

# Four key spending decisions Provincial aid <sup>[1]</sup>

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EXCERPTS:

POVERTY isn't just about money, Finance Minister Stan Struthers declared Tuesday -- it's also about social exclusion, about barriers that prevent people from enjoying all of the benefits of living in Manitoba.

So there isn't a huge amount of money in the budget specifically for poverty reduction, although the basic personal tax exemption for everyone increases by \$250. But spending on health and education remain priorities.

"The best way out of poverty is through a well-paying job," said Struthers. "Educated, strong, healthy individuals who have the required skills and talents to participate successfully in the labour market will support the economy as workers and as consumers."

Struthers promised Manitoba families will pay the lowest combined bills in Canada for electricity, home heating and auto insurance.

The NDP promised in 2008 to fund 6,500 child-care spaces, and by the end of this year, the promise will have been kept, said the finance minister.

There are currently 54 child-care centres being built or expanded, said Struthers -- the province continues to support better training and wages for child-care workers, though Struthers didn't say what the government would do.

The private sector will be asked for proposals to add affordable rental housing units. And the commitment to add 1,500 new social housing units over five years continues, said Struthers.

Advocates for low-income Manitobans aren't impressed.

"We're pretty disappointed. We get tired of pushing -- it's the same thing every year," said Shauna MacKinnon, executive director for the Manitoba branch of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Struthers' attitude "means everyone who is poor has the capacity to do a job. It sounds so simple they way it's presented, and it's not simple," MacKinnon said.

She said money spent to give every taxpayer a \$250 tax exemption could have been better spent by increasing the housing allowance for low-income Manitobans.

"The wealthiest benefit from that (\$250), the people on social assistance don't benefit from that," she said.

MacKinnon pointed to Pathways in Education, a non-profit North End agency working with at-risk kids. "They've frozen the budget. How are they supposed to respond to the needs of 100 more kids? They're putting out fires every day," she said.

The budget also starts to move forward on the NDP's election promise to eliminate school property taxes for seniors, with an additional \$75 property tax credit for low-income seniors, earning less than \$25,000.

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