

MINISTER OP-ED

Byline: Minister Sigurdson [CAN BE CHANGED FOR MLA]

Seniors have spent their lives helping to make Alberta the wonderful province it is today, and they deserve a government that works to make their lives better. That's why our government is supporting seniors to stay in their homes for longer, making practical changes that make life more affordable, and protecting the programs and services that they count on.

Last summer, I met a couple in Sherwood Park named Jill and David who wanted to stay living in their family home as they aged. Jill has multiple sclerosis however, and their split level house needed to be modified if they were to stay. With the help of the Seniors Home Adaptation and Repair Program (SHARP), launched in July 2016, Jill and David were able to make home adaptations so they could live in their home for longer. I went back to see them this winter, and their carpet had been replaced with hardwood for when Jill may need a walker, a stair lift was installed to let her access all three levels of their home, and the bathtub was modified to ensure it was accessible. [STORY CAN BE MODIFIED TO REFLECT LOCAL MLA EXPERIENCE]

Through low-interest loans, SHARP helps eligible seniors access up to \$40,000 from the equity in their home, to be paid back when the home is sold, or at any time of the senior's choosing. Since the program was launched in July 2016, the Seniors and Housing ministry has received more than 970 applications and has provided about \$6 million in loans. SHARP is just one way our government is working to make life better for Alberta seniors like Jill and David.

Affordable housing for seniors is a priority for us, and so we are continuing our \$1.2 billion investment over five years, four times what the previous government had budgeted. We are beginning to address the massive maintenance deficit in seniors facilities left behind by the former government. Further, there are now over 40 major construction projects across Alberta that are building new and renovating existing seniors' housing. We have also chosen to keep the Alberta Seniors Benefit steady, because in spite of this tough economy, our government knows thousands of seniors rely on it.

Almost half of seniors in Alberta have received a rebate on the carbon levy. Further, for those seniors who live independently, they can now register for the Residential No-Charge Energy Savings Program. Starting in April, seniors will be able to have qualified agents visit and install practical, no-charge efficiency products like LED lights, high-efficiency shower heads, advanced power bars, and self-adjusting thermostats in their homes.

We have also increased funding for home and community care by \$200 million to a total of over \$2 billion annually, which will support hundreds more home-care clients receiving personal care. This helps seniors access the services they need in order to continue to live and participate in their communities.

Our government stands by our commitment to creating 2,000 new long-term care beds across Alberta. We are well on our way to fulfilling this promise. Budget 2017 funds the expansion of the Norwood Capital Care centre in Edmonton and the construction of a whole new facility in the Bridgeland community of Calgary. These two fully public facilities will create hundreds more spaces for seniors to access long-term care.

Any seniors who have experienced the aggressive, misleading sales pitches for furnaces or energy contracts can rest assured now that door-to-door sales of energy products is now against the law. No one should feel pressured or tricked into making a purchase on the spot. Banning these door-to-door sales is a practical change so that scammers at your doors can be charged.

These are just some of the ways that our government is working for Alberta's seniors. Through programs like SHARP and the Residential No-Charge Energy Savings Program, we are making sure seniors stay in their homes and communities longer. With affordable housing being built across Alberta and more money committed to address the former government's significant maintenance deficit, we are keeping seniors' lodges safe and comfortable. Our government recognizes the countless contributions seniors have made to Alberta, and in return we're protecting the things you count on, while working to make your lives better.

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