

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**Thursday, January 29, 2004**

**Committee Room 1**

**Nova Scotia Children's Aid/Foster Families**

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## **COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE**

Ms. Marilyn More (Chairman)

Mr. Mark Parent

Mr. William Langille

Mr. Gary Hines

Mr. Jerry Pye

Mr. Gordon Gosse

Mr. Russell MacKinnon

Mr. Stephen McNeil

Mr. Leo Glavine

In Attendance:

Ms. Mora Stevens

Legislative Committee Coordinator

## **WITNESSES**

### Halifax Children's Aid Society

Ms. Barbara Williams

Coordinator of Family and Adolescent Services

### Federation of Foster Families of Nova Scotia

Ms. Debbie Thibault

Coordinator of Training

Ms. Carmen Godfrey

Foster Allegation Support Worker



**HALIFAX, THURSDAY, JANUARY 29, 2004**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**9:00 A.M.**

**CHAIRMAN**  
Ms. Marilyn More

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I will call the Standing Committee on Community Services to order. We are pleased to have with us this morning officials from the Children's Aid Society and the Federation of Foster Families Nova Scotia. So welcome. We will start with introductions of the committee members, please.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We have our committee clerk with us, Mora Stevens. I believe Jerry Pye will be joining us, as far as we know, so we will start and he can join us when he arrives. Unfortunately, Mr. John Rowan, Executive Director of the Children's Aid Society, has been called into a meeting with the minister and won't be able to attend today but perhaps you folks would like to introduce yourselves, starting with Barbara.

[The committee witnesses introduced themselves.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think the way we will start, if it is fine with the committee members, is perhaps we will ask you both to give your presentations and that will give us as much of the background information as possible. Then we will just ask some questions and clarification and just try to get a better idea of the system and the environment within which you all work. Barbara, would you like to start?

MS. BARBARA WILLIAMS: Yes, thank you. Good morning, everyone, and thank you for the opportunity to discuss child welfare with this legislative committee. In doing the preparation, I actually don't know how much you know about child welfare, so I decided to present child welfare in a broad context, not just focused on the agency I represent. However, any reference to day-to-day operations and programming, I can only speak for the agency in which I work.

Child welfare is a broad subject and I am going to approach it with a broad description and if you need a more detailed description of how it actually works, I will certainly respond to those questions. The province has legislation which is entitled the Children and Family Services Act and that provides the mandate for agencies to operate in this province. There are actually 14 Children's Aid Societies or private agencies and six district offices that carry out the mandate of the Children and Family Services Act.

Everywhere across the province there is an agency that carries out this mandate. In this particular area, in HRM, there are actually four offices. One is private, and that is the Children's Aid Society of Halifax, and we still serve the old city. So that is our jurisdiction. There is an office in Dartmouth - Dartmouth district office - there is Cole Harbour and there is Sackville. So HRM has four agencies pretty much doing the same thing but just different jurisdictions.

The services are 24 hours so that the bulk of the work is done in daytime hours. However, every agency is mandated to provide emergency service after-hours so across the province again, there is an after-hours service for emergencies that come in that relate to children. The definition of a child in this province is a person under the age of 16. Now, the definition of a child varies across the country, but in this province it's a person who is under the age of 16.

The basic reason we exist is to protect children from abuse and neglect. That is the purpose of our being and then the other services augment that particular purpose. Essentially the agencies are mandated to investigate reports of abuse and neglect of children under the age of 16, to assist the family unit and the children to remain intact while providing services to address whatever the risks or issues are, to provide appropriate placements for children who need to come into our care, and to ensure long-term healthy placements for children who come into our permanent care. So there are children who come in with us temporarily who go back home, but there are children who aren't able to return home and we need to ensure that - we become their parents, actually, and need to oversee all levels of care.

I will break into functions what child welfare agencies do. The organization of agencies may differ across the province. There are varying sizes, as you are aware, but I will break the functions down just to show you what the actual mandated services of the agencies are. The first function is that of intake and that is a service of receiving referrals or reports of abuse and neglect that come to our agency or any agency across the province. So if a neighbour or a teacher or a doctor, the family themselves, have concerns about the risk of a child, they call an intake person at the child welfare agency in their area. It is those workers' responsibility to assess the information and to decide whether or not we investigate the referral and if we do, to follow policies and procedures that are province-wide in terms of guidelines about how to do that investigation. If the allegations are of a criminal nature, then, of course, the police are involved with us and they lead the investigations of those natures, such as sexual abuse.

If the allegations are founded, meaning that they are actually true - some aren't - and the family require assistance to deal with the issues, then the file is opened and moves along to a long-term protection worker and that is consistent throughout the province. There is an intake function and then it moves to a long-term protection worker. The intake function is very short term. It's normally about six weeks. The role of the long-term protection worker is to work with the family to address the issues - what brought this family to our attention, what do they need to deal with? - and to provide whatever services are necessary within the referrals to community or to provide them ourselves to assist the family to get back on track to be able to parent their children. That is still the goal, to assist families to parent their own children.

[9:15 a.m.]

If the family is unable to keep the child safe while they are dealing with their problems, we may have to bring the child into care. It could be done in a voluntary way and sometimes that happens, or it could be that we need to apply to court for an order to have the child come into our care. The goal would still be to return the child home. If we legally have to take a child from a parent, which is the last resort and certainly it is the part of our work that gets the most attention, the most media, then the goal is still to return the child. We have to answer to a judge - it goes before Family Court - about why we took the child. We have to lay out for the judge what we are going to do to assist the family to correct the problems and have the child returned. A matter could stay before court for 18 months so it can be a long process and the child meanwhile would be in care and visiting family.

There is a court process that allows a child to stay at home. It is called an application supervision order, so that sometimes happens as well. The outcome of a court proceeding is, of course, up to a judge and in most situations, children do return home. There are some children - and last year our agency had 27 - for whom we are unable to satisfactorily resolve the issues at home and who come into our permanent care. I don't have the numbers for across the province for that.

So I have described briefly an intake function and then a long-term protection worker function. The other function that agencies perform is to become like parents to the children who are in their permanent care. They have different names at different agencies, in our agency we call them children care workers. So they are children for whom we are legally responsible until they're placed for adoption, or until they return home, or until they grow up, and growing up in Nova Scotia ends at age 19, or 21 if the child has an educational plan, so we are responsible for the care of those children. Sometimes children who are in our permanent care and custody do return home even after a period of time. Their role is to be like good parents, to ensure proper care.

All agencies need to have a place to put a child when they come into care. The federation will speak more to the fostering program, but all agencies either have a program, or

there is availability to a program in their area, a foster program and an adoption program to ensure we have a safe place to put a child when they are in our care. Some agencies have therapeutic foster programs, our agency happens to have one, it's entitled Parent Counsellor Program, which is a therapeutic foster home.

Some agencies have what is called a family support program or a family skills program, it's different names at different agencies, but essentially, they are parent educators. They are paraprofessionals who either do group work with families or do individual work with families, to assist in the parenting gaps that exist.

Some agencies - and the private agencies have more flexibility in these areas, I believe, I might be biased about private agencies - are able to provide some augmented programs such as volunteer programs. Our agency, in particular, has a half-time volunteer coordinator who is actually funded by the board through fundraising, who provides programs to children such as tutoring, big buddies, those kinds of programs. As well, our board of directors, through fundraising, are able to provide educational awards to some of our youth who are able to move on into university or community college.

The challenges that face our families - and I'm now speaking of metro because I don't know as many of the challenges in the other areas - are many. They include poverty, they include isolation, they include mental health issues, addiction issues, lack of role models in parenting, there are many. The challenges which face the youths are many as well, and we see many youths who don't seem to have a goal to live for, they're in trouble with the law, in difficulty in school. Our efforts are to try to assist the youths to get back on track.

The trends we're seeing and are concerning, are mainly in the area of prevention. Some agencies are able - our agency isn't because of the volume - to do the kind of prevention work that needs to happen in the community to prevent that first call. The other challenge is in the area of placement, and I think the people from the federation - by the way, we do know each other - will be able to speak to the challenges there. We do not have sufficient foster homes, we don't have enough numbers in our province. Foster parents are leaving as quickly as they're entering the system. Some children have to be placed in situations that we would consider less than desirable for them. So those are just some of our challenges and I will stop now because I'm sure I have gone over my 10 minutes, but I'm open to any questions as we go along.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. Debbie and Carmen, is one going to speak or are you going to split up the presentation?

MS. DEBBIE THIBAUT: I will probably speak.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do you want to just give us some information about your organization.

MS. THIBAUT: The Federation of Foster Families was created in 1974 and it began here in the metro area. It began as a result of a steering committee of approximately 10 to 12 people who were made up of foster parents and social workers, who wanted an organization that could start to provide some support to foster parents. Once the organization started in the metro area, other communities around the province decided to develop associations. There is a Foster Family Association in each county and it's linked with the agency or district office around the province.

In 1976, the federation was incorporated as a charitable organization, we're incorporated under the Societies Act. We receive our funding from the Department of Community Services, but we are not technically civil servants, part of the department.

The board of directors is comprised of foster parents around the province, so we're a little bit unique in that normally you would have a board of directors comprised of community members and different professions. When a foster home is approved, the agency notifies us and their name goes on our mailing list and they're automatically a member of the federation. We have our annual general meeting every Spring and at those meetings, representatives are elected.

We follow the department's boundaries for the province for the four regions, so we have two foster parents from each region, so there would be two from central, two from western. Several years ago we decided to allow representation from the Mi'kmaq community, so we now have a foster parent who represents Mi'kmaq on the mainland, as well as Cape Breton. At the present time, we have a place on our board of directors for representation from Youth in Care and at the present time, that position is vacant. We have had a former Youth in Care sit on our board of directors before, to help see their perspective.

Our main mandate is to be a collective voice for all foster parents throughout the province, to provide support and assistance. Some of the services that we provide are advocacy services, the Foster Allegation Support Program and Carmen is the social worker involved in that. That began in 1999 and if a foster home is going through an allegation of abuse, the foster parent can contact us and we will provide support. We also provide educational services and in 1998, the department determined some specific training programs to be mandatory when you became a foster parent. We administer several of those programs, we track the foster parents for the training they have and organize the workshops throughout the province. Several years ago there was a new program introduced called the PRIDE program and it's another training aspect, and we administer that jointly with the Department of Community Services and work with staff throughout the province.

We have been working with the department in establishing an insurance program. There had been one for several years, which provided extended coverage if there was damage done to your home by your foster child, or would provide legal costs if you were going through

an allegation and if the allegation was not substantiated. In 2000 or 2001, we weren't able to renew that insurance coverage. I think insurance issues are pretty consistent across the country. Foster parents have been deemed to be a high risk. That's a major challenge for foster parents, not only for our coverage but just to receive their own personal coverage, car insurance, home insurance. There are some companies that will not renew their insurance when they find out that they are foster parents. That has been a major challenge to foster parents.

We have a new policy that has just come into effect, and it's for all the agencies and the federation. It was effective November 26, 2003, and at this point we are waiting for the policies to come out so that we can notify foster parents. That will provide coverage for them. That's been one of the major challenges when we do recruitment with foster parents. They're opening their homes, their families and then there isn't additional coverage or protection for them. That is beginning to be resolved.

The last couple of years, as Barb mentioned, the placement is a crisis issue. Foster homes are decreasing. I pulled out some statistics, and since the 1999-2000 fiscal year compared with this past fiscal year, there were 278 fewer homes in the province, but the number of children coming into care is on the increase and the numbers for last year, there would be 187 more children who have come into care. So you have a lot of stress on the foster homes that we have. Their placements are to the max. It creates stress for foster parents, it creates stress for the agencies and the workers in finding placements. That has been a major concern to us and to the agencies.

Another issue that the federation has been advocating for is to have an increase in the maintenance rates, the board rates that are given for the children in care. The last increase in maintenance rates was in 1999, and that was 1.5 per cent. If you look at the increase in the cost of living over the last couple of years, there has been a substantial increase but there hasn't been an increase for foster parents. So for a lot of them, for some who are opting out of fostering, they just simply, financially, can't afford to do it. There are some who spend a lot of money out of pocket for the children. There are some who assist children with their education, when they're older with their weddings, that sort of thing. So it's a financial commitment as well as a personal commitment.

Another area that raises concern and that we believe relates to the retention of foster homes is that there are a lot of false allegations placed. When an allegation is made, the agency is responsible for investigating that agency. There could be various reasons, the foster child may be angry with what's happening in their life, may want to go home and feel that if there is an allegation made then they might be able to return home or be placed elsewhere. So there are various reasons why the allegations happen.

If you go through an investigation, it's a pretty traumatic experience. If you live in a rural community, sometimes people seem to know, even though it is confidential, and it can be



quite a traumatic experience. We have had some foster families that have fostered for 14, 15 years and after going through an allegation, even though it was not substantiated, have just said we can't do this anymore. Then given the last couple of years there hasn't been any insurance coverage, so even if it's been unsubstantiated, they've had to pay their own legal fees as well, on top of additional maintenance.

[9:30 a.m.]

So there are a lot of issues out there for foster parents. It really is, we feel, in a crisis situation. The days of people coming into fostering and staying for 20, 25 years, I don't think we're going to see those anymore. As Barb said, we tend to see that new homes are opening, but as quick as you open new homes, you're losing other homes, they're closing. To have somebody who fosters for five years or more is quite a feat these days.

In terms of advocacy work for the foster parents, we do have representation on several provincial committees that are through the Department of Community Services. One is the Recruitment and Awareness Committee; one is the PRIDE Training Committee. We have representation on the Foster Care Committee, which is actually through the Nova Scotia Council for the Family, and the Joint Committee on Foster Care and that's the committee that looks at policy development for foster care. Foster parents are elected to those committees, so there are some areas where they can provide their voices on provincial committees. Is there anything you would like to add?

MS. CARMEN GODFREY: I don't think so. I think you covered it all.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. Just to clarify for our members, you represent two non-government organizations who help the Department of Community Services perform its legislated mandate.

MS. THIBAUT: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: And the federation represents foster parents across Nova Scotia. Barbara, you work with the Halifax Children's Aid.

MS. WILLIAMS: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Are you familiar with the other agencies and Children's Aid Societies, if questions come up elsewhere in the province?

MS. WILLIAMS: I can only speak in general terms of what services we're mandated to provide. I can really only speak about the Children's Aid Society of Halifax, in terms of the programs and day-to-day activities, specifics.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: If you feel uncomfortable answering a question you can just let us know that.

MS. WILLIAMS: Oh, I will just state that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So far on the speakers' list I have Mark, Gordie and Russell.

MR. MARK PARENT: With that exchange, you might not be able to answer my question. I was struck by the comment that unfounded allegations are one of the problems in getting foster parents to sign on and stay on. The question I had was really in regard to private and public Children's Aid Societies, and you touched on that very briefly. The one in my area is a private agency with a board of directors. It has to have the wisdom of Solomon, I think, to deal with all the cases that come before it.

There have been some concerns from various constituents that with the private agency the accountability and therefore the possibility of abuse of power is there in a way that it isn't with the public agency. Can you comment on that in general terms at all?

MS. WILLIAMS: Could you just rephrase the question? The accountability . . .

MR. PARENT: The accountability in terms of allegations. Once an allegation is made, the Children's Aid Society or Family and Children's Services has enormous power to decide whether to proceed or not to proceed with that. There have been various constituents who have felt that they've proceeded in a rather heavy-handed manner. Now there is an appeal process that we've had access to.

MS. WILLIAMS: In terms of investigating an allegation?

MR. PARENT: In terms of investigating, yes.

MS. WILLIAMS: All agencies follow the Department of Community Services Child Welfare Division policies and procedures. So we would actually have a process that should be very similar across the province in how we do investigations. I don't know what the practice differences might be.

MR. PARENT: But theoretically there should be none between private and public.

MS. WILLIAMS: No. We actually get most of our support from the Department of Community Services. The only piece of other monies is fund-raised monies by the board for extra activities. So we're funded by the Department of Community Services, and we are obligated to follow the standards, the policies and procedures in every aspect of our work. Fundamentally, there should not be a difference in practice. I don't know how to comment further on that. Private agencies are accountable to - there's a regional structure now in the

province, there are four regions. So there is a regional office we're accountable to, and as well we're accountable to what's called the division or the head office with regard to how we do our work.

There is an appeal process if a client feels that we've been inappropriate in our handling of a case. The person can go through, first, a when-you-disagree process. They can go up that ladder, as far as the department. It can go up to the divisional office. If a matter is before the court, it's full disclosure before the court and a judge ultimately decides the outcome. So the when-you-disagree process doesn't actually work there, because everything is out anyway, all the information, it's full disclosure in any matter before the court.

MR. PARENT: Would you know the percentage of how many are private and how many are public in the province?

MS. WILLIAMS: There are 14 private and six district offices.

MR. PARENT: If someone moved from an area in Cape Breton, for example, where the society had set up certain procedures, would they be portable to one in another part of the province?

MS. WILLIAMS: My understanding of what we're supposed to be following is provincial, there are processes that we're supposed to be following across the province.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Gordon.

MR. GORDON GOSSE: I actually have a few questions for both. My first one is, foster parents are, as was mentioned, in low supply, what are the barriers perceived in getting more foster families? And, how can we as a committee address those barriers?

MS. THIBAUT: Well, I think one of the biggest challenges I mentioned is the maintenance rates. We presented a proposal to the Minister of Community Services last March, and we've actually re-presented it again. We've just been told there isn't funding for the different particular fiscal years.

MR. GOSSE: Excuse me, for what fiscal year, this upcoming fiscal year?

MS. THIBAUT: Yes. Another big challenge is that there's a higher number of children in say 11- to 15-year-olds that are in care now than what there would have been several years ago. So that can be quite a challenge, you're dealing with adolescents. We're seeing that some have greater needs and behavioural problems than what there would have been in the past. There is a lot of training provided for foster parents, but then you're asking them to leave their home on the weekends. Even to just sort of have a normal life, to want to go out for an

evening, you can't choose just anyone to babysit, it has to be someone who's approved. That is a bit of a challenge as well.

MR. GOSSE: I was wondering if you could send a copy of the proposal to the committee here? Is there any chance that we could have a copy of that proposal?

MS. THIBAUT: Sure.

MR. GOSSE: Which leads to my second question, there is a gap - you had mentioned there are so many kids between the ages of 10 and 15, but there is also a gap of children between the ages of 16 and 19. Those are the ones who are very difficult to find foster placement for and they fall between the cracks, because Community Services, they're not under the ESI assistance program, they don't fall under that. So there are a lot of those who are out on the streets relying on the kindness of families or other stuff. What is being done to address the group between the ages of 16 and 19?

MS. THIBAUT: One of the things that I'm aware of, I represent the federation on the Legislative Review Committee, which is through the Nova Scotia Council for the Family, and that mandate is to look at the Children and Family Services Act and to kind of pick certain sections, do some research, make some recommendations to the department. This year the committee has started to look at that exact issue, recognizing there are not a lot of services available and the youth are getting lost.

MR. GOSSE: And becoming homeless and on the streets.

MS. THIBAUT: Yes.

MR. GOSSE: My other question is, I know Community Services plans to train special foster parents to take difficult, high-needs placements that used to go to the SOS Children's Village, which has since closed. I am just wondering how many parents have taken this training and how many houses are there in Nova Scotia that are designated or willing to take troubled teens or difficult placements?

MS. THIBAUT: The therapeutic homes that Barb spoke about are called the Parent Counsellor Program, and there's a program associated with Halifax, CAS, there's one with Colchester, there's one with Cape Breton, I believe, and one with Cumberland County. So there aren't a lot of therapeutic homes around the province and that becomes part of the challenge as well, that if those homes are filled and you still need a placement, then there could be children that technically should be in a therapeutic home but you have to place them somewhere, so they end up in regular foster care.

MR. GOSSE: Another question is, how many parents have taken this training for special needs, would you have an idea of how many foster parents have taken this training?

MS. THIBAUT: Probably two-thirds of the foster parents have completed all of the mandatory programs. I think probably, some of those who haven't taken some of the programs are older foster parents who might have had a long-term placement and when that child is gone they don't intend to foster anymore. Those are the ones we see who don't come to training, they're sort of at the end of their career. New foster parents, when you make an enquiry to become a foster parent, if you have successfully gone through the pre-assessment process, you have to attend a six-week training program to learn about behavioural issues, to look at what the requirements would be, to make sure you can make an informed decision as to whether you want to foster or not. During that training program, we do a presentation about all the other training that is expected.

Now you see people coming into the system who know this is the expectation and they will need to take training, but at this point, I would say probably two-thirds of the actual numbers.

MR. GOSSE: That have the specialized training for the difficult needs children?

MS. THIBAUT: There are different levels of training, I'm not quite sure in terms of special needs. We're not involved in the placement, so I'm not sure when you say special needs just what . . .

MR. GOSSE: Youth at risk, I guess, in general terms the same thing. I have another question - actually I have lots of questions for the Children's Aid Society of Nova Scotia but like you said, I don't think you can answer these questions because I'm a Cape Breton MLA and most of my questions were going to be for that area. I think it would be unfair for me to ask you those questions because when I was given the advanced program it said, the Children's Aid Society of Nova Scotia, so I thought I was going to be able to ask those questions. I did have a number of questions for that agency and it would be unfair for me to ask you those because I know you wouldn't be able to answer.

There are things around a tender for a home that was out on August 5<sup>th</sup>. The girls' centre is closed in Sydney now and the boys' home now is a co-ed home with girls and boys in New Waterford. The new home was supposed to be built, the tender was out on August 5<sup>th</sup>, the tenders came back too high. I met with the director down there, Frank Capstick, and wondered when they were going to build a new centre. He had given me a commitment of April 1<sup>st</sup>, and bids are going back to Transportation and Public Works. There are quite a few things I would like to ask, but I know it would be unfair for me to do that to you.

MS. THIBAUT: Right. Thank you.

MR. GOSSE: And there are issues of court cases in Cape Breton, I think there are five court cases against the Children's Aid Society of Cape Breton.

[9:45 a.m.]

MS. THIBAUT: That are against . . .

MR. GOSSE: Yes, and it wouldn't be fair. So I will just have to maybe wait until a later date. Is there any way we could have a chance of getting that? It said Children's Aid Society of Nova Scotia.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Can we ask, is there a provincial organization . . .

MS. THIBAUT: I was just going to say there is a presidents' group, and it's comprised of the presidents of all the private agencies throughout the province. They meet on a regular basis. They do presentations to the minister twice a year. I'm not sure who the chairperson is, but I can find that out and pass it on to Mora. It might be helpful to have a presentation from them. (Interruptions)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mora has just explained to me that John Rowan, who couldn't be here today at the last minute, is on that group. So if he had been here there might have been the possibility of asking questions in other areas.

MR. PARENT: Can I ask about that, Mr. Rowan's absence? When did we find out about that? My questions pertained - like Gordie's, there's not much use in me asking Ms. Williams to answer questions that she can't really answer.

MS. WILLIAMS: Mr. Rowan actually can only speak for the Children's Aid Society of Halifax, as well. I would think it would be the presidents of the agencies who can maybe give a broader view on provincial matters. All I can speak to is really the programs we are supposed to be serving.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Rather than spend any more time on this, we are going to talk about future agenda items at the end of today's meeting. Why don't we raise it there, and if there's interest perhaps we could arrange to have someone who represents the whole province.

MR. GOSSE: Again, I would like to say thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Russell, if you don't mind I would like to just break in here. There were a couple of things that Gordie asked, and I'm not sure we had all the information. You talked about the older teens. One of you mentioned that 16 was the cut-off age in Nova Scotia. Are you aware of what the age is in other provinces? Is that low?

MS. WILLIAMS: It varies across the country. I know in some provinces it's 18. That cut-off age actually varies across the country, but I don't have the actual facts about the age. Our age is low. It is low. There is a gap, you're right. The 16- to 19-year-olds, if they're not

known to Children's Aid prior to their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, we actually can't respond to concerns of reports of allegations, and they are abused too. They can be in very challenging situations. The child welfare agencies have no mandate to provide a service to them. The most we've done is advocate to other resources for them. Income assistance will, even though they don't fit the age group, make exceptions to provide services for youth. There is a lot of advocacy work that's required to ensure that that age group gets the kind of service they need.

MR. GOSSE: I know, I've been a part of that for many years.

MS. WILLIAMS: Now the children who grow up in our care and who turn 16, they're still with us, but even 19 is a low age to say, you're an adult now and you're on your own. They can actually stay in our care until they are 21 if they're in an educational program. Even 21 is a young age these days, to be able to get launched in education or a job. So the whole age range, I think can be best addressed through the committee that looks at changes to the Act. There have been recommendations that have gone forth that we need to look at, raising the age of who's a child in Nova Scotia.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Debbie, could you clarify for us, if there's a shortage of foster care, where do the children on the waiting list go in the meantime?

MS. THIBAUT: Maybe Barb could respond. We're not involved in the actual placement of children. That would be a function of the agency.

MS. WILLIAMS: It's a good question. Just to let you know, the shortage of foster homes is not just in this province. This is a Canada-wide theme. The trends - when you think about the changing family, we have two-parent families now who are working two-parent families, or the profile of a family may be a single parent. Economic times are different, the children who come into our care appear to be more challenging, presenting more challenging behaviours. So there are a number of reasons for the shortage of foster care.

Where children go, we may have to place a child in a home that already has too many children, we may have to overcrowd a foster home. We have to split siblings, which we don't like to do, but we may have a sibling group of three and we don't have a home that will take all three, we may have to put one in one home and one in another. Some of our children go into group homes. There are group homes in residential settings for children. There have been times where we have had to staff an apartment or a hospitality suite, a hotel room to place children. So it has gotten that desperate at times in this province. It's not what we want to do, but there have been times when at the end of the day if we have no place, we have to find a place because the child has to be taken from their parent. Those are only short-term solutions, and they're not ones that anyone likes to have to do, but because we have to place them somewhere that's safe, we may have to hire childcare staff to look after our children.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. Sorry, Russell.

MR. RUSSELL MACKINNON: At the outset, I must say it may be just me, either I'm getting tone deaf or I just didn't get anything out of your opening remarks, Ms. Williams. I found your presentation didn't give me the detail that I thought I would receive from the department. So I will put that on the table for starts.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Just to clarify though, Barbara is not from the department. She's from the Children's Aid Society, which is a non-profit organization.

MR. MACKINNON: Well, yes, but by extension, from the department, right? You're an agency of . . .

MS. WILLIAMS: I am not a government employee.

MR. MACKINNON: So there's nobody here representing the province?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, not today.

MR. MACKINNON: Okay. Children's Aid. You receive your funding from the province?

MS. WILLIAMS: Yes, we do.

MR. MACKINNON: I'm looking in our binder, and it says that foster care co-ordinators are carrying caseloads of anywhere from 45 to 62. Would you agree that that's too high?

MS. WILLIAMS: Yes, I would.

MR. MACKINNON: Have you made any representation to the department to address that?

MS. WILLIAMS: Our agency has made representation over the years through our executive director and our boards, with regard to size.

MR. MACKINNON: Would you provide a copy of that presentation or representation to members of the committee here?

MS. WILLIAMS: Certainly.

MR. MACKINNON: What is the per diem rate for a foster child that is being paid by the province, presently?

MS. THIBAUT: It is broken down in age levels. For children zero to nine years old, it's \$13.77 per day; 10 years old and up, it's \$20.02 per day. Then there is a clothing allowance,



for zero to four, it's \$471 for a year; for children aged five to nine, it's \$777; and for 10 and up, it's \$1,088. There's an allowance for school supplies, five to nine - and I can make sure that you receive a complete copy of this - it's \$70; for 10 to 12, it's \$120. So when you look at the cost of clothing and schooling, it's not a lot.

MR. MACKINNON: Madam Chairman, I'm looking at what's supposed to be the Canadian rate, the Statistics Canada rate that should apply in Nova Scotia, and it says \$45.72 per day. Is that, essentially, what you are being paid?

MS. THIBAUT: No.

MR. MACKINNON: Give it to me in layman's terms, amalgamated figures.

MS. WILLIAMS: It's \$20.02.

MR. MACKINNON: So you're reaching less than 50 per cent.

MS. THIBAUT: Of what Statistics Canada would say it costs to raise a child in Nova Scotia. The information I think you have from Statistics Canada, that was a presentation that we made to the minister a year ago, with the breakdown.

MR. MACKINNON: I noticed the government - just to shift gears slightly, Madam Chairman - is undertaking what's referred to as an integrated case management study initiative, that would help develop a new system for client intake eligibility and assessment case planning and case management. Have you folks had any input into that? I understand the government has commissioned a private sector partner. Are you aware of this?

MS. THIBAUT: No, we haven't had any from the federation.

MS. WILLIAMS: I'm not sure what that refers to, if it's a computer system. In the child welfare section we do have a computerized system where we keep track of files of cases. This may refer to income assistance, I'm not sure. Certainly, we are involved in any changes that come about in enhancing the computerized system in child welfare.

MR. MACKINNON: The number of children in need of foster care is going up. It sounds from your presentation that you pretty well indicated it is moving toward a crisis management situation. What specific action plan does the department - to the best of your knowledge - have to deal with that? Have they communicated anything?

MS. WILLIAMS: What has been communicated is that it is a high priority for . . .

MR. MACKINNON: Well, you wouldn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out there is a problem.

MS. WILLIAMS: It's a high priority but in terms of action plans, other than the PRIDE model, I'm not sure. The most recent action, which I should mention we do appreciate, is the establishment of Secure Care in Truro, which has assisted with children who have behavioural management difficulties. So there has been a facility recently established in Nova Scotia, Secure Care in Truro, which hasn't addressed the foster part but it has addressed some placement issues of children who are older and whose behaviour is too difficult to manage in a group setting. I don't know of any other specific actions, do you, Debbie?

MS. THIBAUT: Several years ago the recruitment and awareness committee was established and there has been a lot of effort put into the recruitment. We are starting to see advertisements, pamphlets, posters around a lot more now and there is quite an emphasis on recruitment. From the federation's perspective, we feel that if some of the issues in terms of the maintenance issues and some of the other things, the reality, once you become a foster parent, if that isn't addressed, you can recruit all you want, but if you are not retaining -basically, it's probably a two- to five-year average that people are staying in fostering - if you don't start looking at why people are leaving the system and addressing those issues, then recruitment isn't a factor.

MR. MACKINNON: In closing, I want to compliment your organization and yourselves for the work that you do. I think on a previous day I noted that one of my siblings was a foster parent for 20-some years, but I'm not so sure she would do it today with all the restraints. I guess in closing I would ask, what would you consider to be a reasonable caseload?

MS. WILLIAMS: For a foster worker?

MS. MACKINNON: Yes.

MS. WILLIAMS: Probably 30. The province hasn't set standards in that area, they have set standards for protection.

MR. MACKINNON: But from your experience would you say anything over 30, the quality of attention to the case would suffer?

MS. WILLIAMS: To actually be able to support foster parents in the way that they deserve and require.

MR. MACKINNON: One final short snapper. How many children in the last year were placed in hotels?

MS. WILLIAMS: I don't actually know provincially. Each region has an emergency resource that we have to, at times, utilize. In our region it's an apartment that we occasionally have to utilize. Just recently, and this is probably the worst-case scenario that I can think of this past year, we had to place a 5-year-old with staff in this apartment until we were able to

locate an appropriate placement. He was actually there for less than a week and he has now been accepted in the Children's Response program which is a treatment facility in Halifax for children who have high needs. So that's the most recent example. It's not a hotel, but some areas may have to use hotels. We have an apartment we secure in a housing unit, basically.

MR. MACKINNON: Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I have Bill, Leo and then Stephen. Bill.

MR. WILLIAM LANGILLE: Actually I got sidetracked because a couple of the questions I was going to ask have already been asked. Something that just came to mind that Mr. MacKinnon brought up in the Stats Canada, I find it hard to believe \$40 per day to raise a child. I'm thinking of a family very dear and close to my heart and \$40 just for three children over 30 days would be \$3,600 clear a month, and that's not counting the parents. I would like to know who makes that kind of money. I know you can raise children with a lot less income than that, so I wonder where Stats Canada gets their figures. I mean that's extremely high. (Interruption) It's in the booklet, but I'm saying I wonder where Stats Canada gets their figures because I know for a fact you can raise three children on less than \$3,600 clear per month. If you figure out what kind of salary you would have to make, you would have to make over \$80,000; therefore, I guess everybody will have to go on the pill.

Anyway, I want to get back to children in need of protection. Something you said in your opening statement four times is that your main goal is to relocate them back to the family, their parents. Even if you have to go in with a court order, that child must be in need of protection to be able to do that. What is the criteria for putting that child back in the same environment that you had to take the child away from?

MS. WILLIAMS: Ideally, it wouldn't be the same environment that we would be returning the child to. The focus would be to assist the parents to change the environment so it is safe for the child to return. It's not just our agency's focus, it's the direction of the legislation to ensure that children, where possible, can be raised in their own homes. Our work is to assist families to make the necessary changes so that the child isn't going back to the same environment.

You and I know that there are situations where a child has been returned and the parents have resorted to whatever style of living, or whatever problems that brought the child into care in the first place, so we are involved again. Maybe the change was only temporary and then we have to get back involved, so it's not always solved, but we don't recommend to the court that a child be returned unless we can see that significant changes have happened in the home. Ultimately, it is the judge's call.

MR. LANGILLE: I guess that comes with my other background, before I was a politician. I've seen many children in need of protection. Certainly in a lot of cases, hands were

handcuffed, but in a lot of cases it took a process to get those children out of the environment. If there is a need, an emergency, can you give me your authority for going in and extracting that child from the premise?

[10:00 a.m.]

MS. WILLIAMS: Can I give you an authority?

MR. LANGILLE: What authority do you have to go in and extract that child from the home, if there's an emergency?

MS. WILLIAMS: The child welfare agencies do have that authority, to remove a child from a home if we deem the child to be at risk.

MR. LANGILLE: My last question, in Nova Scotia a child 16 and under, you're talking that it should be raised, but the age of majority is 18 years of age, and the Criminal Code recognizes that you're an adult at 18. We certainly recognize it, because I believe you have the right to run as an MLA at 18 now. You say 19 and then you would like to see it at 21. How do you get the authority to keep a child over 16, if they don't want to be kept anywhere? Or can you keep them?

MS. WILLIAMS: I think you've asked a couple of questions. One is, when we're doing an investigation of abuse and neglect, the definition of a child is up to the age of 16. That's one area. If a child is in our permanent care and custody, they obviously come into care before they're 16, they're in our permanent care and custody until they're 19, unless they've been placed for adoption or unless they've returned home or unless they have chosen on their own, and some children have done that, to go to court themselves, at age 16 or so, and say I want to leave the care of the agency. Some have done that, that is their right if they're not pleased with the care or they feel they can do better on their own. It's rare but some children will get a court hearing and ask that their guardianship be terminated.

MR. LANGILLE: At age 18, would they have to have a court hearing?

MS. WILLIAMS: They would. Because they're in our legal care and custody, in order to have that guardianship terminated, there has to be a court hearing up until age 19.

MR. LANGILLE: I'm just thinking, because the Criminal Code supersedes a lot of legislation, you're an adult at age 18. I wonder if there's a controversy or a conflict there.

MS. WILLIAMS: There might be, but certainly in our experience if a youth decides they want to leave our care, some just leave, some just leave and don't go to court, they just leave and don't follow whatever we expect of them to do, they return home, they leave the province, so there's that. That does sometimes happen. Others will want to pursue court to

officially terminate the guardianship, others just leave as you would leave a natural family, if you're fed up and don't want their controls anymore.

MR. LANGILLE: I would like to commend all of you for your work. I know it's difficult and it's hard, it's hard times. But look at the demographics on the foster homes declining and the need for children being placed in foster homes, I believe it's only going to get harder, it's not going to get better. I also believe that there have to be more incentives for people, not just for the money, but caring people who could take children into their foster homes. Having said that, I have another commitment. My daughter just had a baby. (Interruptions) So I'm on my way.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Just to follow up on Bill's question, though, the other side of the coin is that just as when our children turn 16 and 18, we just don't put them outside the door and say, okay, you're an adult, you're on your own, I think the point of raising the age is to allow the system the flexibility of continuing to support, when needed, as they go through those difficult later teen years and transition into education, further education . . .

MS. WILLIAMS: That's right, so that the parents are still there for the child.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, it's to continue the nurturing.

MS. WILLIAMS: That's right.

MR. LEO GLAVINE: First of all I thank Mr. Gosse for raising the SOS Children's Village. Between my wife and I, we've been board members there at least 15 years. I consider that type of facility, a strong therapeutic facility, as being a very important part and a key plank in this whole process of child care in this province. I'm wondering if you concur with that and see its demise as a major loss to the system?

MS. WILLIAMS: I see any loss of a placement in this province as a problem. We certainly placed children at SOS Village in some long-term placements that worked very well. I think there needs to be a range of placement resources for children. Foster care is the backbone of placement in this province, but it doesn't meet the needs of all children who come into the system. There are children who cannot be accommodated in a family setting. So SOS Children's Village or similar services such as that are necessary to provide the range. Children come with many different needs, and they don't all fit into what we have. We need to be as creative as possible in having the range. That's what's key, to have a range.

MR. GLAVINE: Yesterday I took part in the Public Accounts Committee, and we were dealing with the issues surrounding tuition arrangements and so on for children who have high educational needs. Certainly there is a real deficiency there, and I see a real tie-in today, where these are very vulnerable children and certainly if we don't invest in some corrective and

supportive measures now there will be a price to pay later on, and perhaps in many cases a big price.

MS. WILLIAMS: I agree.

MR. GLAVINE: I would say, in addressing my first question and the comments you have made this morning, you may not want to use the words but I certainly feel that the minister and the Department of Community Services have let down many families and many children in this province. Would that be a correct statement to make?

MS. THIBAUT: Perhaps the way to word it would be that they haven't necessarily always met the needs of the family. The needs are varied, as Barb has stated. I think maybe one comment to make at this point, when the Children and Family Services Act was rewritten, and I think it was 1990, 1991 that it was proclaimed, a year after that there was a lot of budget cuts to in-home support services. When that Act initially was brought in, there are some who would say there should have been about \$10 million to go with it to provide the services. So some of the frustration is that you have an Act that you're trying to follow, but you don't have the budget to support it. I think in a lot of the issues it comes down to the budget, the support.

MS. WILLIAMS: It's very challenging work, and I think we're all in this together in a sense, not just the Minister of Community Services but communities as a whole, to ensure that we advocate on behalf of the vulnerable families and children who need it. Communities have a responsibility too to raise their children.

MR. STEPHEN MCNEIL: You had mentioned in your presentation there are 278 fewer homes, what is the total number of Nova Scotia foster homes?

MS. THIBAUT: The stats that we received from the department for the 2002-03 fiscal year is that there were 506 regular foster homes and 207 restricted foster homes. When we refer to restricted foster homes, those would be homes where it might be a family member. Perhaps if you have a niece or a nephew coming into care, you would be approved to just look after that one particular child and it would be specific or it could be someone who is known to you in the community or there is a closer relationship. So that total would be 713. In fiscal year 1999-2000, the total was 991. Those figures came from a report that we received from the department.

MR. MCNEIL: You also mentioned that there were 178 more children in need today. What was the total in 1999?

MS. THIBAUT: In 1999 it was 1,967 - and actually it should have been 187 instead of 178 - and in 2002-03 there were 2,154 children in care.

MR. MCNEIL: What has happened to your operating budget since then, since 1999 to the present day?

[10:15 a.m.]

MS. THIBAUT: For the federation, we had a clawback in our operational budget, not this past fiscal year but the year before, and it was about \$90,000. We have maintained about the same budget the last two years but it is certainly not going to increase.

MR. MCNEIL: So the demand has gone up and your budget has decreased by \$90,000 since 1999?

MS. THIBAUT: Yes, the budget that I'm speaking about would be for providing training and the educational supports. We don't administer the maintenance budgets which would be the monies that are paid to foster parents. That would be administered through the agencies and the district offices. So there would be two separate budgets. One of the issues that we run into when we make a presentation is that our funding comes through the foster care program but the maintenance rates come out of the Children in Care Program so it is like two different pockets of money. So when we go to speak, this comes out of a different program and then if you make a presentation there, you are in a Catch-22 and it is like we appreciate it but your mandate is through foster care so you kind of get caught.

MR. MCNEIL: Is it possible to get an idea of what the total pot of money is we are talking about? Some is coming from you in different directions, is it possible to get a handle on how much money we are actually talking about?

MS. THIBAUT: I think those figures would be included in the annual reports that the department produces.

MR. MCNEIL: Great. You talked about foster parents. What are the dynamics of most of the foster parents? Do they have children of their own? Are their children grown?

MS. THIBAUT: There is a combination. I'm not really sure of any statistics but there are some whose children are grown and they just love children and they want to continue to have children in their home. There are some who are perhaps unable to have children so they have chosen to foster. Some have elementary-age children, so there is a range and I'm not sure if there are any statistics done on the breakdown.

MS. WILLIAMS: In terms of a profile, I don't know, but there are certainly many more where both parents are working outside the home and we have a number of foster families where there are actually single parents who are working outside the home who are still fostering. How they are managing that is amazing.

MR. MCNEIL: So is there a family support for the whole unit as opposed to the child who is just coming in as a foster child? Is there support for all the children in the home? Any time somebody is added to the home environment, it creates some repositioning. Is there any support for the family in that manner?

MS. THIBAUT: The support would be through the foster care workers and the agencies.

MR. MCNEIL: Just one final question. You had mentioned there were 14 private offices - is that it? - and six government. How long have we had 14 and six? It is really two-third private, one-third government.

MS. WILLIAMS: I'm not sure. Since I've been in the field - it has been since the 1960s - there has been a combination of private and district offices and certainly the number of offices have increased over the years but I'm not sure how long it's been that ratio.

MR. MCNEIL: The ones that have increased, though, the private has been increased?

MS. WILLIAMS: There have been some private as well. That whole area of governance is at another level being discussed about whether we should continue with all private or a combination of private and department or whether there should be one model for the province. That's an area that is being discussed at some other level, as well, now.

MR. MCNEIL: What is your feeling? I hate to put you on the spot.

MS. WILLIAMS: I have a bias, you know, but I think as long as agencies have the resources to do the work they do, to me that is a key issue, and a funding formula for agencies, if that can be clarified, I think that would assist as well.

MR. MCNEIL: Thank you very much.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Russell.

MR. MACKINNON: Madam Chairman, I would like to go back to the issue on finance that we were talking about before. I just need some clarification. Did you say it was \$20 a day or was it \$22?

MS. THIBAUT: It is \$20.02 for a child 10 years and older.

MR. MACKINNON: What was the request to the department for the increase? How much were you looking for?

MS. THIBAUT: Well, we submitted Statistics Canada's . . .



MR. MACKINNON: So you wanted to go to the national figure, \$45.72?

MS. THIBAUT: Well, we knew realistically that wouldn't happen but we thought even if we presented that, at least there would be some increase.

MR. MACKINNON: Okay, so you have had a freeze in the last two years and you have been notified you are going to have another freeze this year.

MS. THIBAUT: We were told that there wouldn't be any increase in this current fiscal year and there hasn't been a comment made for the upcoming . . .

MR. MACKINNON: And you have had a reduction in your budget for the education and training component?

MS. THIBAUT: Yes.

MR. MACKINNON: So in real dollars, what is the impact? Tell us as clearly as you can, what is the impact for these 2,054 foster children?

MS. THIBAUT: For some, I guess the impact would probably be in terms of their placement options. The ideal would be that every child is able to be in a family situation that meets their needs. If that isn't available, then you would need to look elsewhere.

MR. MACKINNON: I asked Ms. Williams before about what the province is planning in a long-term strategy to deal with this backlog, to eliminate this crisis management, as we referred to but I guess I wanted to find out, has your organization received any feedback or direction from the department as to what their strategy or their action plan is to deal with this crisis situation?

MS. THIBAUT: The main thing is the recruitment and also the . . .

MR. MACKINNON: Recruitment of more foster . . .

MS. THIBAUT: More foster homes. We made reference to the PRIDE program and that is a competency-based program.

MR. MACKINNON: What about staff, what they call foster care coordinators? Ms. Williams, you indicated that 30 would be a maximum, and then after that things start to fall off.

MS. WILLIAMS: More staff would certainly assist.

MR. MACKINNON: How many additional staff do you feel would be required?

MS. WILLIAMS: I don't know provincially. Certainly our proposal is recommending three more for our particular agency. I don't know provincially what the numbers would look like.

MR. MACKINNON: Has the department given any consideration to your request?

MS. WILLIAMS: Oh yes. Certainly requests are considered. I understand that we're in times now where there are no new positions and no new - I can't say it hasn't been considered but we're in a time where there are no new . . .

MR. MACKINNON: But they're not going to proceed, they're not going to give you the funding.

MS. WILLIAMS: . . . positions added at this point.

MR. MACKINNON: One final question, if I could, Madam Chairman. I'm concerned about the fact that the coordinators are overworked. This is having a negative impact on the children. As we know, for a foster child it's pretty traumatic at the best of times, because they're in an environment - and I have several foster families in my constituency and they do just great work. They take those children as if they were their own from birth.

MS. THIBAUT: They do, yes.

MR. MACKINNON: I know that if we overwork our coordinators then, in fact, that's going to trickle down.

MS. THIBAUT: Yes.

MR. MACKINNON: We have the number of children needing placements, that list is growing, the number of foster homes is shrinking, the department has put a freeze on your budgets and cut back in some cases for education and training, there's a shortage of foster care coordinators; when you go through the whole menu, it's not very positive. What are you recommending to this committee that we can do to help with your problem, because it doesn't appear as if the department is responding positively?

MS. THIBAUT: I guess probably a recommendation from us would be that it's something that you continue to raise with the department, with the minister, what is being done, and to recognize it as a major issue in Nova Scotia that has to be addressed.

MR. MACKINNON: And it is in a crisis situation.

MS. THIBAUT: I certainly feel it is.

MR. MACKINNON: You would agree with that?

MS. THIBAUT: Yes.

MR. MACKINNON: Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'm going to move Gary up on the list because he hasn't spoken yet. Mr. Hines.

MR. GARY HINES: Thank you ladies for coming this morning. I think any time you have, as you want to call it, a crisis situation in any department, you have to take a look at why it's happening. To what do you attribute the increase in children reaching out and needing help? Is it changes in the socio-economic situation in the province or in the country in general, political correctness, moving away from the "spare the rod, spoil the child" syndrome, that kind of thing? Is there a studying process that goes hand in hand with what you do, and do you get involved in trying to determine the source or the root of the problem escalating?

[10:30 a.m.]

MS. THIBAUT: I'm not sure if children's aid . . .

MS. WILLIAMS: What we do is we refer to research that's done through the Child Welfare League of America to assist us in our practice, as well as, of course, policies and procedures that come from the department. In terms of trends, we turn to research that's done in other areas, we don't actually have our own research base here in Nova Scotia. We do look to other areas. There are trends, families having more stressors on them because of the economic times. People who are poor seem to be poorer than ever. A lot of our clients are in very serious economic situations. Economics is not the only area, but it certainly is a factor.

The families not having others to turn to - we're seeing more families who are isolated, not having the networks that perhaps we had growing up, so parents with a new child don't have the support of nanny or granddad or extras to help out. We're seeing people in more isolated situations. I don't know about "spare the rod" that kind of theory. Certainly we see parents who are having major difficulties managing children, and they may be parents who were not adequately parented themselves, either one extreme or the other, too permissive or too rigid. They didn't get the sense of what is an appropriate parent. I don't know if that's helpful.

MR. HINES: I appreciate that. I just used the term, "spare the rod, spoil the child" because I know there are lots of arguments that take place about that particular thing. Some insist that a little tap doesn't hurt, that kind of thing, and then there are others who are adamant that you don't use physical, and so on. I wondered if there has been any correlation, or if you see a correlation in relation to that. You've answered my question.

Has there ever been a breakdown done on the numbers or the percentages, poor opposed to middle income as opposed to upper income children? It seems to me that in today's society, especially in middle income families where both parents are working, they tend more today to lean on things that are available for babysitting and that kind of thing rather than doing the babysitting and doing the parenting that maybe they're capable of doing. We stretch ourselves beyond, and I'm guilty of the same thing, of being away from home more than I would like to be away from home and maybe than I have to be.

I think today society calls more and more on government to put money forward to support a system for babysitting, for want of a better word. I think it's a problem that exists, we all recognize. I always think there's a lot more that families who let their own slide through the cracks could do as opposed to turning to governments for assistance. I guess a good example is when you get the storm days and they shut the school bus system down and so on, then the outcry starts on the talk show. If you asked the question, the big problem is that there's nobody to fall back on to babysit; it isn't the fact that they shut the schools down that really concerns them, it's the fact that the child is going to be home and there's nobody to look after him.

I think, and I wonder how you feel about proactive methods to convince families out there that you have to take more interest in what's going on with your children. Are there any proactive measures out there that you're involved with, that you have had discussions on, that can point out to families that no longer do we have the resources in government to look after the many groups and organizations that come to us looking for support?

MS. WILLIAMS: That's a good question. Our agency doesn't really do, unfortunately, much proactive work. We're not involved in doing much prevention. We're responding to crisis. Now, there may be agencies across the province that have more ability to do that, but certainly the Children's Aid Society of Halifax is not doing that. We're responding to crisis. When we do proactive work, it's through calls that come through to intake asking for help, where we're able to sometimes refer clients to appropriate community resources that will assist families, so it's not necessarily counting on us to do the work or to help. It's an education and referral process that we would recommend to families. We're not actively out there doing prevention.

MR. HINES: You just don't have the time to do it. I know I had a meeting with my family of schools just recently, and one of the discussion pieces that came up and captured most of the evening was, two of the teachers had gotten involved in training or helping the parents, because they were finding more and more young couples were getting married, getting their careers started, and then decide to have a family. All of a sudden, at age 30 or 35, they have a child and they haven't got a clue about parenting, or have very few clues about parenting and they reach out for help. My family of schools are discussing now starting a volunteer group that will allow parents to come and reach forward, and I think these are the kinds of proactive things that we need to be doing as a society to help the situation.

MS. WILLIAMS: Just because the Children's Aid Society of Halifax is not doing proactive work, it doesn't mean other people aren't. Clearly, across the province there are many parent resource centres and schools involved in assisting parents, daycares are involved in assisting parents. Children aren't born with a manual about how to raise them and what people tend to rely on is how they were parented. That might work for some children and it might not for others, or it may not be appropriate given the times.

Many parents, regardless of if they're in poverty situations, or middle class, or upper class, have to look to others to assist in parenting, it's a major job. What we see is the small percentage of people who are not doing a good job of parenting, but there are many people out there and many community resources that do assist others.

MR. HINES: Just to put a lighter side to an issue that is very hard to put a lighter side on, the final comment, I believe that night the teachers thought maybe they should get together and write a book, parenting for dummies, to go with that series you see in the bookstores.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I just want to inform the committee, we have 25 minutes left. What I would like to suggest, and I want to get your agreement on this, we have two speakers left. Perhaps if they just use three or four minutes maximum and then perhaps we would hear if there are any final closing remarks from our presenters. At that time we will allow them to leave and then we will go on to discuss future agenda items. Is that satisfactory? Agreed.

I have Mark and then Gordon.

MR. PARENT: Just a question of clarification and then I want to follow up on the whole issue of prevention and what ideas you might have. The maintenance increase, the \$45.72 per day, is that how it's broken down, for people in residential care, or is that what foster parents get in other provinces in Canada? It's unclear to me - not for Nova Scotia, you have used this from Statistics Canada - is that what other foster parents are getting across the country, or is that what children in residential care facilities are assessed at if you broke it down on a per head basis?

MS. THIBAUT: I'm not really sure. This figure was intended to be used in foster homes.

MR. PARENT: Because when you compare the rates for residential care there's a great difference. It seems to indicate that this rate, \$45, is for children in residential care, where the whole cost of running the facility would be broken down to an individual case, not for foster parents. Do you see the difference?

MS. WILLIAMS: My experience is that is very low for residential care. Residential care, I'm thinking of the Children's Response program, it's at \$400-plus a day, I'm talking a lot of money for residential care.

MR. PARENT: But we're not really sure what this \$45 applies to, then?

MS. THIBAUT: It would apply in a family home, not residential care.

MR. PARENT: So other foster parents in other provinces are getting \$45 per day?

MS. THIBAUT: In these figures it isn't stated that they're getting \$45, this was based on what Statistics Canada felt it cost in Nova Scotia, that's where these figures came from. Each province has a different breakdown on how they pay their board rates, and we are probably one of the lowest provinces, in terms of maintenance rates. You can get comparisons from different provinces and then you would have to break down because in some provinces it's a larger amount, but then it includes more, like their schools and . . .

MR. PARENT: How do we compare with the other Atlantic Provinces, do you know that? That's where the fair comparison is.

MS. THIBAUT: I would say we're probably lower but to be honest I haven't looked at those figures in probably about a year.

MR. PARENT: Getting back to the question of prevention. I think you put your finger on a very important point, Ms. Williams, in that this enormous debt that we're trying to struggle with, all agencies in all areas just seem to be managing crises, in health care, et cetera. They are frustrated, the government's frustrated, taxpayers are frustrated. It's too big a question to really ask you, I guess, but you talked about prevention, you're not doing it, you would like to do some. What would you like to do if you had the resources to do it?

MS. WILLIAMS: Either we would like to do it or like to see the communities able to do more, and more of what really works is accessible parenting programs for parents of children of any age. Accessible parenting resource. We probably have more in this area than the rest of the province put together, but to have parenting resources that actually meet the needs, parenting resources that can go into the homes and assist families, parent education even in the schools. So a focus on helping people parent, basically, that's of all ages.

MR. PARENT: That would be the single, most important thing that could be done?

MS. WILLIAMS: For me, that would be it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Gordie.

MR. GOSSE: Mine was just a short thing before and I think during the presentation somebody had mentioned false accusations against any kind of agencies, whether it be foster care, for abuse of some sort, where it be physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. I know that it's very difficult in society today for all organizations to get volunteers, not just foster families.

Volunteerism is down all across Canada and all across foster parents, for those reasons of somebody not wanting to be a part of that because of those allegations. In one sense, as a youth worker, myself, in my former career, when somebody does make an allegation you do have to investigate. I do know for a fact that there were some issues in Cape Breton about foster parents and stuff like that in the past, and that makes it difficult for anybody wanting to be a foster parent, and I understand that. With that said and aside, that's just the way society is today and that's the way it's perceived in many different organizations.

Again, I go back to government services being cut to the bare bones. What happens is they are expecting all these non-profit organizations, like yours, to pick up the slack, for services that were once provided by the government and that's the stress on what we see today, because of these non-profit organizations. They are also stretched to the limit, whether it be foster care or Children's Aid Society, to provide these services and are stretched to the limited because there's nothing in the budget and you're expected to pick up these services.

Again, I have great issue with the children between the ages of 16, 17 and 18 falling through the cracks and ending on the street. There's nothing for those and I think we, as a society, need to find some solution to find out what we can do with this age group, where they fall between the cracks of Community Services, they fall over the age of Children's Aid and I think we, as a society, and elected officials and everybody, have to find some solution to deal with this age group, 16 to 19 years old, who are falling between the cracks, and that has to be done.

The stress on the non-profit organizations in the province, from the years of cutbacks and everything else, they are expected to pick up the slack and it's making it very difficult. Again, we go back - and it's a vicious circle - to why would you want to volunteer, you're afraid to volunteer and there are all kinds of different issues out there today, so it puts many strains on a lot of organizations. I thank you for coming today.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Gary has asked to have one final question.

MR. HINES: I only wanted to make a brief comment on my earlier presentation. I didn't want anybody in here to think that I was suggesting that using the rod was the solution. I used that as a statement.

MS. WILLIAMS: Right.

MR. GOSSE: It has been quite an issue, Bill No. 43, over the years and a very debatable issue over many years, on the rod. I think by showing a child violent behaviour it encourages them to be violent, so that's just my own personal view and that debate has gone on for many years. As a former student who was strapped on many occasions, I understand that. (Laughter)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Would any of you like to mention something that hasn't been brought up or make a closing statement?

MS. THIBAUT: I would like to thank the committee for inviting us to come and to present. We all would agree that society has changed, a lot of us went to school when the strap was acceptable and it isn't any longer. I think most of us in this room grew up in close-knit communities, we had extended family, we had lots of support available. That's not the demographics anymore and I think those are some of the reasons why we see increases, and it's important for us all to continue to be aware of that. We really appreciate the opportunity to speak on fostering and to see the recognition coming from the standing committee on the importance of a lot of foster parents to give a lot of time and energy. It's not just financial.

[10:45 a.m.]

I think when the question was raised, why would you continue to volunteer, the reward for them is when they see a child succeeding and when they see a child being able to go to university and they probably wouldn't have. We have sort of presented all the negatives, but there are some very positive things happening in foster care, within the child welfare system. We tend to focus on the crisis. We certainly appreciate having the opportunity to be here.

MS. WILLIAMS: I echo those comments as well. I do appreciate the opportunity. This is my first experience, by the way, in presenting to a legislative committee. It's been interesting. I appreciate the questions. One trend that I forgot to mention, and I don't know how I did that, is in terms of what we're seeing in society, it's a trend in more reports in situations of domestic violence. That likely is because there's more attention paid to it. I don't know if there's actually more violence, but certainly we have more referrals than ever of situations where children are exposed, on a repeated basis, to domestic violence.

I need to learn, I guess from you, Mora, a report was asked for from this committee, so what's the process for me to provide that information?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mora will be in touch with you.

MS. WILLIAMS: Thank you so much.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We just want to say that you've certainly provided a very powerful message about the challenges that your organizations and your colleagues and the people you're working for are facing; I want you to be reassured that we, as decision makers and the community generally, appreciate that. Especially in tough economic and social times, we have a special responsibility to protect and nurture our youth and our children. We take that very seriously. You've certainly provided a lot of excellent background information. Hopefully that's going to help us perform our roles a little better, so thank you very much for coming.



If you folks want to leave, you don't have to stay and listen to the rest of this. Again, thank you for all your time. I'm just going to ask the committee members to stay. Yes, Russell.

MR. MACKINNON: I didn't mean to interject while you were in mid-flight there, but I'm thinking that because they identified this as a crisis situation here, would it be appropriate to bring in someone from the Department of Community Services to speak to this issue?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, that's certainly something we can discuss. Mora, can you bring us up to date in terms of the immediate future agenda, and then we can make some decisions.

[10:48 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[10:50 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mora, why don't you just bring us up to date on our schedule.

MS. MORA STEVENS (Legislative Committee Coordinator): What the committee has scheduled next is for February 12<sup>th</sup>, that's the Transition House Association of Nova Scotia plus there were some letters as well but there are other items that have been on the list; cost recovery of social assistance overpayments, social housing and home care services were the others that had been approved. Those were the items. Now it seems as if there was a lack because of John not being here. I was just informed yesterday that he was unable to make this meeting and it was my understanding that John was the conduit between Children's Aid Nova Scotia and Children's Aid Halifax. Without his presence, he couldn't give the overall picture so if it sounded as if . . .

MR. GOSSE: I had gotten the package and I had a number of questions for that agency and I could not ask them.

MS. STEVENS: Precisely.

MR. GOSSE: So that was the only problem.

MR. MACKINNON: Madam Chairman, I'm just thinking because of the magnitude of that issue, I believe it would appropriate to bring in the deputy minister from the department to speak on this because we are leading into the House opening in the Spring with the budget and she was very categorical in her assertion that it is a crisis situation. I do believe that it would be appropriate to bring a senior director plus the deputy minister before the committee and I would so move.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Now we have some timing here. We have three left from our original schedule. We have had two requests to appear before the committee. One of them,

although there is not much information available, Ms. X, I actually met with her a couple of weeks ago. She is the mother of the first child to go through the secure care treatment, the Wood Street centre in Truro, the one we heard about a few weeks ago. She had an amazing story to tell that I really feel this committee needs to hear. She is part of a support group in Lower Sackville but I'm not sure the secure care treatment centre is doing what they had planned to do and because it is a fairly new facility, it may be that our interest in that facility might clear up some of the confusion that is happening.

MR. PARENT: There are so many good topics but I guess we made an original list and I would like to work - like social housing, for example, is a very important topic for my area and I would like to see us work our way through it and to note these and to continue with these. I too, like Gordon, would liked to have asked some questions. I'm not sure it would be the deputy minister, it would be whoever the director of programming for Children's Aid, both private and public would be. That would be the one, I guess, who could answer it because even Mr. Rowan, if he was here, could only speak on behalf of the Children's Aid Society of Halifax, couldn't he? We did make a list and I would like to sort of adhere to it and add these on at the end of it because the social housing for me is a big, big item.

MR. MACKINNON: With all due respect, Madam Chairman, if I could interject here, we've had some presenters here to state categorically we have a crisis situation here. We are talking children at risk. I think we should respond. We didn't have one representative to connect to the department on this issue.

MR. PARENT: I'm not denying we need a representative, I'm just saying I would like to adhere to our original list and come back to this afterwards simply because social housing, housing is so key and I argued strongly to get that on the list and now it's sort of getting bumped. It's a key issue so I don't disagree that we should bring someone in from the department, I just would like to see us adhere to our original list and bring them in after that.

MR. GOSSE: Mora, what was on the original list that we had? The three that were left, was there any date for those three that were already penciled in?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, and they weren't actually prioritized. They were sort of .  
..

MR. MACKINNON: It's fluid.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: February 12<sup>th</sup> is definitely transition houses, okay, and then after that the three remaining topics are cost recovery of social assistance overpayments, social housing, and home care services. Then we have had two requests to add women's centres and the parents' view of the secure treatment centre.

MR. GOSSE: Also the request here that we just had today.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, that we pursue some of the questions we have heard about child protection and foster care with officials from the department.

MR. MACKINNON: Can we have that approved, then? I put that on the table. Are we agreeing to that?

MR. PARENT: Agreeing to what?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That in the two requests . . .

MR. PARENT: Sure, but we are just talking about timing right now.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, so now we have to prioritize the remaining five after next month's.

MR. MACKINNON: Sure.

MR. PARENT: Do we have to do it at this meeting, Madam Chairman? Would it be possible for us to get a list . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, we need some lead time in terms of arranging the March meeting, for example.

MS. STEVENS: I will be booking that today.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So if we at least choose one of the remaining five as the top priority for March, that does give us a little more lead time.

MR. PARENT: Well, I would suggest that social housing be our next topic after our meeting on February 12<sup>th</sup>.

MR. MACKINNON: I have no problem with the priority, as long as we have senior officials from the Department of Community Services come in before the budget because this is a budgetary matter we are talking about here with these foster children. I guess maybe I just have a soft spot for children and I think any time a child is considered to be at risk, we have to react. Social housing, that was one of our priorities. We brought it in to have it approved and I still support that.

MS. STEVENS: So that would be April? (Interruptions)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, I just want to lay my view on the table that a couple of these are time sensitive in that the budget could be adjusted to help them. Others, I think the government has made sort of a long-term commitment and whether we discuss them now or after the budget really isn't going to change what is done or how it is done or how much money

is being spent. So, for example, the women's centres and continuing on with the child protection and foster care, I think they might benefit from a discussion before the budget. I'm being upfront. That's my view.

MR. GOSSE: And social housing also.

MR. PARENT: I will move that social housing be our next topic of discussion in March because I think . . .

MR. MACKINNON: No, we already have this motion.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mark has put - that's his motion.

MR. MACKINNON: We have a motion on the floor already

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That's his motion. It's on the floor.

MR. MACKINNON: No, my motion hasn't been dealt with yet.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Oh.

MR. GOSSE: But the next meeting for sure, in March, is transition houses. That's already booked, that's already set.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes.

MR. PARENT: February is transition houses. We're talking about the March meeting.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, I haven't heard a seconder for either one. (Interruptions)

MS. STEVENS: You don't need a seconder.

MR. MACKINNON: Well, wait now, my motion is . . .

MR. GLAVINE: I will second the original, the first motion.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, now we have two motions on the floor. (Interruptions)

MR. HINES: I don't recall you putting it forward as a motion. It was a suggestion and discussion . . .

MR. MACKINNON: No, it was a motion. (Interruptions)

MS. STEVENS: It was a motion.

MR. PARENT: It never got seconded, though.

MS. STEVENS: You don't need a seconder in a standing committee.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I didn't realize that, my apologies.

Okay, so now we have two motions on the floor.

MR. MACKINNON: The motion is to bring in the deputy minister and senior . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So we have a choice, okay. Perhaps we will vote on the choice. There are two options. Option A is to bring in the deputy minister or senior officials to get more information on child protection and foster care, youth in care. Option B would be to go into social housing as the topic.

MR. PARENT: Could I have a point of clarification?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes.

MR. PARENT: In a sense, we already agreed that we would add those to the list, didn't we?

MR. MACKINNON: Yes, but it's just a question of whether we would bring in the deputy and senior director in March.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Where on the list they go.

MR. PARENT: Yes, but Russell's motion was not dealing with March. Russell's motion was that we should get that level of people on the list. Is that not true? Can you read back the motion?

MR. MACKINNON: Well, yes, but I mean I can make a friendly amendment to my own motion.

MR. PARENT: No, but I'm just curious as to what the intent was. The intent, very clearly, for you was to get the appropriate people who could answer the questions that we wanted.

MR. MACKINNON: Yes, as soon as possible. That was what I was saying because of the urgency.

MR. PARENT: Okay, but I didn't hear that in the original motion.

MR. MACKINNON: Well, I stated it several times because it is a crisis situation we are dealing with.

MR. GLAVINE: This was very limited this morning, really, what they could give us.

MR. MACKINNON: Well, is there any problem with bringing in the deputy minister and senior director in March?

MR. PARENT: The problem for me, again, is that we made this list of some key issues. When you talk about housing . . .

[11:00 a.m.]

MR. MACKINNON: We aren't taking them off the list.

MR. PARENT: No, but you keep moving them back.

MR. MCNEIL: Madam Chairman, the original list, did we prioritize it? We just made a list . . .

MS. STEVENS: It's just a list.

MR. MCNEIL: The issue, I just want to go . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: The first few issues were prioritized.

MR. MCNEIL: I would like to go back to what the chairman said, I think there's a number of these issues that we should be looking at and prioritizing in terms of the budget, and saying, what benefit would they have, if we have them in prior to the budget being submitted. If there are some we can leave until after that process, well then that's what we should be doing. I think the chair had a good point. Could you just read the remainder of the list that you have there?

MS. STEVENS: The original list that was approved, what we would have left on that after the transition houses is cost recovery of social assistance overpayments, social housing and home care services. What was added today, CONNECT, the women's centres, Ms. X, who is the secure care treatment parent, and the motion for the deputy ministers and senior directors, that would be for foster care, children's protection, welfare, youth in care, to come in and speak about the current crisis that is happening.

Also, Jerry Pye had brought it up, the KIN organization. He provided me - KIN is no longer in existence, it's called Maritime Advocates for Children in Need, that's what they are now. I got this information too late to put them in that meeting. That had also been approved as another organization, as an add-on for parents of children in care.

MR. PARENT: Two quick questions, was that deputy minister and/or program director, whoever the appropriate person is who can answer the questions, right? It wasn't . . .

MS. STEVENS: Senior director, deputy minister.

MR. PARENT: It was and/or, it wasn't and, it was and/or?

MS. STEVENS: Yes.

MR. PARENT: Right. Secondly, we're going to have to be very careful with Ms. X, in terms of how we publicize that because what we will do if we use her name is we might reveal the identify of the youth in care.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, I was even going to suggest or ask your advice, if you did agree to add her to the agenda, that perhaps we could do it through an in camera meeting, to protect the child's identity.

MR. PARENT: I think we would have to, to protect the identity of the child.

MS. STEVENS: The first child through the secure treatment facility. If I may, there have been precedents, we have had people in to talk about situations like that that have been in camera and not even had a transcript of that meeting, if they want to talk in detail. (Interruptions)

MR. PARENT: I would suggest that for her we do it in camera, to protect the identity of the youth. (Interruptions)

MS. STEVENS: The one question there is, would you like a transcript or not a transcript for that? You can have a transcript, but it's marked confidential for committee members only, or there can be a transcript with it just kept here, or . . .

MR. PARENT: Any time you have a transcript, it's going to get out.

MS. STEVENS: . . . one that's without a transcript.

MR. HINES: Could we determine what she's comfortable with? She's going to do the presentation. Is she comfortable with there being a transcript?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: It certainly should be discussed with her, but I think she's someone who feels that there are some issues that need to be laid before the MLAs. Certainly if there's no transcript, she has no record of that. I think she would probably appreciate the security of having a confidential transcript.

MR. PARENT: As long as the identity of her child is protected, that's the issue.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: She's a very responsible, articulate, caring person. I really feel it would be worth your time to hear her story.

MS. STEVENS: There could be a secured transcript here, and then one given to her. That has happened before. Those, when they are secured, are locked up, and the committee would have to vote to get that transcript because it would be in the care of the files here.

MR. GLAVINE: Madam Chairman, are we going to be voting on this . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: If we can agree on the March meeting, then we can postpone setting the rest of the schedule.

MR. GOSSE: I suggest that we go with what Mark says in March, social housing, because that's an issue with me also, and then I say we go with what Russell says again in April for the discussion that we had this morning for Community Services, and then go back to the list again. Would that satisfy everybody? Then we do social housing in March and then . . .

MR. MACKINNON: I agree with that . . .

MR. GOSSE: Just to do it that way, because there are some issues that I have with social housing, and that's why that was on the list there too. Would that make it easier for us, to do social housing in March, then we will do the foster - I want the Children's Aid Society too (Interruptions) The whole society, that's right.

MR. MACKINNON: Are you moving that as a friendly amendment?

MR. GOSSE: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Thank you very much.

[The committee adjourned at 11:06 a.m.]