

# Budget's health spending falls short, critics say

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Interim Progressive Conservative leader Karla MacFarlane says the latest provincial budget doesn't address mental health issues by providing additional funding. (RYAN TAPLIN / Staff)

Health-care spending, particularly for long-term care and mental health, fell short in Tuesday's provincial budget, opposition MLAs and organizations said.

The Liberals have set aside \$2.9 million in additional mental health spending, which will be used to hire five more clinicians for adults and five for youth, although it's not clear where those clinicians will be located.

Karla MacFarlane, interim leader of the Conservative party, said that doesn't come close to addressing the need.

"I'm highly disappointed to see that there's no real investment into our mental health services here in Nova Scotia," she told reporters at Province House on Tuesday after Finance Minister Karen Casey tabled her budget. "We know that this province is in desperate need of psychiatrists, there's no real money there, there's no real plan there to increase mental health services and we have people struggling right across this province."

The Nova Scotia Health Authority's total spending on mental health services for 2018-19 is estimated to be \$151.3 million. An additional \$43.9 million has been earmarked for addictive services.

## Long-term disappointment

NDP Leader Gary Burrill singled out long-term care spending as his biggest disappointment with the budget.

"My principal reaction to this budget is about a different surplus," he told reporters. "It's about the surplus, the surfeit of people, we have in hospitals in the province waiting to get in nursing homes. I think it is very sad that when this problem has been raised as sharply as it has across the province, when it has so many ramifications as it has, and we've got a budget in front of us that doesn't have a single provision for a single new nursing bed . . . anywhere in Nova Scotia."

Janet Hazelton, president of the Nova Scotia Nurses Union, also cited long-term care as a disappointment in the Liberals' budget, which posted revenues of \$10.81 billion and \$10.78 billion in spending, adding up to a \$29.4-million surplus.

Hazelton wasn't happy the province didn't reinstate a one-per-cent cut in funding for long-term care homes implemented in 2016.

"Our long-term care employers, and consequently the nurses I represent, they're struggling out there to make ends meet," Hazelton said. "They needed that money back in the budget and I didn't see it there."

The province did boost funding aimed at keeping seniors in their own homes longer, including a previously announced expansion of the caregiver benefit program.

Hazelton also took issue with the lack of support for nurses who want to enhance their skills and education, such as training to be a nurse practitioner. She noted the tuition support funding that the province announced Monday as part of a \$19.6-million package to recruit, retain and train more doctors.

## Collaborative care



The province also set aside an additional \$8 million to expand its collaborative care network. The Liberals have touted collaborative care as a solution to Nova Scotia's overburdened health-care system.

There are now about 57 collaborative care teams, which include doctors, nurse practitioners, nurses and other health-care providers such as nutritionists and physiotherapists.

The government hopes to have about 70 teams established by the end of its current term, but how many teams and where they'll be located isn't known.

Each community-based team is meant to serve a population of about 10,000 people, but the size of the teams, locations and total number will depend on local needs, according to Department of Health and Wellness officials who briefed media at the legislature. The additional \$8 million announced in the budget brings the total collaborative care spending to \$17.6 million this year.

"When health professionals work together, they can take on more patients, and people get healthier, and see their quality of life improve," Casey said in her budget address.

The province's total budget for the Department of Health and Wellness is estimated to jump 3.6 per cent in 2018-19 compared to last year, to \$4.367 billion.

A big chunk of that money will go toward capital expenditures, including \$64.8 million on the redevelopment of QEII Health Sciences Centre facilities such as the Halifax Infirmary, Dartmouth General Hospital and Hants Community Hospital.

This huge project includes major renovations to buildings and acquisition of more land for expansions.

Other health-care spending:

- \$6.8 million for Emergency Health Services to meet an increased call volume and EHS contract increases (overtime and other costs).
- \$8.8 million to provide 350 more hip and knee surgeries, create a central booking process and hire more surgeons. The province has added \$24.3 million to the orthopedic surgery budget over the past four years, bringing the total number of surgeries over that time to 14,000. That spending aims to cut wait times for orthopedic surgery in Nova Scotia, which have been among the longest in the country.

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