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| Alberta | 28e | 2e | Remarques préliminaires à l'étude des crédits | 19 mars 2014 | M. Fred Horne | Ministre de la Santé | PC |

Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Good afternoon, colleagues. I'd just like to begin by bringing regrets on behalf of our colleague, hon. Dave Rodney, who is the Associate Minister of Wellness. Unfortunately, he was taken ill this afternoon, and he unexpectedly did have to leave, so we bring regrets from the associate minister.

Colleagues, the Health budget for 2014-15 is $18.3 billion, an increase of $628 million, or 3 .6 per cent, excluding flood recovery initiatives. The $18.3 billion breaks down as follows: $10.7 billion for Alberta Health Services, $4 billion for physician compensation and development, $1.5 billion toward drugs and supplemental health benefits, $805 million for community programs and other health services, $395 million for the Alberta seniors' benefit and other seniors' services, $393 million to Alberta Health Services for operating costs of new facilities, $326 million for primary health care and addictions and mental health services, $111 million for endowments related to research and cancer prevention initiatives, and $78 million to ministry support services.

The 2014 budget is an investment in families, communities, and seniors and reflects the priority that government places on giving Albertans access to the care they need when and where they need it. It enables us to continue looking after the most vulnerable in the health care system. It also includes strategic investments in areas like primary health care and community-based health services to help keep Albertans healthy and out of the acute-care system.

Next year the government of Canada is providing Alberta with $3.7 billion in health transfer funding, which will cover about 20 per cent of this year's health budget. This is a $1 billion increase from last year. We are investing in total $14.6 billion over and above what the federal government is providing us in 2014-15.

I'd like to take a look now at some of the major areas of health investment proposed in Budget 2014. The base operating funding for Alberta Health Services will increase by $210 million, or 2 per cent, to $10.7 billion. These funds will be used to deliver health services and operate health facilities throughout Alberta. The Alberta Health Services operating allocation represents 59 per cent of the health budget in 2014-15. Over and above this funding AHS will receive an additional $393 million for the operating costs of three health facilities, including the Strathcona community hospital. This breaks down to $341 million for the South Health Campus in Calgary, $30 million for the Kaye Edmonton clinic, and $22 million, as I said, for the Strathcona community hospital.

With respect to physician services there is a $4 billion budget in 2014-15 for physician compensation and development programs, a $275 million increase, or 7.5 per cent. Physician compensation and development represents 22 per cent of the health budget next year. This includes payments for Alberta's 9,200 physicians and 1,500 medical residents, programs to add more physicians to the health system, and programs for training and support. The budget reflects the costs of the new seven-year agreement with the Alberta Medical Association, which provides 2 and a half per cent increases to fee rates in both 2014-15 and 2015-16 and a cost-of-living adjustment in 2016-17 and 2017-18.

As you will also note, there is a $1.5 billion budget allocated to drugs and supplemental health benefits, representing 8 per cent of our total budget in 2014-15. This money, as we all know, assists Albertans with cancer therapy drugs, specialized high-cost drugs, prescription drugs, ambulance services, the Alberta aids to daily living program, and other benefits such as ground ambulance, prosthetics, and orthotics. This includes $159 million for outpatient cancer therapy drugs, $90 million for outpatient specialized high-cost drugs, $387 million for prescription drug benefits for seniors, $127 million for dental, optical, and supplementary health benefits for seniors, and $138 million for Albertans who don't have a group drug plan or supplemental health benefits through a group plan.

New for 2014-15 are health benefit programs for the assured income for the severely handicapped, or AISH, and the health benefit programs for income-support clients, formerly of the Ministry of Human Services. There is $805 million budgeted in 2014-15 for community programs and other health services. This includes $198 million for community-based health and wellness programs, $173 million for spending on blood and blood products, and $40 million for enhanced home care and rehabilitation. Through the $12 million increase for enhanced home care and rehabilitation $2 million will be used to help up to 1,000 more people go home from hospital with enhanced home-care support, and $10 million will be invested in other continuing care initiatives desigued to make further improvements to quality and patient safety.

Turning to investments and seniors, there's $353 million budgeted for the Alberta seniors' benefit, an increase of 6.2 per cent. As we know, Alberta has one of the most comprehensive packages of seniors' benefits in the country, supporting approximately 150,000 low-income seniors. The increase in the seniors' benefit represents an expected increase in demand. In addition, there's a $31 million allocation for special-needs assistance to low-income seniors, an increase of $6 million, or 23 per cent. These funds will be used for things like home repairs and medical expenses. This will help ensure that this unique program continues to be available to our most vulnerable seniors who face unexpected costs.

Over $20 million in loans are anticipated under the seniors' property tax deferral program in 2014-15. Through this program seniors in need are able to keep more money in their pockets by deferring property taxes until their home is sold.

The 2014-15 budget allocates $326 million for primary health care in addictions and mental health. Improving Albertans' access to primary health care is a top priority for our government. There is a $271 million allocation to support primary care networks and family care clinics and $48 million going toward addictions and mental health. Strategic investments in primary health care will help Albertans receive co-ordinated, team-based care that is responsive to their needs, provided closer to home, and prevents or reduces the need for acute care. Addictions and mental health funding will go toward new and continuing programs, including those for children and youth, as well as enhanced community supports and treatment for people coping with severe mental illness.

An additional $25 million will be used to support the long-term social and psychological recovery for Albertans who were impacted by last year's floods. This funding will also help to promote resiliency in the general population, especially among children and youth, and develop provincial capacity to respond to mental health needs that may present themselves in future disasters.

Another key feature of the budget is $111 million in endowments for research and cancer prevention activities. Transfers from the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research endowment fund provide $86 million annually for Alberta Innovates: Health Solutions. Transfers from the Alberta cancer prevention legacy fund provide $25 million annually for cancer research and prevention initiatives.

The final part of our $18.3 billion budget is $78 million allocated for ministry support services used to operate the ministry, including policy development.

Let me conclude, Madam Chair, by saying that the 2014-15 budget will allow us to continue spending smarter, achieving better health outcomes for Albertans, and delivering better value for taxpayers. We will spend $50 million every day, or $2.1 million every hour, for the 4 million Albertans that depend on our health care system in the coming year. With the help of front-line health care workers we'll continue to build a healthy Alberta by making health care and wellness programs more accessible and providing them closer to home.

Thank you very much. I look forward to the questions from my colleagues around the table.