I'll give them compliments to that.

I do know we have a couple of mat leaves up in that part of the province that we should hopefully see soon. Again, all those physician recruitment initiatives that I talk about are important. We know how hard it is to recruit physicians, so it's tough to give a timeline, but I think we're moving in the right direction of all the things I talked about already today.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, members.

I just wanted to say I thought you guys did pretty well in terms of keeping to timelines today. I'm going to report back to the Speaker that all the timelines were adhered to, and you were in good order today.

A reminder to always go through the Speaker when you're speaking, and also that really, it's the Executive Council that chooses who answers the question as opposed to directing it.

[End of Question Period]