

MORE HEALTHCARE, *FASTER*



Budget Address

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Budget 2023-24: Budget Address
Finance and Treasury Board
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Introduction

Today, I am pleased to present the 2023–24 provincial budget.

This budget is about empowering people. When people are empowered, they feel more in control and more optimistic about their future.

This budget does just that. It focuses on three main areas:

- **Action for Healthcare** -- our strategic plan to grow the healthcare workforce and get Nova Scotians faster access to the care they need.
- **A Healthy Economy** -- which helps to pay for the healthcare system Nova Scotians deserve and lays the foundation for a thriving province.
- **Healthy Communities** -- by addressing the factors affecting people's health and well-being, like child poverty, housing, inclusion, and education, we can help improve the quality of life for all Nova Scotians.

I believe the most important thing governments can do is to prepare for the future, ensuring we have the services and infrastructure that the growth we are seeing demands.

Mr. Speaker, in the last year, we have experienced the fastest annual population growth since 1926 -- almost 100 years ago. Why 1926? Because that's as far back as our economists can track annual data.

We are seeing the tightest labour markets since the early 1970s, with unemployment rates falling to as low as 6.5%.

The world is experiencing the impacts of inflation.

Much of this inflation has been created by supply chain interruptions coming out of the pandemic, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has driven up the price of fossil fuels. And we know that drives up the price of everything else. In July, the federal government will place its carbon tax on fuels, and this will prove to be a drag on the economy.

Our government is offering solutions to help navigate through these times of change and growth.

Because with growth comes opportunities, too. Growth can transform our economy.

Nova Scotia has felt the effects of the opposite of growth too many times. And let me tell you, I would much rather be dealing with the opportunities that come with growth than the challenges that come with decline.

Growth brings in new investment, new ideas, a new perspective. It opens doors for entrepreneurs who want to start a business and for business owners that want to grow and venture into new markets.

Nova Scotia's economy proved more resilient and recharged more quickly through the pandemic.

Today, our exports are up at pre-pandemic levels. We have reached record high employment. We are seeing strong recovery in the tourism sector. And housing construction is working at full steam, trying to keep up with the demands of a growing population.

This has meant increased revenues for the provincial government, giving us capacity to make the significant investments we are making to fix healthcare.

The budget I'm tabling today is about meeting this moment in time.

It will fuel the momentum of the work we've started, investing in solutions that will make life better for Nova Scotians and build a healthier, more thriving province.

With \$14.4 billion in spending, we have the ability to empower people and address our province's priorities.

And, Mr. Speaker, healthcare is at the top of that list.

Action for Healthcare

The centrepiece of this budget is healthcare.

Budget 2023 is focused on our government's plan to fix healthcare. The Action for Health plan is our roadmap to better healthcare for each and every Nova Scotian.

This budget puts \$6.5 billion into healthcare. That's \$1.2 billion -- or almost 22% -- more money than the previous government budgeted just two years ago.

These investments are meant to empower the people working in the health system, so they feel better equipped to provide quality care to their patients.

These investments are also meant to empower Nova Scotians with new choices and new ways to access their healthcare, better, and faster.

We are taking an all-hands-on-deck approach and the Premier and our ministers of health are engaging healthcare leaders, everyone working in the healthcare system, regulators, service providers as well as our universities and colleges. We are very pleased they are stepping up to the plate.

In every step we take, we want to see real results for Nova Scotia families: greater access to doctors, more nurses at the bedside, healthcare providers working to the full scope of their abilities, shorter wait times, better mental health services, ambulances there when you need them, more hospital beds and more long-term care spaces, and emergency departments that work.

These are the results Nova Scotians want.

More Healthcare Workers

Mr. Speaker, these results are only possible if we have enough people delivering healthcare.

Our plan is about building healthcare teams with better working conditions, opportunities for mentorship and training, less red tape, modern hospitals and technology, and having the tools they need to provide a high standard of care.

This is how we empower our teams and how Nova Scotia becomes a magnet for health providers.

We're opening up more opportunities for people who want to train as a nurse,

paramedic, or continuing care assistant with more training spaces, financial incentives, and a direct path to a job.

We are also piloting new approaches to recruiting more mental health care providers.

People living in rural Nova Scotia need more doctors.

And we've made a nearly \$60 million investment now, so that in a few short years, more family doctors -- with a focus on rural health -- will be graduating from a new medical school campus at Cape Breton University.

Our hope is that more young Nova Scotians can realize their dream of becoming a doctor here at home.

There are many healthcare providers who want to come to Nova Scotia.

It's getting easier and faster for internationally trained healthcare workers to get licenced. Our regulatory colleges are finding ways to ensure newly recruited doctors and nurses can start practicing in our communities more quickly.

Mr. Speaker, we are finding solutions to keep our current workforce, too.

Earlier this week, our Premier sent a strong message to nurses and other healthcare workers. That was: we value you and want you to keep working in our province's healthcare system.

That message came with retention incentives that we hope will encourage more nurses and other providers to stay working in Nova Scotia.

And today, I'm happy to announce another solution that will make Nova Scotia even more attractive to nurses.

Starting for the 2023 tax year, we will include nurses in the More Opportunity for Skilled Trades provincial tax refund program.

Eligible nurses, under the age of 30, will receive a refund of the provincial income tax they pay on their first \$50,000 of income.

Faster Access to Care

We need more healthcare workers, but we also need the system they work in to be effective so that people get faster access to care.

People coming to an emergency department are facing great uncertainty. We want them to have confidence in the actions we are taking to improve the care and experience they will receive.

Things that will make a difference like:

- adding more nurse practitioners in emergency departments
- having patient advocates in all emergency waiting rooms to interact with and keep an eye on people until they can be seen by the healthcare team
- and adding a new role -- care providers -- working in ED waiting rooms.

And we're also opening more urgent treatment centres closer to where people live and freeing up trained paramedics by reducing the number of routine patient transfers they do.

One of the biggest challenges in our system continues to be the time people are waiting for surgeries.

Our investments this year will support more hospital beds, more technology, and better planning. We are increasing the number of hours operating rooms are working so that people can get the surgeries they need more quickly.

We are using real-time data on bed use to help move people through the system more efficiently. And getting patients moving more quickly after their surgeries, which can help them go home sooner.

And of course, we're looking to better support people who are in hospital beds but who should be in long-term care – offering them a more appropriate level of care and opening more hospital beds for people coming out of surgeries.

Travel is a major barrier to people accessing care, which is why we are adding new options to help empower people to get the care they need closer to home.

Through mobile health teams, community pharmacy locations, pharmacist walk-in clinics, more virtual care options, and expanding people's access to same-day-next-day primary care appointments.

Dialysis services are expanding in the Liverpool and Pictou areas, supporting those patients who need it.

We are providing a range of improvements to cancer care services, too.

This budget includes 14 new cancer drugs available under our pharmacare programs.

We are also introducing a new early screening program for people at high risk of developing lung cancer and expanding services at community-based cancer care sites, so people can travel less and get more of the services they need in their community.

We need to ensure our healthcare system understands our diverse communities and their needs to build trust and improve health outcomes. This includes training for healthcare workers, encouraging young people from underrepresented communities to consider careers in healthcare, and working with community leaders on other solutions.

Mr. Speaker, our Action for Health Plan addresses the needs of people with addictions and mental health concerns.

Our ultimate goal is offering universal access to mental health and addictions services.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. That's why we are putting a variety of solutions in place that reflect the different needs of Nova Scotians.

People have access to one-on-one supportive counselling with professionals to help with general mental health concerns over the phone, online, or in-person.

We've opened the province's first mental health acute day hospital at the QEII Health Sciences Centre and expect the second one to open this Spring at the Cape Breton Regional Hospital.

People with mental illness in need of intensive treatment can get it at the hospital during the day and return home in the evening. This helps reduce the number of overnight hospital admissions, easing pressures on psychiatric units, without compromising the quality of care.

This year, more people struggling with addictions will have better access to care through six new recovery support centres. When there, clients have withdrawal support and can access other levels of care based on their individual needs, such as opioid-use disorder treatment and community mental health and addictions programs.

Seniors and Long-Term Care

Too many Nova Scotians are waiting to get into long-term care. And it places incredible stress on families and strain on the entire health system. We are opening more spaces and recruiting more staff.

Our government is committed to adding 1,200 new long-term care spaces and renovating 2,300 more by 2027.

We're also doing more to improve existing facilities with one-time, \$25 million additional capital funding this year.

Mr. Speaker, this government will explore every opportunity to improve care and give dignity back to our seniors.

Nova Scotia is one of the first provinces in Canada to establish a 4.1 standard of care. That means every nursing home resident should receive an average of 4.1 hours of direct care each day from their care providers.

Some homes have already reached this standard, most homes are ready to implement it, and others are preparing now. The key to meeting the standard is finding the people we need to hire.

The free education and increased wages for CCAs will help. Recently, we had the 1,000th student sign up for a CCA training program, and we are on track to reach 2,000 CCA students over two years.

Mr. Speaker, many Nova Scotians want to stay in their homes for as long as possible and the demand for home support programs is growing.

We are increasing budgets for home care and direct funding programs by \$25 million, so more people can get the level of care and support they need.

And this year, to help keep our seniors healthy, I'm pleased to announce that all Nova Scotians 65 years of age and older will have access to the high-dose flu vaccine, for free.

Building More, Faster

When a Nova Scotian steps into one of our hospitals they should feel they are in the best place to receive care.

The Capital Plan makes generational investments in healthcare infrastructure for our growing province.

- A person who needs surgery will get in more quickly with four more operating rooms and 400 new hospital beds
- Cancer patients will receive the best advances in treatment in new cancer care centres
- A stroke survivor will receive their therapy in a new rehabilitation centre
- A cardiac patient will participate in leading-edge research at a new centre of excellence for heart health.

We are moving on these and many other redevelopment projects across the province.

Beyond the bricks and mortar, modern healthcare is also about the systems behind the care.

One Person One Record will replace or connect more than 80 systems healthcare providers use to record and view patient information. Many of these systems are outdated, slow, and information cannot be shared easily between them.

One Person One Record will allow healthcare providers, at any Nova Scotia Health or IWK Health, facility to access a patient's complete, up-to-date information, at any time.

It will save time, improve care, and give health providers more time with patients.

A Healthy Economy

Skilled Workers & Immigration

Mr. Speaker, healthier people are the foundation of a strong economy.

The doors of opportunity are open, and Nova Scotians should feel empowered. They have choices.

This is a marketplace that favours workers, requiring employers to be more creative and competitive in attracting the talent they need.

All of this highlights the important role of our universities, NSCC, the Apprenticeship Agency, and Employment Nova Scotia with Nova Scotia Works offices around our province. Helping people with training, skills development, and employment resources to realize new opportunities.

For some, this could mean starting a career with higher-pay, benefits, and a path for advancement. We want our young people to know, there is a place for them in the skilled trades.

And this Spring, workers under the age of 30 who work in eligible skilled trades and film and video occupations will receive a rebate of their 2022 provincial income tax paid on the first \$50,000 of income.

This is available through the More Opportunity for Skilled Trades tax refund program that I announced last year as part of our plan to attract and retain people with the skills employers are looking for.

This year, too, we will help connect more people to employers through paid internships, expanding life and job skills for youth at risk, making it easier to become an apprentice faster, and helping employers hire first-year apprentices in Red Seal trades.

Growing our population is part of our plan to grow the economy and fix healthcare. The newcomers from across Canada, and from around the world, who we will welcome in the years ahead, will help to build homes and provide the healthcare and childcare we all need. They are being hired for hard-to-fill jobs, and in some cases, they are creating jobs with new businesses.

Business & Innovation

This government is growing key sectors and strengthening local business so that we can secure Nova Scotia's place in the economy of the future.

Nova Scotia-made products are second to none, produced with passion and skill.

Nova Scotia Loyal will be a fresh new buy local program. After doing the research, talking with producers, businesses, and customers, we expect Nova Scotia Loyal will launch this year.

Buying local starts with growing local and this government has been helping farmers and agri-businesses put fresh, healthy, local food on the Nova Scotians' tables and into large-scale kitchens in our schools, hospitals, and nursing homes.

Farmers who are investing in their operations have a partner in this government. With recent investments, we are helping to offset the cost of new technologies to increase production, extend the growing season, and open new market opportunities.

And wine producers, who had a very tough winter this year, will be interested to know the Nova Scotia Quality Wine Strategy will continue with added support, for a total spend of \$1.1 million.

With the world starting to travel again, major events being hosted here, and a strong interest in our corner of the world, this year, we will introduce new tools to promote tourism and offer compelling reasons for people to visit.

Visitors are looking for new experiences, which is why we will develop a year-round tourism marketing strategy and why we want to work with our partners to develop new African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw cultural tourism experiences.

The film industry promotes our province as a tourism destination in a unique way and interest in making films here is growing. This is why we will expand the Film and Television Production Incentive Fund by another \$14 million this year.

We will also invest more in forestry, energy and resource development, and ocean technology.

The global marketplace is eager for new sources of renewable energy. This is why we will further explore the potential of our offshore wind resource to produce green hydrogen. It is an example of how we're shifting our focus to a greener, more innovative economy.

Investment in physical capital, such as machinery and equipment, is a key productivity driver.

The Innovation Rebate Program and the recently expanded Capital Investment Tax Credit are encouraging more businesses to invest in their operations to become more productive, competitive, efficient, and sustainable.

Nova Scotia businesses are also better able to innovate and grow when they can focus on their business and not on red tape. Last year, initiatives across government helped to achieve about \$10.7 million in estimated savings for business.

When time is money, these changes matter to business owners and we expect to see more progress this year.

Healthy Communities

A healthy community is one where people are connected. Connected to each other and the world around them.

Last week, I released the Capital Plan. This plan will come to life in every community.

A main feature of this \$1.6 billion plan is more investment in highways and local roads to support a moving economy and help connect people to each other and to opportunity.

Over the past two years, we have added significant funding:

- \$60 million more for local roads, which is an increase of 130%
- \$35 million more for gravel roads, an increase of 175% or nearly triple compared to two years ago
- And after we doubled the local road maintenance budget to \$22 million last year, we're doing even more. We've upped the budget by a further \$14 million this year.

Safer roads for everyone.

But people need more than roads to stay connected.

Nova Scotians have been waiting for better access to high-speed internet. I'm told the Internet for Nova Scotia Initiative is on track to reach 98,500 homes and businesses by the end of 2023.

With the Province's Satellite Rebate Program and other local projects, 99.9% of Nova Scotian homes and businesses will have access to high-speed internet.

This government is also investing in local rinks, art centres, museums, and recreational centres. These are gathering places that bring people together, promote healthy living, and reflect the uniqueness of our communities.

We have been pleased to support community organizations with projects to do repairs and energy efficiency upgrades to their facilities as well as buy generators.

This year, we'll add \$2 million more so that more organizations can buy generators. So that when a storm strikes, there is a warm and powered place for community members to go.

We are investing \$7.7 million in our provincial museum sites, arts and culture organizations, and community-owned museums. This will provide a much-needed boost to organizations that have not received an increase in 15 years.

We will celebrate and promote Nova Scotia's first language under the Mi'kmaq Language legislation, which passed last year. A new committee will come together this year to develop a multi-year strategy to reclaim, preserve, and revitalize the language.

We strive to work with Nova Scotians to help them find success in their communities.

And some of our most vulnerable family members and neighbours benefit from specialized, targeted support that meets their needs and helps them lead more independent lives.

We are doing more. This year, we will provide:

- \$28.4 million more for a range of Disability Support Programs
- \$7.8 million more for prevention and early intervention programs
- \$6.2 million more to continue to redesign the foster care system
- \$4.4 million more to support more people transitioning from residential centres into community-based options

We will also increase funding for initiatives that help to keep women and their children safe. The Standing Together Action Plan to Prevent Domestic Violence and coordinated efforts to prevent human trafficking and sexual exploitation will continue with our support this year.

Housing, Homelessness & Affordability

Mr. Speaker, we have been providing targeted supports to help Nova Scotians with the cost of living.

Reducing the cost of childcare. More affordable housing options. Programs that help people lower their energy bills. Access to healthcare and good food. Helping young people repay student loans.

This year, the \$500 Seniors Care Grant to help seniors with household needs continues. And I'm pleased to say, there will be no fee increases for the Seniors Pharmacare and Family Pharmacare programs.

We're investing in our children at an early age and youth to help break the cycle of poverty.

We are, once again, increasing the Nova Scotia Child Benefit. In the last two years, we have increased the benefit by \$600 – from \$925 to \$1,525 – at the lowest income levels. This year's \$8 million increase will benefit more than 40,000 children.

We are also committed to helping young people from low-income families build connections to communities, build self-confidence, develop a career path, so they may live full and prosperous lives.

They will be supported through a range of programs to meet their needs, whether they be social, mental health, or finding employment. They have access to skills upgrading, training, education, and job opportunities to achieve independence.

Mr. Speaker, Nova Scotians need more housing.

For the past 18 months, we have started to implement solutions to reduce barriers, speed up development, attract the workforce, and get more people and families into safe and affordable housing, faster.

It takes real cooperation from all levels of government, involvement of the private and not-for-profit sectors and communities, and more money for more projects and new ideas.

We have a task force in place to find ways to accelerate housing development of all types within the Halifax region.

With the success of our universities and college system, post-secondary students need more options, too. So they can study more, and not worry about where they're going to live.

Three student housing projects are now under construction at three NSCC campuses, two in Dartmouth and one in Pictou County. And this year, we expect to see more solutions in a Student Housing Strategy from the Minister of Advanced Education.

We have established the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency and invested well over \$200 million. We've supported rapid housing projects, below-market rent projects, modular housing for healthcare and skilled trades workers, and rent supplements.

This year, this work continues. This budget will support further private sector and community-led development and reduce wait lists for much-needed housing programs.

More people who need help with their rent will get it this year.

With an added investment of \$21.6 million, we can support more than 1,000 new rent supplements. This brings the total to more than 8,000, compared with less than 5,000 when this government took office in 2021.

For people who qualify for home repair and adaptation programs -- many of whom are seniors -- we are eliminating the waitlist.

The additional \$13 million will help about 800 more homeowners, for a total of 2,800 households that can receive assistance this year. This is the second year in a row government is increasing funding for low-income homeowners.

Through our Capital Plan, we're adding \$15.3 million more for public housing upgrades and repairs, for a total of \$21 million.

A new provincial housing strategy is coming this Spring, which will set the direction for what's to come next.

Our government is also committed to working on solutions for those who are experiencing homelessness. Recently, the Overlook opened its doors to offer permanent supportive housing units to 60 people who are chronically unhoused.

And with \$8.2 million more this year, we will ensure people have access to overnight shelter, emergency and supportive housing options, and outreach workers who can help connect them to important services.

Education

We want the best possible start in life for all of our children. Parents want child care that is affordable and available where they live and when they work.

To meet these needs, our government is transforming child care in Nova Scotia, with the support of the federal government.

We are reducing fees to make licenced childcare more affordable. With the changes introduced last year, families should be paying less today than they did one year ago. And we'll continue to see fees lowered to an average of \$10 a day in 2026.

We know it's tough for many families looking for available spaces. So, we are working with the sector to open 1,500 more child-care spaces in centres and family homes across the province. This expansion takes time, but we are pleased many new family homes have opened -- spaces in Oxford, Hubbards, Windsor, Lower Sackville, and Lower Onslow. And hundreds more are coming by the end of this year. We've also heard from parents and added more than 700 before- and after-school care spaces in schools, with more to come.

Recruiting and retaining this workforce is vital.

We started increasing wages for child care workers last year. And this year, we will spend an additional \$40 million in provincial funds to keep our commitment to continue to increase wages and benefits.

We have been helping child care operators with workforce initiatives inflationary cost pressures and more funding for infant spaces, which are in demand.

These and the other steps that we are taking will help ensure children have access to high-quality, affordable, flexible, and inclusive early learning and childcare across Nova Scotia.

Mr. Speaker, with about 129,000 students from pre-primary to Grade 12 in the public school system this year, our government understands the importance of investing in a strong education, as part of a healthy province.

This year, we will advance nearly \$50 million more to our public schools, to address growing enrolment, more teachers, and other inflationary pressures.

Working with teachers and administrators we are putting a strong focus on improving the learning environment, student achievement, and health and well-being in our schools.

This year, we will:

- enhance access to mental health supports in our schools, including more counsellors, online resources, and training
- improve approaches to teaching mathematics, reading, and writing
- continue to ensure ongoing support for inclusive education
- update the Special Education Policy and invest in assistive technology supports in classrooms
- update the School Food and Nutrition policy and launch a new physical activity framework
- expand opportunities for junior high and high school students to learn about opportunities in the skilled trades
- expand support for new Canadian students

We continue to invest in technology to support learning. This year, we are providing \$6 million more to refresh classroom technology.

Environment

Nova Scotia has long been recognized as a leader in setting ambitious environmental goals and taking action to achieve them.

We introduced the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act in Fall 2021 with 28 goals that now serve as our roadmap.

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions, protecting land, improving access to renewable energy sources, and advancing climate change adaptation programming are just some things underway.

With funding options available, people are empowered to improve the energy efficiency of their homes, businesses, and community buildings and cut the cost of their power bills.

This year, with a new investment of \$41 million, we will work with communities and partners to make progress on the new Nova Scotia Climate Change Plan for Clean Growth.

Mr. Speaker, we will do all that we can to make sure Nova Scotia and Nova Scotians can prepare for the changing climate and seize the opportunities a green economy can offer as part of a clean, healthy, and sustainable province.

Conclusion

As I mark the end of this budget address, I would like to acknowledge the many people at the Department of Finance and Treasury Board and across government who have helped develop this budget and to everyone throughout the public service who will provide Nova Scotians with the services they will receive over the coming year.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to acknowledge my colleagues on both sides of this legislature. Important questions will be asked on behalf of Nova Scotians during the Budget Estimates Debate. In particular, I want to thank members of the PC Caucus without whom, this budget tabled today would not be possible -- their belief in something better, the ideas they have brought to the table, and their hope for the future.

And I thank our Premier, for his leadership in setting the direction of this administration and moving quickly on the opportunities and challenges that have faced our province.

Three weeks after being sworn in as a new government just 18 months ago, we took control of the previous government's budget and started to shape it around what we believed were the priorities of Nova Scotians.

We set our province on a new course, because our province is growing and we need to invest today to ensure we have the services and infrastructure that the growth we are seeing demands. That growth has led to significantly more revenues than were projected by independent experts. All of the increased investments we are making in healthcare and other areas are manageable and within our growing economic capacity. We continue to manage our fiscal health, while investing in priorities of Nova Scotians.

Budget 2023–24 will empower Nova Scotians.

For it is our people who we can all trust to move our province forward -- our healthcare system, our economy, and our communities.

Thank you.